

Millennium Approaches Study Guide

Millennium Approaches by Tony Kushner

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Plot Summary

Set in the mid-1980s, *Millennium Approaches* tells the story of two couples during the Reagan era and the outbreak in AIDS awareness. Louis Ironson's lover Prior Walter is dying of AIDS, and Louis can't handle the horrors of the illness. He leaves Prior, who begins having visions of an approaching Angel. Meanwhile, Joe Pitt, a conservative Mormon, is offered a position in the Department of Justice by high-powered attorney Roy Cohn. Joe wants to take the job, but his wife Harper is battling mental problems and addiction to Valium. Joe faces the ethical dilemmas involved in the politics of his new job opportunity, as well as his dawning realization that he's gay.

The story begins at Louis's grandmother's funeral, when Prior tells Louis that he's been diagnosed with AIDS. He's afraid Louis will leave him, and his fears are confirmed as Louis immediately begins wondering whether he can stick by Prior through his illness and likely death. Meanwhile, high-powered, crass lawyer Roy M. Cohn offers conservative Mormon Joe Pitt a dream job at the Department of Justice. Joe's decision is complicated by his wife, Harper. Harper has hallucinations and is addicted to Valium, and she doesn't want to move to Washington. Joe feels obligated to take care of her, but he wants the job he's been offered. He wants to be involved in the Reagans' conservative movement in Washington.

Joe and Louis meet in the men's restroom at the Federal Court of Appeals, where they both work. Louis is a lowly word processor, and Joe, a clerk for one of the judges, finds Louis crying in the restroom. Joe asks him what's the matter, and Louis says he's crying for a sick friend. Louis is disdainful of Joe's conservative politics and picks up on the fact that Joe is gay, something Joe denies. Prior and Harper also meet, in a dream-world where Harper tells Prior that deep inside, a part of him is free of illness, and where Prior tells Harper that her husband is gay.

Harper confronts her husband about being gay, but he still denies it. Meanwhile, Louis is on the verge of leaving Prior, as Prior becomes more and more ill. Roy Cohn is also diagnosed with AIDS, but he refuses to admit, even to his doctor, that he could be gay. Roy believes his power changes who he is and instructs his doctor to call his illness cancer.

Joe learns that Roy wants him in the Justice Department so that Joe can use his power to help Roy, but still Joe can't give Roy an answer about the job. After Prior winds up in the hospital, Louis leaves him, and Prior begins hearing a Voice and seeing his ancestors' spirits, heralding the coming of an Angel. Joe finally admits to Harper that he's gay, and Harper disappears into a dream world. Joe also rejects Roy's job at the Justice Department, leaving Roy sick and dying alone with his own ghosts. As Joe and Louis come together, each needing to be with someone, Prior's Angel arrives, saying that they have work to do in the world.



Act 1, Bad News, Scenes 1-3

Act 1, Bad News, Scenes 1-3 Summary

Set in the mid-1980s, *Millennium Approaches* tells the story of two couples during the era of Reagan and AIDS. Louis Ironson's lover Prior Walter is dying of AIDS, and Louis can't handle the horrors of illness. He leaves Prior, who begins having visions of an approaching Angel. Meanwhile, Joe Pitt, a conservative Mormon, is offered a position in the Department of Justice by high-powered attorney Roy Cohn. Joe wants to take the job, but his wife Harper is battling mental problems and addiction to Valium. Joe faces the ethical dilemmas involved in the politics of his new job opportunity, as well as his dawning realization that he's gay.

The play begins with Scene 1 at the funeral for Sarah Ironson, Louis Ironson's grandmother. Rabbi Isidor Chemelwitz is speaking over her coffin. The rabbi admits that he never knew Sarah, commenting on the non-Jewish names of some of her grandchildren. He sees Sarah less as an individual than as a representative of her generation, a woman who brought Judaism over to the United States and passed it on to her children and her children's children. The journey and history of the Jews lives on because of her.

Scene 2 takes place on the same day, in Roy M. Cohn's office. Cohn is a high-powered lawyer with heavy political influence, and a constantly active phone system on his desk. He is talking to Joe Pitt, chief clerk for Justice Theodore Wilson, a judge on the Federal Court of Appeals. The conversation can hardly get going because Roy is constantly interrupted by the phone. He fields a call from an angry client, swearing and yelling at her for being angry that he missed a court date. Apparently, Roy has borrowed a large sum of money from this client Aileen Soffer.

When Roy gets a word in with Joe, he acknowledges that Joe probably does most of the work for the judge he's clerking for. Then, distracted on the phone again, Roy uses Christ's name to swear, and Joe asks him not to take the Lord's name in vain in his presence. Roy finally tells his secretary to handle the phones and focuses on Joe. He says he admires Joe's principles and learns Joe is a Mormon. Then, he offers Joe a job in the Justice Department under Ed Meese, Attorney General. Joe is overwhelmed at the opportunity but tells Roy that he'll need to talk to his wife before accepting.

Scene 3 is at Joe's apartment, where his wife Harper is listening to the radio and talking to herself about the ozone layer disappearing, God's protection of the Earth collapsing. She thinks about traveling away from everything and summons an imaginary travel agent, Mr. Lies. She talks to him about possibly going to the Antarctic, and about the approaching millennium. She wonders if Christ will come again. Then, Joe comes home and the travel agent disappears. He uses his pet name for Harper, Buddy, and asks her how she'd feel about moving to Washington.



Act 1, Bad News, Scenes 1-3 Analysis

The funeral of Louis's grandmother begins the play with a context of history. Although Louis is separated from his roots, he is also affected by his Jewish heritage. Louis carries with him guilt and a need to intellectually examine every question, often at the cost of his emotional life. The rabbi who delivers the funeral address doesn't know Sarah, Louis's grandmother, but Louis doesn't know her either. She has become not a person but a symbol of Jewish heritage.

Roy Cohn is connected, and the phone system on Roy's desk symbolizes his web of power. His power is unofficial. He's a behind-the-scenes political operator. Roy and Joe represent two different sides of the Republican movement. Roy is a crass, amoral, power and money hungry person who is looking after his own welfare and seems to think he is above the law. Meanwhile, Joe is a true believer in "right." He has a conservative idea of what is right and righteous, and he believes that Roy is advancing that idea. Essentially, though, while Roy believes he is above the law, Joe believes in law. When Joe asks Roy not to take the name of the Lord in vain, the difference between the two is being defined.

Joe's nickname for Harper, "Buddy," is significant. Joe and Harper do not have a real marriage. Just as Harper lives in a fantasy world, her marriage is a fantasy. They are not lovers. They are "buddies." Their kisses are "Buddy kisses." This foreshadows the revelation that Joe is gay. The name "Mr. Lies" is also significant, since Harper's marriage is based on a massive lie: Joe pretending he's not gay.



Act 1, Bad News, Scenes 4-6

Act 1, Bad News, Scenes 4-6 Summary

Scene 4 continues on the same day. Louis and his boyfriend Prior are sitting on a bench outside the funeral home after Louis's grandmother's funeral. They are about to head to the graveyard for the burial. Louis apologizes to Prior for not introducing him to the family, but he's uncomfortable with introducing his gay lover at a family event. Prior teases that he even calls himself "Lou" instead of "Louis" to hide any potential lisp, and says that his cousin Doris is a lesbian. Prior and Louis's cat Sheba is missing. Prior tells Louis that he thinks the cat "knows." Prior's got AIDS, and he's begun to develop lesions. Louis is angry, and he wants to know why Prior didn't tell him. Prior is afraid that Louis will leave him because he is dying.

Scene 5 shows two scenes taking place at once, Joe and Harper at their apartment and Louis at the cemetery with the rabbi. Harper doesn't want to move to Washington and asks Joe to say no to the position. Harper calls Washington a cemetery and says they're at least pretend-happy where they are. Joe is frustrated with his low-paying clerk position and wants to go to Washington where he can do something important. Harper says that she has too much to do, like painting the bedroom, though she is afraid to go in there while she's alone. Joe questions Harper to find out how many pills she's taken that day.

Meanwhile, Louis asks the rabbi for advice about someone who abandons the person he loves. He's afraid of disease and afraid of what he might do. The rabbi has no advice, saying that it's too bad Jews believe in guilt, not forgiveness. In Joe's apartment, Joe is asking Harper to consider what the job in Washington means. He's a believer in Reagan, believing that Reagan is bringing good back into the world. Harper does not see the world getting better or less confusing. Harper questions Joe about where he goes when he walks and tells him he should never have married her. She tries to entice him into having sex, offering a blow job, but he rejects her.

Scene 6 takes place the following week, in the men's restroom at the Federal Court of Appeals building. Louis is in the restroom crying when Joe comes in. Louis is a word processor at the courthouse, and he recognizes Joe, Justice Wilson's clerk. Joe asks if Louis is okay, and Louis says he's got a sick friend. Joe is the first person to ask him why he's crying. Louis assumes Joe is gay, but Joe denies it. Louis is disparaging about Joe's Republican views, teasing him, but ultimately Louis kisses Joe lightly on the cheek before leaving.

Act 1, Bad News, Scenes 4-6 Analysis

Prior knows Louis well, and he knows that Louis won't be able to deal with the harsh reality of sickness and death. Louis prefers to live in a clean, pure world of the mind.



The realities (not only of sickness and death, but also of prejudice) are something he tries to explain away and escape from. At first, he denies that Prior's lesion is a sign of AIDS. In part, this is because he doesn't know Prior's been diagnosed, but in part, it is Louis's retreat into denial.

Throughout the play, the author uses split scenes to compare two scenes that are happening at once. Joe and Harper's relationship parallels Louis and Prior's relationship. Joe feels an obligation to take care of Harper, and Louis feels an obligation to take care of Prior. Each struggles with the decision whether to selfishly take what he wants or to stay and take care of his loved one. Joe wants to take the job in Washington, and Louis wants to escape from Prior's disease.

Joe tells Harper that blow jobs aren't proper, but his lack of sexual interest in Harper isn't because of a moral code or sexual repression. Joe is gay, and Louis picks up on this during the scene in the bathroom. Even though Joe denies that he's gay, the quality of homosexuality follows him throughout his life. It is something innate, which he can't escape from. On some level, Harper already knows that Joe is gay.



Act 1, Bad News, Scenes 7-9

Act 1, Bad News, Scenes 7-9 Summary

A week later, Prior is dreaming he's at a makeup table applying drag makeup, and Harper is hallucinating. The two meet in their mutual dream-world. Harper appears, confused at seeing someone she doesn't know in her hallucination, brought on by too much Valium, and surprised at a man wearing makeup. Prior explains that it's his dream and that he's gay. Harper is depressed by the limits of imagination, and she intuits that Prior is sick. Then she asks Prior to tell her something she doesn't know, and he tells Harper that her husband is gay. At first, she denies it, but then she seems to realize that it makes sense. Before she leaves, Harper tells Prior that deep within him, his core is free of disease. Prior begins smearing his makeup, and a feather falls from above. A Voice tells him to look up and to prepare.

Scene 8 is split between Joe and Harper at home and Prior and Louis in bed. Harper questions Joe about where he's been, telling him she's burned his dinner on purpose. Joe tries to talk about Harper's Valium habit and his potential job, but Harper just wants him to tell her where he's been. She says she's afraid of him, and that they both hate sex. Finally, she asks him if he's gay. He denies it.

Meanwhile, Louis talks about being Jewish and about justice, saying that it's not the judgment that matters but the process of considering the question. Prior brings him back from philosophy to reality, telling Louis that he's getting sicker. Louis begins to cry, asking if Prior would hate him if he walked out. Prior says yes.

Joe tells Harper that they should pray for help, saying that all that matters is that he doesn't act on his homosexual leanings. Harper says that she's pregnant, but she's ambiguous about whether she's lying or even knows for sure herself, leaving Joe wondering about her just as she's wondering about him. Then, Prior tells Louis about his ancestor, a ship captain, whose boat sank. The crew with 70 people on board set off in a longboat, but as they took on water, they threw off people until only 9 were left when they reached land. Louis begs him not to get sicker.

Scene 9 is at Roy's doctor's office. Henry tells Roy that he has AIDS. Roy threatens to destroy Henry if he says Roy is homosexual. Henry knows from Roy's history of venereal diseases that Roy sleeps with men, but Roy denies that he is "homosexual." A homosexual is not someone in power, who can get the president on the phone. Roy instructs his doctor to call his illness liver cancer.

Act 1, Bad News, Scenes 7-9 Analysis

Just as Joe and Louis share an affinity as the caretakers in their relationships, Prior and Harper share an affinity. Each is being betrayed by their loved one. Prior and Harper also both have a relationship with the supernatural or the unreal. Joe and Louis live in



the real world; Prior and Harper live in a realm of the spiritual. Prior and Harper's meeting in a dream world underscores their similarities and their relationship with the unreal.

Prior's dream marks the first omen of the coming Angel. The feather is the feather of the Angel's wing. Prior is being called by something above mankind. The existence of a higher authority is something that Joe has always believed in. He believes in law because he believes in a higher power. However, Prior is the chosen prophet the Angel is coming to. Prior is a dying man, one who Joe would consider marked by sin, but his visions of the Angel indicate that Joe's interpretation of a higher power is the wrong one. Prior is the blessed prophet, perhaps a true "later-day saint."

Prior's story of the boat with 70 people on board, and its heartless crew who threw person after person overboard so that the boat could survive, is an illustration of the dog-eat-dog world that Roy Cohn sees. There is a good justification for throwing people overboard; it's better that some survive than that none survive. The question becomes, what is the responsibility towards others versus the responsibility towards self? Joe wants to take the job for himself, but he's torn between his responsibility toward Harper and his responsibility to take care of himself. Louis, similarly, is torn between a responsibility towards Prior and one to care for himself.

Louis and Joe are poised to throw their mates overboard, denying a responsibility to the community as a whole in favor of a responsibility to the self for survival. Roy Cohn is the ultimate proponent of selfishness above all. He feels no responsibility to care for others, and he sees his own power as the center of his survival. He denies being gay and will not help others who are gay. Instead, he wants to help only himself, ready at any moment to throw anyone else overboard.



Act 2, In Vitro, Scenes 1-3

Act 2, In Vitro, Scenes 1-3 Summary

Act 2 begins in the end of December, when Prior is much more ill. He's burning up with a fever, and his legs hurt so bad he can't walk. He has bloody diarrhea, too, but still he begs Louis not to bring him to the hospital.

Scene 2 is on the same night, and Harper is at home alone in the dark when Joe arrives. She is afraid, imagining someone in the bedroom, with a knife. She asks Joe what he prays for, and he says that he prays to be crushed. He remembers seeing a picture of Jacob fighting a beautiful angel, a fight that no human could possibly win. Harper says that Joe is the only person she's ever loved, and Joe asks if she's really pregnant. Harper says that she's missed her period. She asks him to go to Washington, but he says he won't leave her. Harper says that she's leaving him.

Scene 3 takes place the next morning in Prior's hospital room. Louis is talking to a nurse, Emily. Prior is sedated. The nurse sympathizes with Louis and comments on Prior's odd name, Prior Walters. Louis says it's a family name, going back generations. Louis wonders what's wrong with him, that he can't love Prior through his illness. Louis goes out to walk in the park.

Act 2, In Vitro, Scenes 1-3 Analysis

Both Prior and Harper become worse, retreating into their illnesses, and Joe and Louis waver between helping themselves and helping their counterparts. Joe's desire to be crushed, to fight an unwinnable fight against an Angel, is a desire to succumb to something higher than himself. He wants to be completely overtaken by an overwhelming power, which would take responsibility for his own decisions away from him. However, it is also a desire for destruction of the self. Joe is, on some level, self-hating, because he cannot accept who and what he is.



Act 2, In Vitro, Scenes 4-5

Act 2, In Vitro, Scenes 4-5 Summary

Scene 4 is an hour later. The scene is split between Joe and Roy at a bar and Louis with a man in Central Park. Joe confides with Roy about his wife's Valium addiction. She has a miscarriage, but the pills started before that. Harper's father was drunk and abusive, and Joe was attracted to Harper because she was a misfit among the Mormons. Joe felt different, too, unable to "pass." When Roy asks what Joe tried to "pass" as, Joe says someone cheerful and strong, without secrets. Roy presses Joe to go to Washington, but Joe says he can't leave Harper. Meanwhile, Louis asks the stranger to fuck him, and tells him that he needs to be punished. They have nowhere to go, though. The man lives with his parents, and Louis says he doesn't live alone.

Back at the bar, Roy tells Joe that he's had powerful mentors, father-figures, while Louis asks the stranger to use a condom. When the man won't, Louis says he's leaving. The man begs him to stay, and they start to have sex. The condom breaks, and Louis says he doesn't care if the man infects him. The man is freaked out and stops, saying he's going home. Louis makes a crack about the man's parents, and the man slaps him and leaves. At the bar, Roy tells Joe that he's dying of cancer. He says Joe is like his son, and tells him that love and responsibility are traps. Roy urges Joe to do what he needs to do, for himself.

Scene 5 takes place three days later. Belize, a nurse and former drag queen, is with Prior in his hospital room. Prior has improved. Belize has brought an herbal rub and begins massaging it on Prior. Louis has left, and Prior wants him to come back. He confesses to Belize that the drugs are making him hallucinate, but Prior doesn't want to tell the doctors because he likes the Voice that talks to him. After Belize leaves, Prior talks to the Voice. It says it's a messenger and will reveal itself soon and bring back truth. The Voice again tells Prior to prepare.

Act 2, In Vitro, Scenes 4-5 Analysis

When Louis has sex with a stranger in Central Park, it is a betrayal of Prior. Louis is taking a step away from Prior. He wants it to be punishment; he wants it to hurt. He even says he doesn't care if he's infected, the ultimate self-injury. At the same time, for all his self-flagellation, Louis is already betraying Prior, leaving him when he's sick and likely dying. Louis is his own tempter, pulling himself into betraying Prior.

Meanwhile, Joe is being tempted by outside forces. Roy says that love and responsibility are traps. He is against any obligation to others, at the same time that he asks Joe to be obligated to him. Roy has a double standard. He simply feels that no one should be obliged to help anyone but him. Roy does whatever is best for himself. Likely,

if Joe weren't of use to him, Roy would not feel under any obligation to help him or be loyal to him.

The second time the Voice speaks to Prior, there is a bright light, another omen of the approaching Angel. The title of this section is "In Vitro," a Latin phrase meaning "in the glass." The phrase is applied to biological processes that take place outside of living organisms, like the growth of zygotes to be implanted in wombs. The phrase indicates that something is growing, though it has not yet come together with Prior.



Act 2, In Vitro, Scenes 6-7

Act 2, In Vitro, Scenes 6-7 Summary

Scene 6 takes place the second week in January, 1986. Roy, Joe, and Martin Heller from the Justice Department are in a restaurant. Martin talks to Joe about the power of the Reagan administration and the change that's happening, anticipating a Republican take-over of the Supreme Court. He anticipates social change and the end of liberalism, perhaps even a permanent Republican presidency.

Roy tells Martin to shut up and then brags about his ability to shut up one of the most powerful men in the country. Then, he asks Martin to rub his back. Embarrassed, Martin rubs Roy's back for him. Roy says that loyalty, sticking together, is what let the communists take over Russia, implying that the same thing is what will keep the Republicans in power.

Martin stops rubbing Roy's back and presses Joe for an answer about the job in the Justice Department. Roy tells Martin about Joe's wife, and they press Joe to say yes to the job. Still, Joe doesn't answer. Roy hands Joe a letter. It's from the New York State Bar Association. Roy is being threatened with disbarment. He borrowed a half million dollars from a client and didn't return it. Joe is horrified, but Roy blithely states that he'll deny the money was a loan. He says that he needs a friend like Joe in the Justice Department to threaten the lawyers on the disbarment committee who need Justice Department cooperation. Joe balks; it's unethical. Roy asks Martin to leave for a moment. Once Martin is gone, Roy tells Joe to stop being naïve. Politics is dirty, but it's alive. Martin returns, but Joe's still not convinced. He says he'll think it over.

Scene 7 takes place the same afternoon, outside the Hall of Justice. A hot dog vendor is nearby, and Louis is eating a hot dog. Joe enters, with three hot dogs. Joe asks Louis about his sick friend, and Louis says he's worse. Louis says that he can't believe a nice guy like Joe voted for Reagan, but Joe doesn't want to talk about politics. Louis chides Joe for eating three hot dogs, saying that they've got all kinds of nasty things in them. Louis says he's trying to commit suicide with his hot dog, and Joe counters that he's got Pepto-Bismol for his.

Louis worries about Reagan's children, saying that Ron Reagan Jr. is gay, which Joe denies. Louis continues, saying that no one's responsible anymore. Joe comments that Louis just says or does whatever he wants, and Louis counters that freedom is frightening and heartless. Louis gets up to leave, but Joe stops him. Joe tells him about accidentally coming to work on a Sunday and finding the Hall of Justice empty, as if abandoned. There was a sense of sudden terrifying freedom. Joe feels he can't face work, and Louis confesses that he's moved out. He says that they should spend the day together. Louis says that maybe everyone is free, and frightened, in the new world under Reagan.



Act 2, In Vitro, Scenes 6-7 Analysis

Martin Heller adds additional pressure to Joe to come work for the Justice Department. The backdrop is the era of Reagan republicanism and "greed is good." The idea of a self-regulating market, where acting in self-interest creates a system that works, relates thematically to the stories of Louis and Joe. Both Louis and Joe are pulled to act in self-interest instead of in the interest of others or the community. Louis tries to intellectualize his selfishness, much as free-market economy and "trickle-down" economics intellectualize or justify the idea of deregulation and removing obligations to others.

In truth, Louis is more aligned with the Reagan republicans than Joe is. Joe believes in law, in God, and in obligation. He believes in something greater than himself that he's responsible toward. Roy believes in pacts of loyalty to take and maintain power, but this is ultimately selfishness, not a true belief in something higher than himself. Joe's instinct is to act for others and under God, and to deny himself. His denial of his homosexuality is part of Joe's belief in something higher than himself. He's upset at Roy's unethical behavior and his rebellion against acting unethically to help Roy both show the disconnect between Joe's true beliefs and what he finds in the inner circles of Republicanism.

When Joe and Louis talk about the frightening freedom of doing whatever you want, they're talking about the idea of no obligation to a higher authority. This is what Roy believes in; he's obligated only to himself. This is also how Louis has been acting, with no respect for love or obligation to others, but only for himself. Joe is being pulled into this terrifying world of freedom.



Act 2, In Vitro, Scenes 8-10

Act 2, In Vitro, Scenes 8-10 Summary

As Scene 8 opens, Joe is at a payphone, calling his mother, Hannah, who is in Utah. His mother is concerned. It's 4:00 a.m., and she can hear that Joe is on the street. Joe says that he just wants to talk to her, and his mother realizes that he's drunk. She tells him to go home. Joe tells her that he comes to Central Park to "watch" sometimes and asks if his father loved him. Then he tells his mother that he's gay. At first, she doesn't respond. Then, she says he's being ridiculous. She tells him to go home to his wife and says she's going to pretend the whole conversation never happened. Chastising him that drinking's a sin, Joe's mother hangs up on him.

Scene 9 takes place the following morning. It is split between Joe and Harper at home and Louis and Prior in Prior's hospital room. Joe comes in, and Harper says it's the moment of truth. Louis comes in to the hospital room and tells Prior that he's moving out. Joe tells Harper that he loves her and won't leave her. Louis tells Prior that he's already left.

Joe tells Harper that he's talked to her gynecologist and knows she's not pregnant. He confesses that he's gay but thought he could change. When he walks, he walks to the areas where gay men pick each other up. He's losing the battle against himself and against his desires. Meanwhile, Prior yells at Louis for leaving him. There's no room in Louis's life for Prior's illness. Louis says that he doesn't want to be judged. He wants to come visit Prior when he can and says he's doing the best he can, but Prior has no pity on him.

Joe says that he despises his life. He believed that he could save Harper, but he confesses that he never felt sexually attracted to her. Harper tells Joe to leave. She says to go to Washington without her. Meanwhile, Louis tries to tell Prior that he loves him, even though he's failed. Prior says that Louis doesn't love him; Louis can't love. He passes judgment on Louis, saying that his love is worthless.

Harper calls out to her imaginary travel agent, Mr. Lies. She says that she wants to get away from her husband. Joe tells Harper that the men with knives that she's always afraid of are really him. Prior yells at Louis to get out of his room, as Harper slowly realizes that Joe is the man with the knives that she fears. Joe's mouth begins to bleed. Harper calls Mr. Lies again, and he appears and vanishes with her. Prior closes his eyes, blocking Louis out, and Lois leaves. Prior and Joe are left alone.

As Scene 10 begins, Joe's mother Hannah is with Sister Ella Chapter, a real-estate agent. They look at the view of the canyons by Salt Lake City from Hannah's house. Sister Ella is selling Hannah's house for her. Sister Ella tries to draw Hannah down on the price, and then she wishes Hannah wouldn't leave, since Hannah's nearly her only friend. Sister Ella says that, though Salt Lake City is the place of saints, evil and sin are



everywhere. She says it's dangerous to go away from Salt Lake City, the home of saints. Hannah reminds her not to undervalue the house when she sells it.

Act 2, In Vitro, Scenes 8-10 Analysis

Joe's mother takes the same position Joe has taken in the past. She denies his homosexuality, calling it ridiculous. The relationship between Joe and his mother harkens back to Louis's grandmother's funeral. Joe's belief in a higher power and his disbelief in his own homosexuality are part of his heritage. His personal struggle and belief system comes from the past and his ancestors, not from within himself. His homosexuality, however, does come from within himself, and most of his troubles occur because his inner self is in conflict with his heritage.

The end of Act 2 is the low point of the play. Louis finally breaks with Prior, and Harper disappears into another world, her marriage with Joe destroyed. Harper has always known that Joe is gay, just as Joe has known. The men with knives she imagines in the bedroom reflect Harper's feelings of distrust toward Joe and toward men in general. Knives are phallic symbols, and Harper feels on some level that men will destroy her sexually. Joe chooses the phallus over Harper. Though he doesn't want to, he can't help but hurt her. Joe doesn't choose to leave her to help himself. He hurts Harper because of who he is, not because of what he chooses. Louis, however, hurts Prior because of his selfish choices.

Hannah's journey to New York echoes the coming of the Angel. Both Hannah and the Angel are coming from a holy place, and they are both coming to New York to right the wrongs that are occurring. Hannah believes that her son has fallen from the righteous path, and the Angel, too, is coming to help put the world on its better path.



Act 3, Not-Yet-Conscious, Forward Dawning, Scenes 1-2

Act 3, Not-Yet-Conscious, Forward Dawning, Scenes 1-2 Summary

Scene 1 takes place three days later. Prior is in bed, asleep, home from the hospital. He wakes from a nightmare. A man dressed as a 13th-century British squire is by his bedside and introduces himself as Prior Walter, one of Prior's ancestors of the same name. He is the fifth Prior Walter, and Prior is the thirty-fourth, but only if two bastards are counted. Prior 1, the ancestor, compares AIDS to the Black Plague of his time. He asks Prior why he has no children, saying he had twelve.

A 17th-century Prior Walter also appears, Prior 2. He says they are heralds and tells Prior again to prepare the way. Prior asks if he's going to die, but his ancestors are not allowed to discuss it. Prior 1 says that, even with children, you die alone. Prior 2 says that there is good news before bad. Light and music comes from above, and the Priors begin to chant, again saying that it's time to prepare. A messenger is coming to Prior, the prophet.

Scene 2 takes place the next day. Louis and Belize are meeting at a coffee shop. Meanwhile, Prior is visiting the hospital as an outpatient. Louis rambles about the philosophy of democracy, saying the power, not tolerance, is what's needed and that AIDS shows that beneath tolerance there is hatred. He says that politics and power are the issues in America, not race, offending Belize, who is black. When Louis says that he thinks drag is sexist, Belize is even more offended. Louis says Belize hates him because he's a Jew, and Belize accuses Louis of hating black people. Louis tries to convince Belize that he loves Prior, and Belize tells him that he ought to read romance novels instead of texts on democracy.

As the nurse is taking the IV drip out of Prior's arm, Louis asks Belize how he is. The nurse examines Prior while Belize tells Louis of Prior's problems. Prior tells the nurse that he feels he's going crazy, like something is coming. The nurse begins speaking in what sounds like Hebrew, but she doesn't realize it and laughs when Prior mentions it. She tells Prior that he's doing well and suggests seeing a therapist. Suddenly, a great red pillar supporting a book with an Aleph inscribed on it appears, and then disappears just as suddenly. The nurse leaves and so does Prior. Louis asks Belize to tell Prior that he loves him, but Belize says he can't help.



Act 3, Not-Yet-Conscious, Forward Dawning, Scenes 1-2 Analysis

Prior's ancestors come to herald the coming of the Angels. Like Louis and Joe, Prior is tied to his past, but Prior's ancestry is oddly straight and without conflict. The repeating name Prior Walter shows a consistency throughout Prior's ancestry, a lineage that does not swerve off its path. Though Prior is gay, he is not at odds with his ancestry, like Louis and Joe are. This consistency and the purity of Prior's lineage seem to make him suitable as the prophet of the Angel.

Louis tries to intellectualize his own behavior. He talks about democracy and prejudice and freedom, but he denies the simple truths of the people around him. He tries to intellectualize prejudice instead of dealing with Belize as a person. He tries to intellectualize his own betrayal of Prior without dealing with Prior as a person. Prior's presence in this scene is a reminder of the reality of Prior's illness and how much Louis has hurt him.

The third omen of the coming Angel is a book inscribed with an Aleph. This is the Book of Life. Like a book of law, the book indicates a higher authority, something written and therefore permanent, which is above mankind. The feather, the light, and the book all build the anticipation of what is coming: something great and supernatural.



Act 3, Not-Yet-Conscious, Forward Dawning, Scenes 3-4

Act 3, Not-Yet-Conscious, Forward Dawning, Scenes 3-4 Summary

Scene 3, on the same day, finds Harper in a cold, white place, in the snow. The snow feels good, and she is breathing ozone in the air. Mr. Lies tells her that she's in Antarctica. Harper realizes that she's left reality and is in a dream world. She wants to stay there forever and build her own world. Harper wonders who she can have as a companion, but Mr. Lies begs off because it's against his Travel Agent code. Harper says that maybe she'll find an Eskimo to be with her, but Mr. Lies tells her there are no Eskimos in Antarctica. Harper says that in the imaginary world, anything she makes up is true, even being pregnant. An Eskimo appears, and Mr. Lies believes that something is very wrong, as Harper dreams of giving birth to a furry baby that she'll nurse with hot cocoa.

Scene 4 takes place in the South Bronx. Hannah is walking past an abandoned lot, dragging her two suitcases. She is lost. She took the bus, but she couldn't understand the driver and got off at the last stop. She's trying to get to Brooklyn. Joe failed to pick her up at the airport. An old homeless woman tells Hannah that she's in the Bronx. Hannah tries to get more information, but the old woman is rambling, talking to herself. Hannah yells at the woman to get her to focus and learns that the woman doesn't know the way to Brooklyn. However, the woman is able to give her the address of the Mormon Visitor's Center, where they let anyone sit and watch movies all day. The homeless woman gives Hannah directions for the subway.

Act 3, Not-Yet-Conscious, Forward Dawning, Scenes 3-4 Analysis

Just as the supernatural creature, the Angel, is entering the world, Harper escapes it. She goes away to a place of the mind, a place outside of reality, where she has power to create and destroy her own surroundings. Harper has achieved what Roy strives for: complete freedom and control of her own destiny. However, that freedom is an illusion. She lives in a world of the mind, and Mr. Lies warns her that she must accept rules and appreciate the delicacy of her environment. Harper ignores those warnings. She takes the power to create an Antarctic Eskimo, though no such thing should exist. In this way, she is similar to Roy, who ignores the rule of law and creates his own world however he chooses.



Act 3, Not-Yet-Conscious, Forward Dawning, Scenes 5-7

Act 3, Not-Yet-Conscious, Forward Dawning, Scenes 5-7 Summary

As Scene 5 begins, Roy and Joe are in Roy's study. Although Roy is ill, he's trying to appear well. Joe turns down the job finally, explaining that his wife is missing, his mother's arriving, and Joe's been in the hospital with a bleeding ulcer. Roy yells and swears at him, calling him a pretty young punk who's being left behind. Joe says that as much as he loves Roy, there are rules he can't break.

Roy tells Joe that the thing he is most proud of is getting Ethel Rosenberg killed, a communist executed for espionage. Roy brags of harassing the judge into handing down a death sentence. Joe is horrified at Roy's illegal and unethical conduct, which might even be considered murder. Roy denies that he's dying and after asking for Joe's hand, pulls Joe into an unwelcomed embrace. Then, he tells Joe to leave, but pulls Joe into another embrace. Joe pushes him away, ready to hit him, but he doesn't. Joe leaves, and a small Jewish woman enters: Ethel Rosenberg. Roy yells that she doesn't frighten him and tells her to leave. Ethel calmly dials 9-1-1 and calls Roy an ambulance, but Roy says he's immortal. Ethel laughs.

Scene 6 takes place in Prior's bedroom. His ancestors, Prior 1 and Prior 2, are there, dressed in robes. They say that tonight "she" arrives. Prior tries to drive them away, but they won't leave. They acknowledge Prior's hard-on, saying that's a normal reaction to the force that's arriving. Prior's ancestors try to get him to dance to the music that begins, and Prior's imagination summons up his partner: Louis. They dance, and Prior's ancestors depart.

Scene 7 is split between Prior, alone in his apartment, and Louis, alone in the park. Prior begins saying things he himself doesn't understand, about an Angel and the Book of Life. Meanwhile, in the park, Joe approaches Louis. Joe says he followed Louis from work. Joe wants to touch Louis's face. Louis is feeling guilty and sorry for himself, so at first he puts Joe off. When Joe persists, though he is also full of guilt, Louis invites Joe home with him. Louis kisses Joe, telling him that he doesn't want to spend the night alone. Prior, in his apartment, hears the sound of powerful wings approaching. Prior is frightened. The plaster begins raining down from the ceiling. Music and light fills the room, followed by the sound of something falling, hard and fast, towards the room. There is a crash, and a winged Angel descends into the room, telling Prior that the messenger is here and the work must begin.



Act 3, Not-Yet-Conscious, Forward Dawning, Scenes 5-7 Analysis

Although Harper has left Joe for her own world of the mind, Joe rejects Roy's world of selfish freedom. Joe is at his lowest point. He is unable to accept his own sexuality. He has lost Harper. His mother is coming. He is suffering from a bleeding ulcer, the external representation of his internal conflict. Still, he takes a positive step in turning his back on Roy and the total negation of law and obligation. Joe chooses a higher power, the rule of law, and an obligation to others.

Roy cannot escape reality, even though he has tried to create his own destiny. His sins come back to him. Roy is dying of AIDS, despite denying his homosexuality. Roy is haunted by the ghost of Ethel Rosenberg, the reminder of his denial of ethical and legal behavior. He says that he is immortal, but his mortality is a hard and fast law that he cannot deny.

When Joe and Louis come together, Joe is beginning to realize that he must be true to himself and accept his homosexuality. Louis, however, is still running from his own guilt and taking selfish comfort in Joe. His Angel arrives, preparing the way for a final resolution in the companion play, *Perestroika*.



Characters

Joseph Porter Pitt

Joe Pitt is a conservative Mormon lawyer who serves in a relatively low-paying position as clerk to a judge. Joe is gay, but he cannot come to terms with his homosexuality. He believes that homosexuality is a sin, and he tries to overcome his tendencies to be a good Mormon and husband. Joe goes for long walks in Central Park and other places where gay men hang out and pick each other up, and he is constantly tempted.

Joe is offered a high-powered job with the Department of Justice by politically influential attorney Roy M. Cohn. Joe wants to take the job, become part of Reagan's conservative movement, and do something important in the country. However, he's not prepared for the selfish and political motivations of Roy and the rest of the political world. Roy is expecting Joe to use influence at the Department of Justice to stop him from being disbarred.

Joe is also struggling with his desire to help his wife, Harper. Harper is the child of a dysfunctional household, and she is chronically depressed and addicted to Valium. Joe wants to help her, but he doesn't know how. He can't be a true husband to her because he's gay, and on some level, Harper senses that he's gay. Ultimately, Joe must reject the job Roy has offered him, and he loses Harper to her own imaginary world. Joe tries to find himself by making a connection with another gay man, Louis.

Louis Ironson

Louis Ironson is a gay Jewish man, who is in a long-term relationship with his lover Prior Walter. Prior has been diagnosed with AIDS and is beginning to get ill. Louis cannot stand the idea of Prior's sickness and death. Louis wants to run away from the harsh reality of AIDS, and so, while Prior is sick in the hospital, Louis leaves him. Louis's actions are selfish and cruel. Although he knows that he's wrong, he can't seem to help himself from hurting Prior.

Louis intellectualizes his own behavior. He goes on long rants about philosophy, living in an escapist world of the mind, in many ways, like Harper. Harper escapes into pill-induced fantasies, while Louis escapes into pseudo-intellectual rationalizations of his own behavior and the world. Louis says that the important thing about justice is the consideration of the problem, not the verdict. He uses this idea to escape the verdict on himself for his own behavior. Louis cannot face reality or justice.

No one pushes Louis to leave Prior. Louis's only reason is selfish and even cowardly. He doesn't want to face illness and death. Louis is free to make a choice, and he makes the choice to care for himself before others. In this way, Louis is like Roy Cohn, much more so than Joe is. As much as Louis hates Roy Cohn's politics, Louis acts for himself first, doing and taking what he wishes, instead of acting according to a code of ethics or



law of behavior. Louis is acting according to the philosophy of freedom and selfishness that is central to Roy Cohn's behavior and politics.

Prior Walter

Prior Walter is Louis's lover, and he is dying of AIDS. Prior comes from a long line of Prior Walters, a lineage that goes back to the Middle Ages. While he is ill, Prior begins hearing a Voice and seeing signs of an Angel coming to him. Prior is a prophet, and the Angel, a messenger, is coming to him. Two of Prior Walter's ancestors of the same name come to him to herald the arrival of the Angel. Prior doesn't want to accept the role of prophet, but he also doesn't want to stop hearing the Voice that talks to him. Just as being gay is a part of Joe's inherent makeup, being a prophet is part of Prior's inherent makeup and part of his heritage. At the end of the play, the Angel appears to Prior and tells him that it's time to begin their work.

Harper Amaty Pitt

Harper is Joe's wife. Joe was attracted to Harper because she was a broken person. Her father was drunk and abusive, and Joe, who was also a misfit among the Mormon community, was drawn to her. Harper realizes on some level that her husband is not attracted to her. Although she denies it to herself at first, she knows that he is gay. Harper escapes into a world of Valium and hallucinations. When Joe finally admits to her that he is gay, Harper disappears into the world of her mind.

Roy M. Cohn

Roy Cohn is a high-powered New York attorney and an important part of the Republican movement. Roy is Joe's mentor and offers him a job at the Department of Justice. However, Roy is always motivated by selfish reasons. Roy has stolen a half million dollars from one of his clients, and he is undergoing disbarment proceedings. He wants Joe at the Department of Justice so that he can use political influence to stop the disbarment.

Roy prides himself on having been influential in pushing the judge in the trial of famous communist Ethel Rosenberg to order her execution for treason. However, when he is sick from AIDS, Ethel's ghost appears to him, haunting him from his past. Roy believes he is above the law. He does whatever he wants to and tries to get as much as he can for himself. He doesn't believe in a higher authority or in an unmalleable idea of right and wrong.



Hannah Porter Pitt

Hannah Porter Pitt is Joe Pitt's mother, who leaves her home in Salt Lake City to join her son in New York. She refuses to believe that her son is gay and wants to put Joe's marriage back together and get him on the right track.

Belize

Belize is a black former drag queen who is friends with Prior and Louis. Belize refuses to help Louis when he feels guilty about leaving Prior.

The Voice

An angelic Voice talks to Prior while he is sick and alone, after Louis has left him.

The Angel

The Angel is heralded in several scenes. First, a feather falls from above and a Voice says to prepare the way. Then, a light appears. Finally, Prior sees a Book of Life on a grand pillar. The Angel is also heralded by Prior's ancestors' spirits. At the end of the play the Angel, who calls himself a messenger, comes to Prior, calling Prior a prophet and telling him that they have work to do.

Rabbi Isidor Chemelwitz

Rabbi Chemelwitz performs the funeral for Sarah Ironson, Louis Ironson's grandmother.

Mr. Lies

Mr. Lies is a travel agent who Harper hallucinates, part of the International Order of Travel Agents. Mr. Lies transports Harper to the Antarctic.

The Man in the Park

After Louis leaves Prior at the hospital, he goes to Central Park, seeking an anonymous sexual encounter with a strange man.



Henry

Henry is Roy's doctor, who tells Roy that he has AIDS. Roy refuses to let Henry classify him as gay, even though Henry knows from Roy's medical history that Roy sleeps with men.

Emily

Emily is a nurse who attends Prior Walter in the hospital.

Martin Heller

Martin Heller works for the Justice Department under the Reagan Administration and tries to get Joe to accept the job that Roy's arranged for him.

Sister Ella Chapter

Sister Ella Chapter is a real-estate agent and a friend of Hannah, Joe's mother. She doesn't want Hannah to leave Salt Lake City, but she agrees to sell Hannah's house.

Prior 1

Prior 1 is one of Prior Walter's ancestors of the same name, from the 13th century. He is one of the heralds of the coming Angel.

Prior 2

Prior 2 is one of Prior Walter's ancestors of the same name, from the 17th century. He is one of the heralds of the coming Angel.

The Eskimo

When Harper travels to the Antarctic in her hallucination, she sees an Eskimo, who she imagines as her partner in her new, frozen world.

The Woman in the South Bronx

A crazy homeless woman in the South Bronx gives Joe's mother directions to get to the Mormon Visitor's Center.



Ethel Rosenberg

Ethel Rosenberg is the woman Roy Cohn worked to see executed for treason. Ethel Rosenberg (a vision or a ghost) comes to Roy as he is collapsing and calls an ambulance for him.



Objects/Places

Roy M. Cohn's Office

Cohn's office is most distinctive for the elaborate phone system on his desk, which blinks and beeps, giving Cohn a constant connection to the world.

Joe and Harper's Apartment

Joe and Harper live in an apartment in New York. Harper doesn't want to leave their home to go to Washington. She says that she still has to paint the bedroom, but she is afraid to go in there when she is alone. She imagines a man with a knife hiding in the bed.

The Feather

In Prior's dream, a feather falls from the sky and a Voice tells him to look up and to prepare the way. This is the first sign of the coming Angel.

The Hospital

When Prior is ill, he doesn't want to go to the hospital, but Louis brings him there anyway. Prior improves physically while he's in the hospital, but Louis takes the opportunity to leave him.

Central Park

In Central Park, gay men hang out and pick each other up. Joe goes for long walks in Central Park and other locations where gay men hang out.

The Antarctic

When Harper can no longer stand reality, she wishes herself away to her own vision of the Antarctic, where there is cleansing snow, the smell of ozone, and an Eskimo.

The Light

The second harbinger of the Angel is a heavenly light.



The Book on the Pillar

The third harbinger of the Angel is a book on a pillar inscribed with an Aleph, presumably the Book of Life.

The Bronx

When Hannah comes to New York, her son forgets to pick her up at the airport. She takes a bus, trying to get to Brooklyn, and accidentally gets off in the Bronx. An insane homeless woman in an empty lot is able to give Hannah directions to the Mormon Visitor's Center.

Salt Lake City

Joe's mother Hannah lives in Salt Lake City, Utah, the center of the Mormon church. Hannah sells her home overlooking spectacular canyons to come to New York and help her son.



Themes

Freedom and Consequence

Roy and Louis both take paths of freedom without bars. Roy takes money from clients and then tries to use his influence to prevent himself from being disbarred. He uses his influence unethically and illegally to get Ethel Rosenberg executed. He believes that the law is something living, to be used to get what he wants. In fact, he believes that he is above the law and even calls himself immortal. He believes that his power even prevents him from being gay, though he sleeps with men. He takes what he wants and wants to ignore consequences. He ignores justice. He decries the idea of a higher authority. However, Roy's belief in his own freedom without consequence is false. He contracts AIDS (as well as other venereal diseases) as a consequence of his behavior. He faces his own death and disbarment because he cannot truly have freedom and escape judgment. The ghost of Ethel Rosenberg is the ghost of Roy's past. He is not truly free, because he cannot escape the consequences of his action.

Louis also follows a selfish path, doing what he wants. He leaves Prior because he doesn't want to face illness and death. Instead of denying the law of the land, as Roy does, Louis denies the law of love. He denies his obligations to others, not in a lawful society, but in a relationship of two lovers. Louis, too, faces the consequences of his freedom. He has hurt Prior, whom he loves. Louis not only loses Prior, but Prior hates him for what he's done. Louis also must live with his own guilt for his actions. He condemns himself, and he must live with the judgment.

Love and Obligation

Millennium Approaches is the story of two couples. Joe and Harper love each other, but their love is not a physical love. Joe cannot love Harper as a husband should love a wife because he is gay. Joe feels obligation to Harper, and Harper feels a desire to escape. Joe believes that he is bound to help Harper, but ultimately, he cannot help her. He wants to take the job at the Department of Justice for himself, but his sense of obligation stops him. Joe's obligation is to Harper as someone he loves, as well as to the principle of marriage in which he believes as taught through Mormonism. Ultimately, love gives Joe an obligation, but it's one he cannot fulfill. This drives Harper to escape into her own mind.

Louis loves Prior, or believes that he does. However, he chooses not to fulfill the obligation of love. To Prior, and to Belize, this shows that he does not truly love Prior. Without obligation, there is no love. Louis is free to do what he wants to do. He is free to leave Prior. That freedom, however, is not without cost. Louis pays the price of losing Prior and losing love.



The relationship between Joe and Roy Cohn is not based on love. It is based on a different kind of obligation. Roy wants fealty from Joe. He says that Joe is like a son to him. The fealty he expects is not in exchange for love, however. Roy expects fealty in exchange for gain. He offers Joe power and money, in the form of a job for the justice department, in exchange for Joe's loyalty. This relationship of obligation for mutual gain is contrasted to the love relationships of Louis and Prior and of Joe and Harper. In the couples' relationships, love's obligations come from a desire to care for the person you love. In Roy's relationship with Joe, obligations come from a desire to help yourself. The contrast is between the love of self and the love of others.

Heritage

The characters in the play all deal with two types of inheritances. They deal with their cultural heritage, and they deal with their inherited, innate selves. The death of Louis's grandmother at the beginning of the play underscores this theme. Louis's grandmother symbolizes the role of Judaism in who Louis is. It imbues Louis with a sense of guilt and with a sense of rational, intellectual, consideration of questions of morality. However, Louis also has an innate fear of disease and death and an inability to deal with difficulties, driving Louis, despite his heritage of guilt, to leave Prior.

Joe's cultural heritage is Mormonism and a belief in the Mormon picture of God and spirituality. Through this cultural heritage, he comes to deny his innate self, a different kind of heritage. Joe denies that he is gay, and in doing so, he hurts Harper. His cultural heritage is at odds with who he truly is. Harper also struggles with an inconsistency. Her Mormon heritage describes how family should be, but both her father and husband do not fulfill their end of these promises.

Prior is the only character who seems completely in synch with his heritage, which may be why he is chosen as prophet. Perhaps this also is the thing that Harper sees in him, the core of his being that is without illness. Prior comes from a long line of Prior Walters, and the similarity of name bespeaks a consistency of self and purpose throughout the ages. When Prior's ancestors appear, they seem neither shocked or dismayed at Prior's homosexuality. He is comfortable with himself and also with his past.

Style

Point of View

Because *Millennium Approaches* is a play, it is intended to be viewed by an audience instead of read. The perspective is driven by what the author shows to the reader. The author uses split scenes to contrast relationships and make points about events happening in two places at the same time. The reader understands the characters and relationships from the author's sequencing of events and contrasting scenes as well as from the characters' actions and words.

However, unlike many plays, which never get inside the characters' heads because of the enforced third-person perspective of the theater, the author does let the reader inside of Harper's mind and Prior's mind. The reader is able to see Harper's visions and dreams, including her entirely constructed Antarctic dream world, a place made to numb her emotions. The reader also sees within Prior's dreams and visions. The people around Prior don't see his visions. The nurse does not realize she's talking in a foreign tongue. These are only Prior's experiences, but the audience is able to share them.

The play purposefully chooses characters from different backgrounds and perspectives, but all revolving around the gay community in America. Prior is of Anglo-Saxon heritage, a man who is comfortable with being gay and in a long-term relationship with a man he loves. Louis brings a heritage of Jewish guilt and intellectual rationalization to the play, and he seems less comfortable with being gay than Prior is. Joe brings a straight-laced Mormon perspective, while Roy brings a fiercely selfish conservative political view. The play chronicles the clash of these differing perspectives.

Setting

The setting of the play is mainly in New York, but more importantly it is in America, and specifically in mid-1980s America. The setting of America, a country of immigrants distanced from their ancestors, is essential to the play's themes of heritage and people's ties to their ancestry. America is a place of many cultures coming together, and the descendants of these cultures must find their own identities and meanings. The characters are all from different backgrounds: Jewish, Anglo-Saxon protestant, Mormon, African-American. They come together and must learn to live together and make a country together, somehow. In what ways are the characters obligated to their pasts and their heritage? In what ways are they obligated to themselves?

The setting of the 1980s, at the height of Reagan-era conservatism, addresses the idea of freedom, selfishness, and obligation to others. The "greed is good" conception of a free market that runs because the actors in it behave selfishly is attractive. Roy Cohn wants to act selfishly, in his own interests, without concern for others. Louis similarly wants to act selfishly. He wants freedom from the bonds of obligation to love and to



Prior. The political climate of the 1980s reflects the characters' desires for selfishness. As the characters build a society together, however, they must address the need for obligation, to the law, to others, and to the past.

The time period is also important because of the onset of AIDS, mainly among the gay community in America. The nature of AIDS as a sexually transmitted disease gives the play an inroad into talking about discrimination and also consequences of actions. AIDS also brings with it the threat of death, the process of dying, and the idea of mortality. Death is the final judgment, bringing the ultimate consequences.

Language and Meaning

When Louis talks about why he's leaving Prior, he doesn't talk about fear or love. He doesn't talk about emotions. He talks about philosophical ideas and rambles about conceptual paradigms. Louis's language shows his retreat into a world of the mind, escaping from the reality of bloody diarrhea into an intellectual realm of "neo-Hegelian positivist sense of constant historical progress towards happiness." Louis hides behind intellectual language to avoid unpleasant realities and to excuse himself for his own behavior through rationalization.

Roy Cohn is crass, swearing and brutally criticizing others while performing a complex dance of phone call after phone call in order to arrange the world to his desires. Roy uses language for its power of persuasion, and when his guard is down, his language is the lowest gutter-talk. Joe is put off by Roy's language because it breaks all laws of propriety, revealing the distinction between Roy and Joe. Roy does not believe in the law, except as a system to be manipulated. Joy believes in law, both moral law and legal law.

Harper is an escapist like Louis, and like Louis, her language focuses on everything but her own real problems. Harper rambles about the disappearing ozone layer instead of her true worries about where her husband goes on his long walks alone in the city. Her mind flits out to address all the issues of the day, and none of the issues of her own life.

Structure

The play is divided into three acts. Act 1 is titled Bad News, and the play begins with two characters finding out that they have AIDS. Prior tells his partner Louis that he has AIDS, and Roy M. Cohn tells his doctor that under no circumstances is his AIDS to be referred to as AIDS, but instead a nice, clean disease like cancer. The first act sets up the two man couples of the piece, Joe and Harper and Prior and Louis, and their parallel problems. Harper and Prior are both ill, and Joe and Louis both are torn between standing by their partners and acting selfishly. Joe's conflict is driven both by the offer of a job in the Justice Department and the reality that he's actually gay.

The second act is called In Vitro. During this act, the conflict is building. Prior gets sicker, and Louis moves gradually toward leaving him. Joe must come to terms with the



fact that he's gay, at the same time as Roy Cohn is putting pressure on him to take a job in the Justice Department. The act culminates as Louis tells Prior that he's leaving, and as Joe finally admits to Harper that he's gay, causing her to take a final break from reality. Meanwhile, the portents built that an Angel is coming to Prior, who is a prophet.

The title of Act 3 is Not-Yet-Conscious, Forward Dawning. The approaching Angel is coming into fruition. Visits from Prior's ancestors show that the Angel is associated with heritage and continuity with the past. Louis suffers the consequences of his rejection of Prior, and Roy suffers the consequences of his unethical behavior. Joe ultimately rejects the position at the Department of Justice and prepares to face his own identity as a homosexual man. The play ends with the arrival of the Angel. Although Joe has gone through a character arc, the play seems unfinished, with many storylines in limbo. This is because *Millennium Approaches* is Part One of a set of two plays, *Angeles in America*, and the play will continue in Part Two, *Perestroika*.



Quotes

"Descendents of this immigrant woman, you do not grow up in America, you and your children and their children with the goyische names. You do not live in America. No such place exist. Your clay is the clay of some Litvak shtetl, your air the air of the steppes— because she carried the old world on her back across the ocean, in a boat, and she put it down on Grand Concourse Avenue, or in Flatbush, and she worked that earth into your bones, and you pass it to your children, this ancient, ancient culture and home." — Rabbi Isidore Chemelwitz, Act 1, Scene 1

"Rabbi, I'm afraid of the crimes I may commit." —Loius, Act 1, Scene 5

"You think you're the only one who hates sex; I do; I hate it with you; I do. I dream that you batter away at me till all my joints come apart, like wax, and I fall into pieces. It's like a punishment. It was wrong of me to marry you. I knew you . . ." —Harper, Act 1, Scene 8

"Homosexuals are not men who sleep with other men. Homosexuals are men who in fifteen years of trying cannot get a pissant antidiscrimination bill through City Council. Homosexuals are men who know nobody and who nobody knows. Who have zero clout. Does this sound like me, Henry?" —Roy, Act 1, Scene 9

"What scares me is that maybe what I really love in her is the part of her that's farthest from the light, from God's love; maybe I was drawn to that in the first place. And I'm keeping it alive because I need it." —Joe, Act 2, Scene 4

"A marvelous work and a wonder we undertake, an edifice awry we sink plumb and straighten, a great Lie we abolish, a great error correct, with the rule, sword and broom of Truth!" —Voice, Act 2, Scene 5

"Because I know no rules. Because I don't see the Law as a dead and arbitrary collection of antiquated dictums, thou shall, thou shalt not, because, because I know the Law's a pliable, breathing, sweating . . . organ, because, because . . ." -Roy, Act 2, Scene 6

"Maybe the court won't convene. Ever again. Maybe we are free. To do whatever. Children of the new morning, criminal minds. Selfish and greedy and loveless and blind. Reagan's children. You're scared. So am I. Everybody is in the land of the free. God help us all." —Louis, Act 2, Scene 7

"We have reached a verdict, your honor. This man's heart is deficient. He loves, but his love is worth nothing." —Prior, Act 2, Scene 9

"Mr. Lies, I want to get away from here. Far away. Right now. Before he starts talking again. Please, please . . ." —Harper, Act 2, Scene 9



"Well all of this is made up. So if the snow feels cold I'm pregnant. Right? Here, I can be pregnant. And I can have any kind of a baby I want." —Harper, Act 3, Scene 3

"Make the law, or subject to it. Choose. Your wife chose. A week from today, she'll be back. SHE knows how to get what SHE wants. Maybe I ought to send her to Washington." -Roy, Act 3, Scene 5

"I have forced my way into history. I ain't never gonna die." —Roy, Act 3, Scene 5



Topics for Discussion

Why is Prior chosen as the Angel's prophet?

Roy Cohn works to punish Ethel Rosenberg for being a traitor, but Roy himself ignores any laws of the land that he wants to for his own benefit. Discuss the inconsistency between what Roy expects from himself and what he expects from others.

Does Louis have an obligation to stay with Prior? Why or why not?

Is Joe right in wanting to stay with Harper to help her? Does Joe do her more harm than good?

Where does Harper go when she disappears? Is her dream world, in some sense, real?

Why does Joe turn down the position at the Department of Justice?

Why doesn't Joe pick up his mother at the airport? Is it only because he's ill, or is Joe in some way denying his mother?

What attracts Joe to Louis?

What is the author's vision of America and what it means to be a land of immigrants?