

### AIDS as a Vision of Purgatory

In between Dante's *Inferno* and Dante's *Paradiso*, is Dante's *Purgatorio*, a detailed account of Dante's imagining of Purgatory, the space between Heaven and Hell. The souls in Purgatory sinned, but prayed for forgiveness before their sins in before they died and must labor to eventually make it to Heaven. In Tony Kushner's play, *Angels in America*, there are parallels between Dante's *Purgatorio*, and AIDS as a metaphorical form of Purgatory. In the 1980s AIDS was not the treatable disease that it has become now. Contracting AIDS was a death sentence and it wasn't a matter of if, it was simply a matter of when death would come.

“In *Angels in America*, the two characters who see ghosts suffer from AIDS themselves, occupying a kind of middle space. While some see their visions as fever, medication or stressed induced, both Prior and Roy are, in fact sanctified by their proximity to death...AIDS functions as a metaphor for Purgatory throughout the play.”  
(Barnett 472)

For purposes of this paper I will focus on the similarities and differences between Prior's trip through Purgatory and Dante's and Virgil's trip.

In *Purgatorio* there are seven stacked terraces, which represent the seven deadly sins: pride, envy, wrath, sloth, greed, lust, and gluttony.” Dante outlines a theory that all sin arises from love – either perverted love directed towards others' harm, or deficient love, or the disordered love of good things. In a later paragraph we can see how twisted love can cause

suffering. Unlike the sinners in Dante's *Inferno*, the sinners in Purgatory are not guilty of specific crimes, or doomed to Hell, which is considered true death, because it is eternal separation from God. They are punished for having a certain sinful mindset. Instead the pilgrims work their way up the terraces and happily endure their punishments. They want to make it to Heaven, which is considered eternal life in the presence of God. Prior encounters with an angel in the beginning of the play when Harper hallucinates him into a dream. A single grey feather drifts down and a disembodied voice tells Prior, "Look up, look up, prepare the way...the infinite descent..Glory to..." (Kushner 35) The voice ushers Prior into the metaphorical Purgatory caused by AIDS. Only when Prior is tainted he can interact with the supernatural forces that are at work in the play.

Souls are brought to Purgatory on a boat pulled by an angel of the Lord surrounded by blinding light. When the angel deposits the souls upon the shores of Purgatory the words, "In exitu Israel de Aegypto" (Dante 8) are spoken, which means, "When Israel left out of Egypt." This references God's grace when he gives souls the opportunity to go from a state of unclean sin to a state of divine grace and spiritual cleanliness. The sinner's in Purgatory are concerned with the purification of their souls. Kushner slightly twist that idea in our AIDS victim, "Prior Walter in contrast, desires a purification of the body. Harper promises him, "Deep inside you, there's a part of you, the most inner part, entirely free of disease...threshold of Revelation"(Kushner, 40). "My heart is pumping polluted blood," Prior says, "I feel dirty" (40). " (Barnett, 481) Hope exists for the sinners roaming Dante's vision of Purgatory, for their souls can be cleansed of their sins and they will eventually be wiped clean of mankind's inherent sin.

However, for Prior there is no cleansing or healing: AIDS was untreatable. He suffers merely because he is alive and knows that only death awaits him at the end - and he is incurable.

Souls that wait on the shores of Purgatory can be shortened by the prayers of loved ones still on Earth. Dante is approached by a soul named Manfred, who has a daughter named Constance. He asks Dante, "...reveal to my good Constance how thou hast seen me [that] such a degree might be shortened through prayers." Manfred hopes to hasten his time in Purgatory and asks Dante to be his messenger to the living, and the prayers of a loved one are no doubt comforting. A similar scene occurs in the hospital between Prior and his friend Belize. Prior's boyfriend, Louis, has abandoned him, because of his sickness. Louis exists outside of this sickness, this disease, this purgatory and Prior wants not his prayers, but his company and his love again. Louis was unable to cope with Prior through the disease. Days have passed since Louis and Prior have seen each other. Prior breaks down while Belize is visiting, "I want Louis. I want my fucking boyfriend, where the fuck is he? I'm dying, I'm dying, where's Louis?" (63) Belize is temporarily with Prior in metaphorical Purgatory so he is able to deliver messages to the "outside world."

What are prayers if not loving thoughts spoken with the heart, but Prior was unable receive help from Louis. This would be an example of deficient love from Louis, which Dante would consider a sin of slothfulness. This causes Prior to suffer, because of Louis's abandonment. Louis is merely an imperfect man capable of imperfect love. Louis knows that leaving Prior was wrong, especially since he sought pleasure from another man. Eventually Prior recognizes Louis's faults and confronts him, "[Louis] loves, but his love is worth nothing...Do you know what love means" (82)? Louis responds, "I have to find some way to save myself"

(82), which demonstrates an extremely selfish love. Purgatory is not a contagious disease since faith is a personal choice. AIDS embodies the suffering essence of Purgatory, but rather than leading to Heaven, a place of love and light. AIDS leads to only death and darkness even before the last breath is taken.

Louis's abandonment illustrates the loneliness of AIDS and the stigma at the time. All Prior can do is wait at the hospital and hope that Louis will visit or Belize. He is alone with his unclean body, just as those in Purgatory are alone with their unclean souls. Once Belize leaves and Prior is alone the angel speaks to him. Instead of having to wait; as Manfred did on the prayers of Constance, his daughter, to speed his trip in Purgatory, the divine speaks directly to Prior, "Soon I will return. I will reveal myself to you; I am glorious; my heart...you must prepare...I am on my way; when I am manifest..." (65-66) Kushner takes Dante's idea of lost souls working their way up through Purgatory to be in the presence of the divine and flips it. Rather than Prior having to struggle to reach the divine through repentance the divine has come to him in his time of need.

In addition to seeing angels, which are associated with heaven, Prior is briefly joined by two ancestral ghosts from who also appear to be stuck in some form of Purgatory. Dante and Virgil enlisted the help of several of the souls along the way in Purgatory. In Angels, Prior's ancestors are sent to help him. When Dante and Virgil sought help from the lost souls of Purgatory they were always in the midst of being punished for the nature of their sins and repenting. Prior's ancestors all died a from of a disease like black plague. The family shares that moral affinity of being harbingers of sickness. The ghosts visit Prior at the behest of the angel to

“declare her fabulous incipience,” as well as help Prior spiritually and bodily. Ultimately, they prepare Prior the appearance of the angel later in the play.

We are never told how Prior contracted AIDS in the play, we merely see him break the news to Louis in the park. Given the nature of AIDS one of the possible way that Prior contracted it is multiple sexual partners, or lust, which is the seventh and highest terrace in Purgatory, when Virgil and Dante first see the terrace, Virgil says, “My son, here may be torment, but not death...what shall I do now that I nearer God.” This final level of Purgatory is enclosed by a large wall of flame that scares Dante, but Paradise lies beyond the heat of the flame. Eventually, Virgil manages to coax Dante to cross through the flame of the seventh terrace. The heat is searing and Dante almost loses himself, but he hears an angelic voice saying, *Venite, benedicti Patris mei,*” which translates to “Come, ye blessed of my father.” Dante follows the voice out of the fire and towards the path of paradise.

Prior has similar experience when he finally sees the angel that he has been either hallucinating or having visions of throughout the play. He can hear the beating of the angel’s wings and experiences fear on a visceral level. When he tries to control that fear, “he is washed over by an intense sexual feeling...Oooohh...[He] is so hot...[he]...must have a fever” (Kushner, 124) Just as Dante goes through the purifying heat of fire, which cleanses the souls of the lustful sinners, Prior experiences a sexual heat, which may be reminiscent of the the sexual heat that Prior felt during the act that contracted AIDS. However, rather than Prior being guided through the flames like Dante, the divine comes down to meet Prior and speak to him. The voice that Prior has constantly heard throughout the play has been revealed

Ultimately, Prior goes on to live for five more years at the end of the play, and rather than living in spite of the AIDS Prior eventually learns to live because of his AIDS. He becomes constantly aware of the time he has left on Earth. He pushes on despite the illness, and despite Louis abandoning him. The biggest difference between Dante's vision of Purgatory and the vision presented in *Angels in America* is that the sinners in Dante's Purgatory have the chance to repent and literally have eternity to change with a goal in mind. The souls on the island were cursed by the nature of fallen man, and must repent before standing before a holy God. Their suffering was gleeful, because they were suffering for grace and mercy. Prior's trip through the metaphorical purgatory of AIDS is a different matter. There was no hope for Prior when the end finally came there was no pleasure in his suffering. Even with the divine touch of angels AIDS was still a ticking time bomb inside the body that one has to wait to go out. Waiting for loved ones to return who never do, waiting for the suffering to end, and ultimately waiting to die.

Dante's Purgatory is meant to inspire hope to those who eventually want to make it to Heaven. The way is hard and there will be suffering, but there is spring that comes after winter and purifying that can be done in the flames. Purgatory is temporary in Dante's vision and leads to eternal life. The suffering from AIDS was a slow fade into darkness that caused pain and brought out the worst in people. It was a desperate game of keeping the thread of life uncut as long as possible, because we know that once that line is cut a candle has been forever extinguished and cannot be relit.