

The Poetics of the Tragic in Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*

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The art of playwriting is not fundamentally a narrative art like novel writing; it is dialogic, it proceeds from contradiction, not cause and effect.

-Tony Kushner, "Notes About Political Theater"[\[1\]](#)

Since the post-war period, American drama and theatre has been shaped by a strong political consciousness: the Theater of the Ridiculous, queer and gay drama, and the growing public presence of Latin-American and African-American playwrights during the 1960s to 1980s reflect a thematic and aesthetic diversification of American drama that is unparalleled in its history. Some scholars relate new formal developments to the impact of postmodernism as the prime characteristic of a distinctly contemporary American drama and theatre.[\[2\]](#) Moreover, it shows a growing interest among dramatists to establish drama and theatre as a site for critical self-reflection and public debate in which "socio-political goals of challenging hegemonic political representations and presenting identities outside the established social ideal of how Americans 'should be'" are a central function.[\[3\]](#) In the early 1990s, Tony Kushner, for instance, has received much critical attention for his landmark play *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes* (1992) in which he documents multiple ills of US-American society, culture, and politics during Ronald Reagan's presidency in the 1980s. Kushner, who has for years been an openly political voice in American theatre, has on numerous occasions identified himself as a writer of political theatre and describes his political aspirations as a form of "conscious intent to enter the world of struggle, change, activism, revolution, and growth."[\[4\]](#) Explicit citations of socio-cultural and political events and historical circumstances pervade his dramatic oeuvre in plays such as *A Bright Room Called Day* (1994), *Slavs!* (1995), or *Angels in America* (1992). In many of his plays, dramatic plots and the character's actions function as symbolic explications of the interrelation between human suffering and the dominant ideologies that inform our understanding of reason, morality, and truth while displacing the absolute value and legitimacy of such notions. In particular, his alertness to the social inequalities and injustices resulting from the discriminatory policies on race, ethnicity, and class give his plays political force and has contributed to his reputation as a receptive analyst of the multiple precarious situations that shape human life and experience. Occasionally, Kushner's plays give the impression of being a personal venture into the possibilities and limits of a dialectical and Marxist world-view. Many critics see this venture as one main feature of Kushner's work as a dramatist and yet respond with mixed reactions: Harold Bloom, for instance, voices some concern over an ideological overburdening of Kushner's creativity and dramatic talent at the expense of his artistic and intellectual openness.[\[5\]](#) Other scholars have taken the political suggestiveness of his plays as cues to explore Kushner's dramatic and aesthetic style in relation to a close intellectual affinity of his oeuvre with the works of Walter Benjamin, Bertolt

Brecht, or the theories of Marxism.[\[6\]](#)

In this paper, I will situate Kushner's play *Angels in America* (1992) in the poetological tradition of tragedy and, in particular, the notion of the tragic. As I will later outline, these two interrelated dimensions have posed profound difficulties both as a matter of literary form and a model of thought during the intellectual climate of the 1980s when *Angels* was written. Kushner thus resorts to the tragic in a time when it is seen by many as an outdated view on human existence. In this respect, I suggest that *Angels in America* draws its pressing political consciousness from the way in which Kushner develops his unique poetics of the tragic. It relates the causes of human suffering and agony to concrete moral and political ideologies as well as the ethical implications of human action and will. In this sense, the play most clearly departs from the traditional metaphysics of tragic fate. Even more so, unlike other modern tragedians who negotiate the limitations of human agency as the tragic essence of life, *Angels* rejects a tragic surrender of human agency in favor of its force to induce change and progress. Finality gives way to visions of progress and profound moral conundrums contribute to a growth of character, will, and new conceptions of freedom. From the perspective of dramatic form, Kushner's conception of the tragic bears resemblance to one crucial dimension of the Hegelian model of tragic collision which rests on Georg Friedrich Hegel's assumption, as Simon Goldhill points out, that "the abstract, normative idea of the tragic results in tragedy's becoming the site where aesthetics, politics, and history are most intimately intertwined."[\[7\]](#) It is at the intersection of the political and aesthetic innate to the idea of the tragic, in which I place the following discussion of Kushner's *Angels in America*. This informs the play's deeply dialectical grasp of reality and dramatic form. In this vein, the play artfully intermingles aesthetic and politics and can be read to challenge the often presumed separation of the tragic and the political as two mutually exclusive modes of expression and intent while exposing the innate political potentials of the tragic from the perspective of formal structure and ethical inquiry.

Visions of the Tragic in the Twentieth Century

The tragic, as a site for the literal and figurative envisioning of human agency and its limits has, from the early twentieth century onwards, occupied the minds and creative efforts of American dramatists.[\[8\]](#) Eugene O'Neill's dramatic works envision the tragic conundrum of human existence as the impossibility to escape suffering. The multiple existential struggles that befall his characters embody this inevitability: the tragic protagonist is one who suffers from shattering inner demons as O'Neill dramatizes a pervading sense of despair against the mechanisms of coping with this innate facet of human existence. It is well known that Arthur Miller envisioned modern tragedy as a transfiguration of the tragic hero's nobility into the preservation of human dignity against relentless and dehumanizing social orders.[\[9\]](#) While O'Neill bespeaks an insight into the tragic as a human condition as such, Miller's take on tragedy evokes the quotidian and a concrete social reality. His dramatic accentuation of the average man as a tragic hero inspires a fierce critique on the commodification of human experience and a thoughtful reflection on the changing nature of values, ideals, and virtues in modern US-American society.

Dramatists such as O'Neill and Miller have given crucial impulses to many studies that explore the uniquely modern visions of tragedy and the tragic in the mid-twentieth century and link this emergence with the general trend of modern American drama to give shape and meaning to their *dramatis personae* in relation to social, political, or natural environments and their psychological constitutions. Modern tragedies in this sense are more closely related to a metaphysics of the tragic, although they seldomly refer to the divine or fate as the responsible metaphysical forces but conceive of social, natural, and

psychological forces as the constitutive powers that shape human existence. In his study *From Büchner To Beckett*, Alfred Schwarzer argues that realism and naturalism came into existences as a new poetic of dramatic writing in an attempt to understand and examine the “contemporary version of man’s tragic condition.”^[10] He outlines that the modern tragedians dramatize the modern individual’s exposure to natural and social forces that are beyond his immediate control as an essentially tragic experience.^[11] Tragedy, hence, serves as a model of thought and dramatic form, as it explores the tragic as a *mode* and epitome of modern existence in the context of human agency, psychology, or natural and social determinism.

During the increased presence of political criticism in the 1980s and 1990s—the time in which *Angels* was written—tragedy, as a model of thought and a literary form, suffers from a rapid decline of interest. It has often been remarked that in this intellectual climate of the time, tragedy was contemplated as a highly outdated and insufficient literary form with regard to the critical work plays were meant to perform. In her expansive survey on tragic theory, Rita Felski remarks that tragedy was “perceived as the enemy of politics in promoting a sense of hopelessness, fatalism, and resignation” and therefore was cast to the margins of critical discussion.^[12] Moreover, in an US-American context, Felski argues, the notion of tragedy became highly unpopular because of its power to displace uniquely American myths such as the “sovereignty of selfhood” and was thus regarded as outmoded in a time in which self-determination and individualism were important ideational cornerstones to the idea of freedom.^[13] The Marxist literary critic Terry Eagleton situates the occasional abandonment of tragedy from critical debate in the 1980s and 1990s within its particular history of reception as “the word signifies a kind of writing which is no longer possible.”^[14] And this principal abandonment of tragedy from critical inquiry results in a discrepancy between theory and practice. In a similar vein, I have signaled in the first section of this paper that this view can be challenged as a premature verdict with regard to Kushner’s *Angels in America*. In fact, only in recent years a great body of dramatic work has been reconsidered in response to an increased reclaiming of tragedy to critic’s attention (see “Introduction” in this special issue).

The skepticism towards the notion of tragedy has survived as a persistent force. In the later twentieth century, George Steiner was a main influence in this regard as he challenged the place and value of tragedy in his book *The Death of Tragedy* (1961). Steiner’s main claim is that the particular world view that tragedy requires—a metaphysics of the divine and inescapable and unjust fate—has, in modern times, been superseded by the shaping influence of the metaphysics of Christianity and Marxism. The former receives its meaning from the principles of redemption and forgiveness while the Marxist world view draws its effective momentum from the notions of progress, change, and justice.^[15] In his personal political commitment to Marxism, Kushner’s association with the tragic seems counterintuitive. Unredeemable failure and radical finality, the cornerstones of tragedy on account of Steiner, are absent from such a logic and thus constitute the basic “anti-tragic” metaphysics of the modern and contemporary period. Because “tragedy is irreparable” and cannot lead to justice, resolution, or atonement but forces us to accept the harrowing insight that “things are as they are,” true tragedy seeks to confront us with the radical and tragic limitedness of human agency.^[16] And Kushner’s own aesthetic of theatre coincides with Steiner’s argument to the extent that it renders a certain impossibility of tragedy due to its promotion of a progressivist logic and, as I believe, resistance to the limitedness of human agency. Kushner openly voices his discomfort embracing an essentially tragic outlook on life in his plays: in his essay “Notes About Political Theater” he refers to the “tragic” as a “rhetorical dead end” if it is merely understood as a permanent and universal, or “natural” condition of human existence which withholds the political implications of action and event.^[17] In contrast to Steiner’s idea to declare the death of tragedy,

Kushner's *Angels in America* can be regarded as a successful and imaginative transposition of the tragic into a politically motivated dramatic form in order to explore the dilemmas of contemporary experience. Its openness of form appeals to the investment of the tragic with political meaning and significance which does, in Kushner's own words, not "lie *beyond* politics, beyond history" but presents the world as "an interwoven web of the public and the private" suggesting that "the personal is political."^[18] For Kushner, the tragic must rest within the political, the private, and the public and not outside of it, precisely because it—as a dramatic force—artistically enriches drama with multiple impulses of critique, perception, and reflection on the world of lived experience.

Meanwhile, Steiner's claim itself has been challenged from various theoretical directions, let alone through the striking new interest in contemporary rewritings of Greek tragedies (see the article by Konstantinos Blatanis in this issue). But regarding the fact that we need to approach the tragic anew in order for it to work as an insightful operational tool, his arguments are still illuminative.^[19] In fact, a number of scholars have made attempts to save the tragic from this "rhetorical dead end" of which Kushner speaks and pursue to interrogate different modalities of the tragic. In this respect, the work of scholars like Williams, Wallace, or Felski reflect a trend to rethink the tragic beyond familiar parameters and to include new frameworks from the field of philosophical aesthetics or reception theory.^[20] Rita Felski, for instance, strongly advises to view the tragic as an aesthetic term that involves a "distinctive forming of material" beyond a mere representation of suffering but as a "particular shape of suffering."^[21] The process of shaping that Felski refers to is also a pivotal dimension of Eagleton's view on the tragic when he writes: "Tragic art involves the plotting of suffering, not simply a raw cry of pain."^[22] Both propose to view the tragic as a particular mode of expression which creates the material composition and symbolic meaning of the play.

This appropriation of the tragic beyond the parameters of metaphysics but within the context of drama's poetological form has its roots in a long tradition of thinking and conceptualizing the tragic. In particular, German Idealism of the late eighteenth to early nineteenth century regarded the tragic as a model of philosophical thought.^[23] Since then, Michelle Gellrich points out, the notion of the tragic conflict began to inform attempts of a systematic theories of drama and tragedy.^[24] In fact, the notion that conflict is an essential element of tragic drama can nowadays be traced in a lineage of thinkers on tragedy from Hegel (1830), to Martha Nussbaum (2000), Raymond Williams (1966), or Terry Eagleton (2009).^[25] The German idealist Georg Friedrich Hegel, in his "Lectures on Fine Arts," was among the first philosophers of the theory of tragedy to explicitly single out the conflict as a central feature of plot for the dramatic arts.^[26] In his chapter on the principle importance of action in dramatic poetry he writes: "it rests entirely on *collisions* of circumstances, passions, and characters, and leads therefore to actions and then to the reactions."^[27] On the one hand, collisions are an important engine for a swift and effective progression of dialogue and plot. On the other hand, and more importantly, in tragedy, the dramatization of collisions or conflicts between individuals has a particular "manner" or quality: the characters embody what Hegel calls a "substantive basis" as they signify meaning beyond their individual existence: they symbolize general systems of value such as the family, body politic, religious faiths etc.^[28] The principle task of tragedy consists in plotting such realms of ethical life against each other to kindle the tragic meaning of the conflict. And, as is well known, Hegel builds his argument primarily on Sophocles' *Antigone*. In the confrontation between Antigone and Creon about the rightful burial of Antigone's brother, Hegel recognizes a clash of equally valid systems of value—family (Antigone) versus the body politic (Creon)—which creates a tragic situation resulting from the juxtaposition of two ethically legitimate realms. As both require different imperatives of action and will, a resolution of the conflict inevitably

involves a violation of ethical conduct, and finally death. [29] Hegel writes: “each can establish the true and positive content of its own aim and character only by denying and infringing the equally justified power of the other.” [30] This in essence defines the kind of tragic conflict that Hegel had in mind.

It is Hegel’s point that this particular shaping and patterning of conflict—plotting equally valid ethical systems against each other—as the “artistic appearance” of tragic drama determines its tragic essence; the condition of Hegel’s poetics of the tragic is the dramatization of positions of mutual exclusiveness and the characters’ “active grasp” of this conundrum as tragic. [31] But he also acknowledges that the powers and forces that are plotted against each other are subject to historical change: in ancient tragedy, the character’s actions were features of their “essential nature” that was defined by some external law or ethical code. [32] In modern drama, Hegel argues, the internalization of the notions of freedom, free will, and self-determination manifest the codes of conduct:

To genuine *tragic* action it is essential that the principle of *individual freedom* and *independence*, or at least that of *self-determination*, of will to find in the self the free cause and source of the personal act and its consequences, should already have been aroused. [33]

Hegel argues that the tragic requires the principles of freedom and self-determination, the theoretical possibility to act otherwise based on one’s own assessment and judgement. Or as Glicksberg put it: “freedom of choice . . . is basic to the tragic conflict.” [34] This refers to another important focus of Hegel’s view on the tragic: his concern with the human subject from a modern perspective which sees the individual’s conflicts as a confrontation between internal and external, or as Goldhill writes, between “inner freedom and external necessity.” [35] Hegel’s notion of tragic action envisions a basic understanding of human agency as an end in itself and thus maps out a pattern of inner logic to the tragic conflict. Williams, rephrasing Hegel’s argument, understands the particular nature in which the tragic conflict figures in modern drama as a “self-contained model of integrity.” [36] American culture has been particularly responsive to the notions of individualism and freedom in their shaping and forming of cultural and national identities, an aspect that is also put to critical scrutiny in Kushner’s poetics of the tragic.

Overall, Hegel’s attempt to view tragedy as an embodiment and reflection of human progress on account of the dramatization of tragic collisions has been widely influential for subsequent tragic theory. And the theorems of the transformative impulses of historical and social progress have been particularly attended to by Marxist critics (e.g. Raymond Williams). But I want to conclude my discussion of Hegel by referring to a critical expansion of the kind of critical work the tragic conflict can perform which bespeaks Kushner’s formal procedure. According to Michelle Gellrich, the shortcomings of Hegel’s interpretation lie in his way “of naturalizing the disruptive strategies tied to tragic collision” and she makes the point that Hegel circumvents “textual resistance” [37] in favor of dramatic resolution and closure in order to qualify tragedy as a literary form that achieves a “higher level of spiritual consciousness.” [38]

Angels in America: The Poetics of the Tragic

Angels in America is set in the New York winter of 1985 to early 1986 amidst the AIDS crisis and Ronald Reagan’s presidency. While the first part, *Millennium Approaches*, serves as a prolonged exposition which stages the onset of the tragic conflicts that happen in the protagonist’s lives, the second part,

Perestroika, becomes centrally a matter of how things can end: in the surrender to fatal error, loss, and suffering or the recognition of the powerful forces and value of human will and agency. This two-part structure in itself mirrors the play's appropriation of the tragic as a matter of dramatic structure and ethical inquiry. The interrelatedness of both dimensions constitute the particular aesthetic and political implications that are essential to Kushner's poetics of the tragic: a dialectical dynamic between irreconcilable conflict and resolution, surrender and resistance, self and other.

As the play plots the existence of its characters as a series of struggles with conflicting ideologies and ethics, it recalls the hermeneutical infrastructure of tragedy as the tropes of fate (illness), unbearable conflict, or the unavoidability of human suffering are among the salient concerns of the play: Kushner's play expresses a grasp of reality in which racism, the decline of the ethics of care, irresponsibility and multiple forms of social-cultural discrimination pervade the United States of the 1980s. In the play, all account for the personal struggles the characters have to endure as their actions and decisions are motivated by the internalization of spiritual ideals, religious faiths, or the paralyzing experience of rejection and discrimination. The play's expansive *dramatis personae*, on the one hand, symbolizes the omnipresence of suffering on a global scale, and on the other hand, creates a dynamic intersection of multiple storylines and scenes, as the play's dramatic world impresses through its unusual level of scale and complexity. All minor subplots converge in the play's dramatization of the relationship between Prior Walter and Louis Ironson. In particular Louis's reaction to Prior's incurable illness manifests a dramatic center from which various actions, encounters, and confrontations subsequently precede.

This dramatic center unearths Kushner's negotiation of the tragic as a site of irreconcilable, moral conundrums which cast the protagonists in a profound state of existential precarity about their own ethical situatedness. Like in classical tragedy, this often involves dramatic situations that test a character's strength and will. Luis's confrontation with his partner's outbreak of AIDS emerges as an impossible test of will and character and challenges him to compromise his idealist and dialectical world-view which he holds sacral. In a central scene in the play, Louis probes into the unethicity of his anticipated separation from Prior in a conversation with the Rabbi on the occasion of his grandmother's funeral:

LOUIS: Rabbi, what does the Holy Writ say about someone who abandons someone he loves at a time of great need?

RABBI: Why would a person do such a thing?

LOUIS: Because he has to. *Maybe* because this person's sense of the world, that it will change for the better with struggle, *maybe* a person who has this neo-Hegelian positivist sense of constant historical progress towards happiness or perfection or something, who feels very powerful because he feels connected to these forces, moving uphill all the time. . . . *Maybe* that person can't, um, incorporate sickness into his sense of how things are supposed to go. *Maybe* vomit . . . and sores . . . and disease . . . really frighten him, *maybe* . . . he isn't so good with death (25).^[39]

The conversation reflects the dramatization of Louis moral conundrum as a crisis of authenticity of the self. Louis's self-understanding is spiritually and intellectually informed by Hegelian ideals of progress and reason, as the striving towards such ideals is associated with life's meaning and the purpose to achieve "happiness or perfection." Louis's attempts to justify his struggle resonates with the plays'

careful crafting of Louis's conundrum as an intellectual one: he becomes an object of his own reflection and contemplates the rationale of his actions; self-doubt ('maybe') pervade his speech as he refers to himself as 'this person' in order to objectify his own actions. In this sense, the play links the crisis of the authenticity of the self with a tragic rift between one's integrity to the self and one's loyalty to the other. This involves an active grasp of Louis's situation as irresolvable and tragic, as the play stages his choice in light of the inevitable violation of his ethics of self or the care and loyalty towards the other. These situations of profound collision and struggle create a level of abstraction in *Angels in America* that motivates a reflection beyond its concrete and local exploration of the competing ideologies of race, sexuality, and politics.^[40] As the intellectual and emotional resourcefulness of the play comes from such an exploration of universal experiences of human existence—such as suffering, love and morality, free will—the careful plotting of the tragic conflict becomes an elemental dramatic feature in Kushner's poetics.

Moreover, in the play this rift between autonomy of the self and the self's situatedness within communal and interpersonal bonds bespeaks a specific conundrum of the self-perception of the modern subject. In this sense, *Angels* more explicitly engages with the tragic dimensions of human experience as it reflects on the agential powers of the modern sense of the self which oscillates between self/other, integrity/betrayal, and progress/stasis. The manifestation of the modern sense of self involves a self-perception as an autonomous self that is informed by individualism and freedom as "inner facult[ies]" to use Terry Eagleton's words.^[41] The play does not merely exemplify such struggles but promotes critical examination of the "self-contained model of integrity" as an absolute imperative for action.^[42] In this sense, such profound confrontations of mutually exclusive value systems give rise to the dramaturgy of tragic tension.

Hence, the dynamic of the tragic is symbolized by Louis's personal conundrum as the play explores modern notions of selfhood through the prism of the self in relation to the other. On a different level, the play effects a great suggestiveness about the actual realities of American conservative value systems as sources of tragic outcome in its representation of Joseph 'Joe' Pitts struggle. Joe, Louis's first affair after his separation from Prior, is stricken by an internal struggle: faithful to the beliefs of Mormonism, he rejects his own sexual orientation. His marriage to Harper, who suffers from a morphine addiction, is shaped by his failing attempts to simulate attraction and sexual interest which protects him from the "one thing deep within" him which is "wrong or ugly" (40). Joe's contemplation of Mormonism (a world view which, in the play, is also embodied by Hannah and Harper) as a "second skin" and a layer of "protection" (201) is radically subverted by Kushner as he puts the tragic inherent to Joe's conflict in the service of critiquing precisely those mechanism of oppression and injustice that are innate to such value systems, i.e. the denial or rejection of homosexuality. The coloration of Joe's languages with despair and emotional numbness poetically conveys the sense of unbearable existence as a response to the sanction of one's will, autonomy, and true self. Or, as Joe tells his wife Harper, "so long as I have fought, with everything I have, to kill it" and "I'm a shell. There's nothing left to kill." (40–41). It is precisely this powerful disruptive force of tragic conflict, according to Gellrich, which contains a potential to critique and displace the dominant systems of value:

Dramatizations of tragic conflict . . . are problematic for critical approaches based on assumptions of normative order because they are subversive. Typically they question a culture's truths and systems of knowledge, overturn standards of rational consistency, and upset a basis in the tragic action from which resolution, synthesis, or catharsis might come. In short, conflicts in tragedy

indirectly challenge the terms on which such critical accounts stand[\[43\]](#)

And precisely because the tragic commonly engages with the metaphysics of unalterable fates, natural and cosmic forces, and the absolutisms of civic orders that are beyond human control, *Angels*, in its fierce political intent, interrelates suffering from AIDS to systematic powerlessness and stigmatization; suffering from AIDS bears political meaning insofar as it gestures towards the mechanisms of power involved in its public perception: in the play, Roy Cohn, who has just been diagnosed with the illness, forbids his doctor to diagnose him with AIDS: “*No, Henry, no. AIDS is what homosexuals have. I have liver cancer*” (47). Roy refuses to assume the role of a tragic subject as an outcome of the illness because its potential withdrawal of status, agency and power: “Your problem, Henry, is that you are hung up on words, on labels, that you believe they mean what they seem to mean. AIDS. Homosexual. Gay,” and Roy continues, “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 simpler: clout” (46).

Moreover, in its firm place within the aesthetic spectrum of political drama, *Angels* does not welcome an orientation of the tragic as an end to human agency. Kushner’s play is distinct as it resists the rash impulse to view human experience as essentially tragic, a notion, which is most explicitly spelled out in the event of unpreventable, physical suffering. Kushner’s grasp of reality rejects the tragic as a site for the failing and suspension of human agency which does not principally exclude tragic circumstances from his dramatic universe. *Angels*’s tragic figures are those who suffer from misfortunes that give no hope for resolution or betterment. In classical tragic thought, this dramatization promotes a perception of human existence as tragic by nature due to humans’ limited agency and freedom in light of fate, natural disasters, or hereditary forces. However, in Kushner’s play, the response to the inevitable restriction of one’s own agency—for which the sick body functions as a central symbol—do not inevitable lead to surrender and resignation. Prior’s and Roy Cohen’s bodies are stricken by severe pain, bodily dysfunctions, and severe liaisons: “*Prior stops, suddenly feeling sick again: leg pain, constricted lungs, cloudy vision, febrile panic and under that, dreadful weakness*” (279, original emphasis). This plight of suffering is refigured into powerful metaphors for the persistence of human will as forceful dimension of human agency which can challenge the hopelessness that metaphysical determinisms of a tragic view on life commonly involve. In the case of Prior, Joe, and Harper, for instance, the growing consciousness to oppose the loss of their individual will coincides with a spiritual strengthening that eventually triggers life-changing actions. Prior, despite the physical agonies of his battle with AIDS, displays a striking strength and sense of hope which lead him to reject the prospect of relief and eternal spiritual life offered by the Angels. Prior’s comment, “*I HAVE SIGHT I SEE*” (224) alludes to the new forms of perception and his strength of will. In as much Prior’s new found perception of life is triggered by his rejection of the Angel, Harper’s personal catharsis comes with her learning the truth about her husband’s real sexual orientation:

HARPER: Look at me. Look at me. *Here! Look here at—*

JOE (*Looking at her*): *What?*

HARPER: What do you see?

JOE: What do I . . . ?

HARPER: What do you see?

JOE: *Nothing, I— (Little pause) I see nothing.*

HARPER (*A nod, then*): Finally. The truth (244).

Prior and Harper both experience such a “threshold of revelation” (199, 218): Harper finally recognizes her husband’s attempt to conceal and suppress his true sexual nature. She experiences a sense of liberation from knowing the truth. The withholding of truth has been the tragic force of Harper’s inner imprisonment as she only finds relief in her hallucinations and her imaginary friend.

This prospect of overcoming and opposing tragic circumstances that the play offers, prompts the question of its ending. According to David Kornhaber, much criticism of Kushner’s play finds the ending unsatisfactory because of its “downgrading of revolutionary demands” that *Angels* otherwise seems to promote. [44] And yet, in Kornhaber’s view the ending circumvents the final surrender of the characters to tragic defeat in the formation of an inclusive *polis* and a civic community that the play finally stages. The coda of the play, set during a “a sunny winter’s day, warm and cold at once” (288) in Central Park during January 1990, suggests reconciliation instead of irreversible alienation as one alternative outcome of tragic circumstances. Indeed, on this level, dramatic closure is channeled into visions of social change and progress that the character’s imagine during this final conversation in which tragic situations find internal closure in the character’s hopeful envisioning of a better, more just future. This ending also reflects Kushner’s own belief in the transformative potentials of theatre and the political work his plays are meant to perform, or as Louis says: “That’s what politics is. The world moving ahead” (288). This view on the dynamic of constant movement through struggle and conflict also effect the play’s symbolic structure from the point of view of dramatic form.

In “Notes About Political Theater,” Kushner writes that in his view, the narrative form of drama is a matter of “contradiction.” [45] Throughout, the play’s aesthetic is grounded on this premise. Kushner’s elaborate use of conflict and juxtaposition as dramatic devices create those situations that contain the tragic tensions. These are not so much concerned with the dramatization of a verdict over human existence as essentially tragic. Rather, these function as a symbolic representations of the human condition in contemporary America as an outcome of particular socio-political and cultural structures. In this respect, the play is reminiscent of the conventions of social realism in its sharp exposure of the multiple inequalities in US American society and its discriminatory ideologies on the grounds of race, sexuality, or religion as a main sources of suffering. It also reflects on the human condition of the modern subject as a sphere of inseparable and conflictual interconnections and relations between the private and the public, the personal and the political, the self and the other. In Kushner’s craft, theatre’s capacity for symbolic representation intermingles with his precise vision of the unique dynamic of dramatic form and reflects his inspiration to create art that is meaningful beyond its self-contained enclosure.

Recurrently, the play develops a discursive dynamic that springs from its stress on a composition of dialog that is motivated by the negotiation of different world-views and ideologies. The integrity of the dramatic categories of dialogue and dramatis personae to express meaningful communication and interaction are essential in Kushner’s poetics. Moreover, the poetics of the tragic are grounded in the play’s negotiation of the place and value of human will and agency in the American consciousness and

perception. In a scene between Louis and his on-and-off friend Belize, a former drag queen who now works as a nurse, the dynamic of the conversation is driven by the exchange of viewpoints when the implicit question of politics and the implications of one's own situatedness lead to a heated confrontation:

LOUIS: But I mean in spite of all this the thing about America, I think, is that ultimately we're different from every other nation on earth, in that, with people here of every race, we can't—Ultimately what defines us isn't race, but politics. . . . (94).

BELIZE: Here in America race doesn't count.

LOUIS: No, no, that's not—I mean you *can't* be hearing that.

BELIZE: I—

LOUIS: It's—Look, race, yes, but ultimately race here is a political question, right? Racists just try to use race here as a tool in a political struggle (96).

. . .

BELIZE: Unlike, I suppose, banging me over the head with your theory that America doesn't have a race problem (97).

. . .

BELIZE: You have no basis except your—Louis, it's good to know you haven't changed; you are still an honorary citizen of the *Twilight Zone*, and after your pale, pale white polemics on behalf of racial insensitivity you have a flaming *fuck* a lot of nerve calling me an anti-Semite. Now I really gotta go (99).

As Louis and Belize argue about the politics of race in the country and spring from implicit suggestions to explicit accusations, the dramatic function of such situations is pivotal in the play to create the movement from the specific to the general: beyond the prisms of psychological individuality and socio-cultural determination, the characters of the play can be regarded as embodiments of different world views that are constitutive for the level of abstraction interrelating the dramatic reality and the actual empirical reality of US-American society it refers to: Joe/Hannah (Mormonism, Conservatism), Roy Cohen (Republicanism, corrupt law), Louis (American individualism) and so on. In a conversation between Louis and Prior on the subject of different faiths, Louis ponders on the question of guilt as a matter to be “abstracted”:

PRIOR: You could never be a lawyer because you are oversexed. You're too distracted.

LOUIS: Not distracted; *abstracted*. I'm trying to make a point:

. . .

LOUIS: That it should be the questions and shape of a life, its total complexity gathered, arranged and considered, which matters in the end, not some stamp of salvation or damnation which disperses all the complexity in some unsatisfying little decision—the balancing of the scales (38-39).

The occasional establishment of the protagonists as objects of critical contemplation resonates with a Hegelian logic of the tragic conflict. But in contrast to Hegel's interpretation that sees the characters as abstract representations of the family and body politic, Kushner's protagonists are not limited to ethical archetypes but are finely crafted and autonomous individuals.^[46] To this extent, the play relies on the staging of rational contemplations, motivations, social and political environments to establish meaningful dramatic action. This effects a logic of representation to realistically portray and seek answers. Even the play's interspersed minor monologues rarely express subjective, inner perceptions but stage the characters' confrontation with the validity of different world-views and involve ethical inquiries (e.g. Joe or Louis).

Besides, while in the Hegelian model the tragic, internal resolution and formal closure are a necessity to achieve tragic drama, in Kushner's poetics of the tragic, dramatic conflicts neither ultimately lead to defeat nor to absolute resolution. The dynamic of juxtaposition and debate pervades the play and relieves the tragic of its traditional task to mean final surrender. Ambiguity, movement, and the value of will are all associated with the tragic. Even though *Angels* permits the prospect of dramatic resolution as a metaphor for the agency of an open dialectic, its attitude towards the political and historical circumstances that lead to a tragic outcome are far from conciliatory intent. It does not involve a sense of resignation in light of the harmful conditions that shape human existence. The seriousness of tone and concern that permeates much of the dialogue of the play creates a dramatic space motivated by the constant negotiation of the state and the ethics of social politics. Moreover, essential to the play are its staging of real circumstance and personalities to reach a symbolic level of reflection. Roy Cohen is the play's epitome to rely on a historical framework that relates the play to the reality of politics; of all characters, Cohen is the most distressing symbol for the play's negotiation of the ethical decline and ill state of American politics:

JOE (*A beat, then*): Even if I said yes to the job, it would still be illegal to interfere. With the hearings. It's unethical. No. I can't.

ROY: Un-ethical. Would you excuse us, Martin?

...

ROY: Un-ethical. Are you trying to embarrass me in front of my friend? . . . This is—this is gastric juices churning, this is enzymes and acids, this is intestinal is what this is, bowel movement and blood-red meat! This stinks, this is *politics*, Joe, the game of being alive. And you think you're. . . . What? Above that? Above alive is what? Dead! In the clouds! You're on earth, goddamnit! Plant a foot, stay a while (70-71).

Kushner's rewriting of the infamous jurist Cohen marks his attempt to create a close relatability between

the imaginary and the real; his creation of Roy is informed by evoking the actual realities of American politics rather than by parodic and sarcastic intent. In fact, Kushner felt it necessary to clarify the terms of his inclusion of Roy Cohen into the dramatis personae not as a bleak imitation but as an artistic as well as a metaphorical transposition of actual conditions into a dramatic form: in a footnote on the character of Roy Cohen he writes: “The character Roy M. Cohen is based on the late Roy M. Cohen (1927-1986), who was all too real; . . . But this Roy is a work of dramatic fiction; his words are my invention, and liberties have been taken.”^[47]

Kushner’s oeuvre constantly negotiates the interplay between art and politics – or, put differently, the creation of a distinctly artful and politically meaningful drama. Occasionally, the play breaks with realistic representation and rational discourse as its own principles of dramatic form. In many situations in the play in which unbearable physical or spiritual suffering give occasion for angels to appear, hallucinations to enter the mind, and visions to inspire new forms of insight and understanding, the boundaries of reason and possibility are crossed: in the Diorama Room of the Mormon Visitors’ Center, Prior suddenly sees Louis on stage as part of the costumed mannequins and questions the reliability of his own mind and senses: “Am I dreaming this, I don’t understand” (197). These situations are saturated with symbolic meaning as the rational gives way to the irrational and the play’s own experimentation with dramatic form. When trial victim Ethel Rosenberg frequently appears on stage and hunts Roy Cohen’s consciousness, or when Prior is confronted with the appearance of Angels and his forefathers, the protagonists inner struggle is externalized and transformed into a physical and material presence on stage. On a formal level, this inclusion debases the play’s own reliance on a narrative model of contradictions of reason and introduces the irrational which, from the perspective of formal structure, adds to the play a sense of openness, ambiguity, and a heightened sense of theatricality. This stylistic hybridity bears testimony to Kushner’s openness to form and his devotion to the exploration of dramatic and theatrical territory which is playfully expressed in his own conception of the “Theater of the Fabulous.”^[48] Kushner’s achievement with *Angels in America* is his construction of the tragic beyond the promise of ultimate spiritual transcendence and as a site where human action and will are a matter of ethical and political acts that bear meaning to questions of responsibility, justice, and change.

In this sense, the inclusion of the visionary and the irrational also gesture towards the utopian, and the final reward of change which is perhaps most clearly symbolized in the epilogue of the play. If, as Goldhill argues, the essence of true tragic drama according to Hegel was a matter of the subject’s final reconciliation between inner freedom and external necessity, the ending of *Angels* reaches no such formal or ethical closure. Prior still suffers from AIDS and remains unreconciled with Louis. But Prior’s final words of the play “we won’t die secret deaths anymore. . . . The Great Work Begins” (290) link struggle and suffering with the prospect of a more hopeful future, in which structures of injustice, discrimination, and exclusion can be overturned.

Conclusion

Kushner’s play derives much of its dramatic and artistic force from the unique interplay of aesthetics and politics. At the beginning of this paper I have argued that the political and the tragic are often regarded as a mutually exclusive dramatic aesthetic. The benefit of creating a relation in the context of political theatre has therefore so far been overlooked. Moreover, *Angels in America*, as this paper intended to argue, is one striking example of American drama in which the role of the tragic renders the dramatic properties of conflict and contradiction essential to the symbolic value of the play. Change comes from

struggle is one of the key ideas that informs the political dimension of the play. Hence, and in contrast to Steiner's approach to place the tragic in the realm of the metaphysical, I read Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* as a striking example that rejects such logic. The play displaces the tragic mode from a universal one—one that refers to a permanent and metaphysical condition of human existence—and situates it in a local contemporary setting to evoke the political challenges of the 1980s and 1990s America. Moreover, in contrast to Hegel, Kushner's contemplation of the tragic is rooted within a complex, self-reflexive theatre aesthetic. And while Hegel's view reconciles the tragic in a transcendent experience of the human consciousness, Kushner envisions the tragic as a force resulting from political, personal, and historical circumstance that the protagonists seek to control, confront, and overcome. This struggle, in essence, speaks of the play's central metaphor on the transformative power of human agency as a social and political responsibility to achieve change and progress. What Kushner has in common with Hegel is the concentration of the human subject as the main locus of the tragic, and the importance of contradiction and collision as a matter of an ethical and formal necessity to express the tragic sense innate to his play. And, in Kushner's case, within this conjunction of the tragic resides a resonant and meaningful symbiosis of art and politics. Overall, what appears as fitting final description of the innate political dimension of Kushner's poetics of the tragic is perhaps best summarized by Christopher Bigsby as a "arena for debate."^[49]

In this line of thought, I read Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* as a continuation of American dramatists' ongoing interest in and imaginative preoccupation with tragedy and the tragic—among whom rank such great dramatists such as Eugene O'Neill or Arthur Miller. Unlike his predecessors, Kushner subjects tragedy's metaphysical offerings to critical scrutiny and establishes the tragic as a distinct modality of the poetics of drama as it informs its shape, patterns, and forms of expression. What I refer to as the poetics of the tragic in Kushner's *Angels in America* thus describes Kushner's attempt to reconcile the tragic as a specific poetological mode of composition and expression with a politically motivated theatre that overall promotes a sense of social relevance of art in general.

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[1] Tony Kushner, "Notes About Political Theater," *The Kenyon Review: New Series* 19, no. 3/4 (Summer–Autumn 1997): 19.

[2] Annette Saddik, in her book *Contemporary American Drama* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007) writes: "contemporary American theatre as an experimental theatre of inclusion and diversity that, in postmodern fashion, questions the nature of reality, presents multiple versions of truth(s), complicates the notion of an origin or 'essence', and destabilises the illusion of fixed identity by blurring the boundaries between role-playing and authenticity, or acting and being," 7. See also: Kerstin Schmidt. *The Theater of Transformation. Postmodernism in American Drama*, (New York: Rodopi, 2005).

[3] Saddik, *Contemporary American Drama*, 5.

[4] Tony Kushner, "Political Theater," 26. See also: Tony Kushner. "How do you Make Social Change?" *Theater* 31, no. 3 (2001): 62–93.

[5] Harold Bloom, "Tony Kushner," in *Modern American Drama*, ed. Harold Bloom (Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2005), 297.

[6] Christopher Bigsby, *Contemporary American Playwrights* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

[7] Simon Goldhill, "The Ends of Tragedy: Schelling, Hegel, and Oedipus," *PMLA* 129, no. 4 (October 2014): 635.

[8] Much criticism has explored tragedy's importance to the dramatic oeuvre of Eugene O'Neill: see for instance Miriam M. Chirico, "Moving Fate into the Family: Tragedy Redefined in O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra*," *The Eugene O'Neill Review* 24, no. 1/2, (Spring/Fall 2000): 81-100; Stephen A. Black, "*Mourning Becomes Electra* as a Greek Tragedy," *The Eugene O'Neill Review* 26 (2004): 166–88.

[9] Arthur Miller, "Tragedy and the Common Man," *The New York Times*, 27 February 1949
<http://movies2.nytimes.com/books/00/11/12/specials/miller-common.html> (accessed 09 September 2018).

[10] Alfred Schwarz, *From Büchner To Beckett: Dramatic Theory and the Modes of Tragic Drama* (Athens, Oh: Ohio University Press, 1978), 5.

[11] Schwarz, *Tragic Drama*, 10.

[12] Rita Felski, "Introduction," in *Rethinking Tragedy*, ed. Rita Felski (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 4.

[13] *Ibid.*, 11.

[14] Terry Eagleton, *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic* (New Jersey: Wiley, 2009), 65,
<https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ub-lmu/detail.action?docID=320111&query=9780631233602>.

[15] George Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980. [1961]), 332–42.

[16] Steiner, *Tragedy*, 8–9.

[17] Kushner, "Political Theater," 22.

[18] *Ibid.*, 21.

[19] A brief reference to German Romanticism and Friedrich Schiller as the most prominent philosopher and representative of viewing life as an essentially tragic experience shall suffice at this point to stress the long tradition of critical thought that interrelates tragedy and metaphysics.

[20] Jennifer Wallace, *The Cambridge Companion to Tragedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Rowan Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); Felski, "Introduction," *Rethinking Tragedy*.

[21] Felski, "Introduction," 10.

[22] Eagleton, *The Idea of the Tragic*, 63.

[23] Goldhill, "The Ends of Tragedy," 634.

[24] Michelle Gellrich, *Tragedy and Theory. The Problem of Conflict since Aristotle*. (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1988), 19.

[25] Eagleton, *The Idea of the Tragic*, Raymond Williams. *Modern Tragedy*. (London: Chatto and Windus, 1966).

[26] G. W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics. Lectures on Fine Art*. Volume 11, trans. T.M.Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975).

[27] *Ibid.*, 1159.

[28] *Ibid.*, 1194.

[29] An excellent reading of Hegel's approach to tragedy can be found in Rowan Williams' *The Tragic Imagination* (2016) in the chapter entitled "Reconciliation and its Discontents: Thinking with Hegel".

[30] Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 1196.

[31] *Ibid.*, 1194–97.

[32] *Ibid.*, 1194.

[33] Hegel qtd. in Williams. *Modern Tragedy*. 33

[34] Charles Glicksberg, *The Tragic Vision in Twentieth Century Literature* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1963), xii.

[35] Goldhill, "The Ends of Tragedy," 636

[36] Williams, *Tragic Imagination*, 63.

[37] Gellrich, *Tragedy and Theory*, 10;22.

[38] *Ibid.*, 32.

[39] Tony Kushner, *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes* (New York: Theatre

Communication Group, 2013), emphasis added. Subsequent references will be provided parenthetically.

[40] A highly illuminative discussion on the way in which Kushner represents American ideologies and myths in his play is offered by David Savran's essay: "Ambivalence, Utopia, and a Queer Sort of Materialism: How 'Angels in America' Reconstructs the Nation," *Theater Journal* 47, no. 2 (1995): 207–27.

[41] Eagleton, *Idea of the Tragic*, 118.

[42] Williams, *Tragic Imagination*, 63.

[43] Gellrich, *Tragedy and Theory*, 10.

[44] David Kornhaber, "Kushner at Colonus: Tragedy, Politics, and Citizenship," *PMLA* 129, no. 4 (October 2014): 737.

[45] Kushner, "Notes About Political Theater," 19.

[46] Goldhill, "The Ends of Tragedy," 635

[47] Kushner, *Angels in America: The Characters In Millennium Approaches*, 2013.

[48] Kushner, "Political Theater," 32.

[49] Bigsby, *Contemporary American Playwrights*, 87.

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