

Political and Social Commentary in Contemporary English Drama: Angels in America by Tony Kushner, the History Boys by Alan Bennett and the Crucible by Arthur Miller

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ABSTRACT

For centuries, dramatists have utilized the powerful aspect of theatre to offer perceptive analyses of societal happenings and, in the process, cause a lot of positive changes in man and his environment. This essay discusses this fact by citing Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*, Alan Bennett's *The History Boys*, Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*, and Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*, drawing upon Levinas and Benjamin's theories, Kushner's political play. This article shows how the three works examples of books about people, events, or society at large are provided by Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*, Alan Bennett's *The History Boys*, and Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* portray the social and political context in which they were written through symbolism, metaphor, and sometimes even a straightforward comparison. These three plays are forecasting because they are both allegories for the times they were written for and have a contemporary interpretation. Each of the three plays addresses a different aspect of society and politics while also addressing the human condition.

Keywords- Drama, Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*, Alan Bennett's *the History boys*, and the *Crucible* by Arthur Miller.

I. INTRODUCTION

Drama is frequently highlighted as a constructive medium for reflecting the social and political realities of a society, that's why the phrase "drama is a representation of life" has gained popularity. Drama therefore instructs and informs in addition to entertaining. In an investigation of the structure of society, the artist adopts the personas of reporter and analyst. Topics cover everything from current affairs to historical occurrences. The artist's goal is always to reveal the mechanisms of society and make inferences to have a deeper grasp of it. Drama that deals with this subject generally critiques top political and individual structures, but it can also poeticize daily life and praise human accomplishments as communities. In the pursuit of a better society, its ultimate goals are to uphold what is moral and reject what poses a threat. The fact that drama, more than other creative arts, deals at a highly

centred, more intense level with the contradictions of social existence is perhaps its most "irreducible generic peculiarity," according to Jayifo (1985), which serves as the general theoretical basis for the social science of drama.

Dramatists have used this potent quality of drama for centuries to make insightful observations about social events and so bring about a number of beneficial developments in both man and his surroundings. This essay explains this fact with reference to *Angels in America* by Tony Kushner, *the History boys* by Alan Bennett and *the Crucible* by Arthur Miller.

II. ANGELS IN AMERICA BY TONY KUSHNER

Using the ideas of Levinas and Benjamin, Kushner's political drama explores the politics of America during the Reagan administration. Although

Louis, Prior, and Belize are depictions of the left wing, some characters, like Joe and Roy, clearly represent right-wing Republican characters; nonetheless as Corby (2011: 16) explains how Tony Kushner "unites the arena of politics with the individual and offers a culturally motivated space for his own creative position" in *Angels in America*.

Angels in America the first part entitled *Millennium Approaches*, began in May 1991. Part two, *Perestroika*, appeared in November of the same year. The playwright gave the subtitle "A Gay Fantasia on National Themes". A "fantasia" is a piece of music in which the writer has let his creativity run wild, letting one melodic concept flow into another without much consideration for the structure of the plot. Since the mid-1950s, *Angels in America* has received the greatest reviews, analysis, and criticism of any play performed in the United States. In light of this, critics such as John M. Clum referred to the play as "a turning point for gay drama and American drama" (2000: 249), while John Lahr stated of Kushner that "no author has revealed his artistic goals with such power on the Broadway stage since Williams" (1993: 133). Some wonder why the play is so "on trend" and "controversial at the same time (Savran 1998: 243).

Kushner bases his philosophical account of the evolving American landscape on the personal histories of his characters. As Román notes, "Kushner's plays comment on the social and political ideas, conflicting historiographies, and society institutions by opening up the microstructures of the characters 'interactions'" (1998: 210). The dramatist forces his characters to reflect on the pasts, ancestries, and roots of their people. Therefore, Rabbi Isidor remembers the vast migration of Jews from Europe to America; Prior asserts his WASP ancestry; Joe, Harper, and Hannah, the Mormons, are happy that their forefathers crossed the continent; and Belize remembers the taking of Black people from Africa as slaves. Kushner, however, accomplishes this logical link by combining them in a blending process. In addition to this significant development of an ideal social politics, Kushner uses social politics to further his own interpretation of American history. The term *Perestroika*, which the playwright picked for the second act of his play, is not a coincidence nor anecdotal. It is commonly known that Mikhail Gorbachev introduced it in 1987 in order to implement a fresh approach to economics in the former USSR. *Perestroika* was an attempt to preserve and change the socialist system; nonetheless, it failed when the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, according to its founder. In his play, Kushner interprets the idea and concept of *perestroika* as a sort of utopian transformation in America characterized by continuous progress and motion towards development.

Moreover, the play comments on the society gender roles. Regarding gender politics, it's also important to discuss how the play reconstructs gender identification patterns. In addition to the angel, who is

consistently referred to as "she," Kushner gives the play's female characters a strong voice, challenging gender norms. Despite her illusions, Harper's desire to escape the real world is a form of protest against the marginalisation and exploitation of women by men. She pleads for his credit card before leaving him at the end of *Perestroika*, stating, "If I can get a job, or something, I'll cut the card to pieces." Additionally, there won't be any further costs for card damage"(95)

Furthermore, Kushner uses Joe and Roy's secretive homosexual relationship to pinpoint his idea of masculinity. By highlighting these characters' deeds, the playwright breaks down the essence of what it means to be a "real man" in America during the Reaganite America in which politics and power are closely associated with masculinity. Both of them are persuaded Conservatives who are unable to deal with their orientation. Joe keeps it a secret from Harper until he learns of it, and Roy receives an AIDS diagnosis, but even then he continues to claim: —I'm not a drug addict (Kushner, 2013: 44)

The dramatist uses past events to illustrate how things are in his own culture, sometimes even speculating about what might happen in the future. This is because the playwright uses theatre as a tool to influence his environment through his works, acting as society's guardian (Obadiogwu 2002: 112). The dramatist is often considered a visionary because he tackles contemporary themes.

III. THE HISTORY BOYS BY ALAN BENNETT

Academic critics have found Alan Bennett's play *The History Boys* (2004) difficult to interpret, which could be due to one or more of the factors listed below: the play is a strange combination; it's offers alien or strange social norms; its politics are questionable; it's difficult to define; it has a surface that is appealing but lacks substance; it's unclear of its intended meaning; and why should a seventy- year-old playwright achieve real success? It is not unusual for newspaper and magazine reviewers on both sides of the Atlantic to give something such a glowing review while academics ignore it. *The History Boys* explores what life was like for a group of mostly working-class teenage boys in the 1980s against the academic rules and emerging sexualities. *The History Boys* is a modern example of a school movie, and it's best viewed as a parody or criticism of the Dead Poets Society tradition. It was based on a play by British author Alan Bennett, who is well-known for plays and books like *The Uncommon Reader* and *The Madness of King George III*. Nicholas Hytner directed it in 2006.

In the 1980s, *The History Boys* centers on a group of pupils and instructors at an all-boys English grammar school. Given their high possibility, the young men are in a class aimed at getting them into either Cambridge or Oxford. The two main teachers in the

narrative are Mrs. Lintott, the history teacher, and Hector, the English instructor. Mrs. Lintott is a conventional and uncomplicated educator. Hector is more unique, though. He is a quirky teacher who enjoys getting the pupils involved in the learning process. The small and imprecise clues provided could lead one to surmise that the boys, like Bennett himself, come from lower middle class families. But take into account families of the boys' likely perspective, whether it is working class or this. Their sons have a chance of getting into Oxford or Cambridge (and, as we find out later, more than just a chance; they are all in). These lads will likely have the greatest opportunity for upward social and economic mobility of any member of their family thanks to Oxbridge. Hector blatantly and deliberately convinces them from considering Oxbridge. It would seem reasonable to assume that he would be quite supportive, as it was widely believed that while more recent institutions were perceived to be moving towards practical knowledge, older universities valued education above all else. So what makes him disapproving?

Hector might perhaps counter that, in terms of academic quality and overall reputation, a few other British universities are on par with Oxford or Cambridge. "Evidence" for or against this claim involves a drawn-out, intricate, contentious, and unsatisfactory discussion that is pointless to discuss here. But it's important to remember that The Times Higher Education Supplement has been polling "1,300 academics in 88 countries" every year. They were asked to list the top universities in the disciplines they considered themselves to be expert in." Following tabulation, the universities are listed in order of preference on a list of the "World's Best Universities." Harvard ranked first, Cambridge second, Oxford third, and Imperial College London ranked ninth. The History Boys sheds light on the educational system and the social stereotypes connected to one's educational institution, making it potentially relevant to class issues. Even in this day and age, public and grammar schools are still associated with the working class and lower social classes. Entrance to these institutions is determined by a student's IQ and, to some extent, whether or not they have the ability to rise beyond their class. Concern with class has been a recurring theme in British humor throughout its history. A subtle comedy is typically best enjoyed by those from higher social classes, as it requires a deep understanding of society to truly appreciate its wit and humor. It's conceivable to claim that socioeconomic status dominates The History Boys' comedic form in a way that mirrors Bennett's own experiences with school because status is such a common theme in British comedy.

Bennett admits to dishonesty in his writing on his "Finals at Oxford", just as he did in the admission exam, even though "nobody else would have called it cheating." Bennett uses archetypes, a method first employed in Greek New Comedy, which makes his

examination of the class unavoidably comical. The play employs stereotypes to depict characters within the educational system; Rudge and the Headmaster serve as the two clearest examples. Rudge initially appears to us when Hector says, "And Rudge too," in reference to his student's A Level scores. Bennett is able to portray Rudge as a stereotyped working-class guy who is uninteresting, obviously uneducated, and ultimately without much quality through his introduction to him and his lack of involvement and language throughout the play. He also does well in sports, which are generally seen as less cerebral than academic topics because they demand less mental capacity. In addition to influencing how free time is used, Young people's lifestyles and spending patterns are influenced by changing transitory experiences as well as expanding and successful marketing methods. These behaviors often operate as indicators of cultural identity. The fact that young people today live semi-dependent lives and spend more time with others influences the brands and products they associate with as well as the styles they select. Class membership, fashions, and lifestyles used to be strongly correlated, but there is evidence that this relationship has either deteriorated or become more fuzzy (Roberts and Parsell 1994; Bennett 2000; Miles 2000).

Finally, Bennett is able to portray Rudge as a stereotyped working-class boy who is uninteresting, obviously uneducated, and ultimately without much quality through how he gets introduced to him and his lack of involvement and language throughout the play. He also does well in sports, which are generally seen as less cerebral than academic topics because they demand less mental capacity. Bennett presents Irwin as an unlawful character in the play's opening scene by highlighting this political fact that the loss of liberty is the price we pay for freedom which the viewer subsequently learns is the result of his innate capacity to reject the popular, everyday truth and consider an alternative viewpoint, regardless of its relationship.

IV. THE CRUCIBLE BY ARTHUR MILLER

The Crucible by Arthur Miller features social criticism Arthur Miller's drama The Crucible, which features a big group of individuals and a continuously changing setting, is a historical narrative. The Crucible is both an allegory of the McCarthy era and a dramatization of the 1692 Salem Witch Trials. Miller examines how his characters' oppressive and stupid culture destroys freedom throughout the entire play. In The Crucible, Arthur Miller illustrates societal critique in both Puritan and modern culture by showing how quickly a member of the community can become an outcast. Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, communism presented a significant threat to the United States. Sen. Joseph McCarthy tried to take advantage of this by charging more than two hundred individuals with either

assisting the cause or smuggling communists into the US government. There were some writers among these two hundred men and women, Arthur Miller among them.

Miller stated, "... my basic need was to respond to a phenomenon which, with only small exaggeration, one could say was impairing a whole generation and in an incredible short time was drying up the traditions of trust and tolerance in public talk." This was his explanation for writing *The Crucible*.

Miller discovered how, after seeing Salem and learning about the happenings of the Salem Witch Trials, The Salem Witch Trials, which resulted in the tragic deaths of twenty people who were wrongfully accused of witchcraft, are one of the most notorious events in American history, and the subject of *The Crucible*. The play largely revolves around the main character, a Puritan farmer named John Proctor, his relationship with his young housekeeper Abigail Williams, and his moral quandary as he attempts to make sense of the chaos going on around him, even though it includes many of the historical individuals from the trial.

Miller compares the HUAC authorities to Puritan judges and reverends in *The Crucible*, a political parody of the officials. In order to expose fraud and demonstrate to society that historical mistakes are still being made, He criticises the haughty doctrines of Christianity and Puritanism, the fear tactics employed by authorities in both periods, and the foolishness of ignoring the crucial connection between the public and private realms. People's rights to their own consciousness are violated in order to comply with political structures' ideas, as depicted in the complex interaction between people and politics. On the other hand, a person's quest for justice may contradict the tenets of an autocratic power system, leading to a cathartic experience. *The Crucible*, a dramatic allegory by Arthur Miller, delves into the author's theories regarding the political and social fallout from the contentious "Cold War" era of American history, which gave rise to a generalized fear of communist. Miller believed that the actions of the present were similar to those that had taken place previously in the famed Salem Witch hunt of the 17th century and that they reveal the unethical conduct of the electoral process and the political measures in a different setting.

Act 4 shows Miller mocking arrogant intellectuals once more and demonstrating the power of words as Reverend Hale comes to terms with the fact that what he calls his expertise has failed him. According to Hale, "I arrived in this village like a groom to his bride, bearing gifts of high religion; I brought the very crowns of holy law, and everything that my bright confidence touched, died" (Miller 122). Once more, it is ironic that Reverend Hale, who is purportedly infinitely strong, is coming to Salem to allay its by introducing books and other examples of possession from the devil, the Devil's concerns. However, neither the Devil nor witches are real in Salem.

All what was real is the social and political oppression that people suffered from during this era. During the McCarthy era, there was no such confidence; in fact, a large number of accused people confessed out of fear of being placed on a list of suspects. The fact that the girls will find it easier to accept a short confession illustrates how quickly the Salem and HUAC trials were held.

During the McCarthy era, there was no such confidence; in fact, a large number of accused people confessed out of fear of being placed on a list of suspects. The fact that the girls will find it easier to accept a short confession illustrates how quickly the Salem and HUAC trials were held. Miller keeps demonstrating how the court is unconcerned with reality or basic sense. Danforth is primarily concerned with how the public perceives him. The village expects to witness a hanging, and they demand one. This is comparable to Senator McCarthy's fear of Communism in that he is frightened of taking military action and doesn't recognize that there isn't enough hard data to back up his allegations. Danforth warns: that —While I speak God's law, I will not crack its voice with whimpering. If retaliation is your fear, know this I shall hang ten thousand that dared to rise against the law. (Miller 119-20)".

To conclude, Miller's aim to mock the problematic actions of 1950s society essentially shows how a satirical interpretation of *The Crucible* may affect how society understands social reform by warning against mindlessly adhering to the law. "Satire exists to isolate a condition or a sector of human life and hold it up for ridicule," claims Aaron Matz. In the literary meaning of the 19th century, realism refers to a technique or approach that aims to portray experience—especially common experience—without being implausible (viii). The 1950s Americans and the Puritans were real individuals with regular lives until gossip and spectral evidence tainted their capacity for reason and logic. Miller was aware that the area had killed comparatively few persons before the Salem Trials. As a result, the 20 deaths in three months caused twice as much paranoia (Murrin 314). Miller used this as an opportunity to make parallels between the intense political climate of the Hollywood Red Scare and the terror of Salem. Dramatists have always provided us with an overview of the world in which they are writing. Three examples include *Angels in America* by Tony Kushner, the *History boys* by Alan Bennett and the *Crucible* by Arthur Miller, which are all about persons, events, or society at large. All three plays use metaphor, symbolism, and occasionally just a direct comparison to depict the social and political environment in which they were written. These three plays are forecasting because, in addition to being allegories for the era in which they were written, they can also be understood in modern terms. The three plays, in turn, address the human condition as well as a social and political background.

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