

Roy Cohn: The *Homme Fatale* of Kushner's *Angels in America*

What is a legacy? Is it merely the image of yourself that you leave behind when you die for the rest of the world? Is it the truth? How much control do we truly have over how the world perceives our life story? For Roy Cohn, famous New York attorney and central character in Tony Kushner's 1991 play *Angels in America*, control and power over his identity and life story are key opponents he faces in a battle to be the best version of himself he can present. The violent language and aggressive demeanor Kushner weaves into Cohn's character has the audience searching and grappling for answers to the man's real story as a historical figure, and the dramatized presentation of Cohn highlights a very niche struggle of internalized homophobia and denial so deep that he finds it joining him six feet under. The de-evolution of Roy Cohn demonstrates the challenges of navigating the stages of grief as he fights the label of a gay man and the meaning of a legacy filled with lies and hate to prove that death cannot hide the true identity of a bully, coward, and victim.

Roy Cohn presents his stage of denial in a clear, aggressive, manner. Roy is not, according to himself, a homosexual, but in fact just a man that sleeps with men. He has clout, a reputation, and power, and those are the things that define him. To Roy, holding a position of power is crucial to his existence, without it he is nobody. In an argument with his doctor at the end of the first act, he denies his AIDS diagnosis, saying "No. Like all labels they tell you one thing and one thing only: where does an individual so identified fit into the food chain, in the pecking order? Not ideology, or sexual taste, but something much simpler: clout. Not who I fuck or who fucks me, but who will pick up the phone when I call, who owes me favors... Homosexuals are men who know nobody and nobody knows. Who have zero clout..." (Kushner 46). Cohn denies engaging in any sort of gay relationship, but instead is wed to his reputation -

the thing that matters most, and there is a clear detestation in labels that are “untrue” in his mind. Cohn’s reputation is made up of his aspirations in life to be the most powerful attorney in New York City, emphasizing the importance of clout - the popularity and influence he aligns himself with, thus crowning him a wielder of power that knows no bounds. He holds this clout in his hands as a king would a sceptre - with pride and a seamless amount of control, complete with subjects at his beck and call. In contrast, the homosexual titles represent the truth, whether he sees it or not, giving the audience the idea that Cohn is hiding from himself.

Darwin’s theory of evolution suggests that organisms in an environment grow and develop in order to survive in that particular environment’s conditions. When Cohn references a food chain and pecking order, the reader recognizes that he has evolved his work strategies to land himself on the top of that food chain. His priorities lie in his job - more specifically his job title. Cohn evolves on the outside to present who he wants to be, like a cougar that hides among the mountains waiting to pounce. However, that perception of evolution overshadows the true devolution of his mind and body as he loses his mind and his battle with AIDS. When we realize the sheer amount of layers to his internal conflict, it raises a potential question of what Cohn was fighting for, and how hard he fought for it. Cohn’s choice of wording in the passage, and his claim that “Homosexuals are men who know nobody and nobody knows” (Kushner 46) exposes his deepest fears: being a nobody. If he has no clout, he has nothing. If he has no reputation, or one he disdains, he is nobody. If he, by his own definition, is not a man or a homosexual, then the work he has built and the control he has maintained is for naught.

The way Cohn forces and clings to his reputation does not give the reader much time to look at his character in any other way throughout the duration of the play. He is consistently a lawyer first, and a man second. To Joe, he says, “I’m gonna be a lawyer, Joe, I’m gonna be a

lawyer, Joe, I'm gonna be a goddamn motherfucking legally licensed member of the bar lawyer, just like my daddy was, till my last bitter day on earth, Joseph, until the day I die" (Kushner 71). But looking beyond the character whose story we watch unfold on stage for nearly 4 hours, a real and deep history reveals the true Roy Cohn and his position and relevance in the AIDS epidemic. In the play, Roy acts as a mentor to Joe, a clerk for the Federal Court of Appeals. He provides him with opportunities for growth and change in his life, though eventually attempts to convince Joe to take a job offering for Roy's own personal gain. In real life, Cohn was a mentor to, at the time, the most powerful New York real estate agent - Donald Trump. Cohn aided him in countering the US Justice Department in a civil rights case, a strong show of resistance. Journalist Peter Manso recalls that "Trump fell in love with that. Never admit that you're wrong" (*Bully, Coward, Victim* 26:40), an ideal from Cohn that lives on in Trump, keeping part of Cohn's legacy alive in others. Roy Cohn hardly separated his work and personal life, successfully creating a certain approachability and dependency about him that infatuated clients like Trump. His natural camouflage created the illusion of a strict duty to his work, allowing him to lure in these mentors and allies that, to this day, keep his political legacy alive.

The idea of a legacy immortalizes a person no longer with us, and provides a comforting way to keep their memory alive. To Roy, that is key: he is to be remembered the way he has carefully sculpted his life and work. But to us, the idea is completely turned on its head. When closer to his death, the ghost of Ethel Rosenberg, a woman he convicted as a communist spy in 1953 visits him, and he says to her, "I'm immortal. Ethel. I have *forced* my way into history. I ain't ever gonna die" (Kushner 118). His language alone conveys power. The emphasis of the sheer will he has behind that force indicates Roy's resolve, and he makes it clear in his conclusion of the act that the fear he holds deep within himself of losing what he has worked for

will only die with him, and that is never. If he had the choice to continue living his life as a lie, he would have chosen to do so. The irony in this passage is palpable; Roy has in fact forced his way into our history as a historical figure, and his story is not dead, but the way we remember him now would be a slap in the face to him if he ever knew. As readers we question how much control he has over what he chooses to leave behind, and what truths slip through the cracks of this shattered, broken man? Cohn, looking in a two way mirror, sees a false image of himself as a charismatic, powerful, and successful man. However, the rest of the world observes him as a gay man who is afraid of himself, and a fraud who never admits the lies and the terrible acts he committed. As we explore the complexities of truth, that glass begins to crack, and eventually shatters as we try to answer the question: Who was Roy Cohn?

In *Angel's in America*, Roy Cohn not only stands out as distinctly brash and disruptive, but also as the singular real, historic figure among a cast of fictional people. His story and character are the only things to breach that fourth wall which separates the real world from the stage. The artifice of the character Roy Cohn is lost due to his intrusiveness in a fictional setting. His presence alone forces the audience to make those real world connections, as much as unaffected readers or may want to shy away from the uncomfortable reality of AIDS. Perhaps his one redeemable quality as a character is that he reflects the spotlight shining on him back to the audience, so that the harsh reality of this play's portrayal of the AIDS epidemic is truly seen and heard. Beyond the stage and the book, Roy Cohn's quilt (see Fig. 1) from the National AIDS Memorial reminds us of his true identity as a bully, coward, and victim. To see him alive on stage and remembered in a piece of real history allows for the connection between play and

reality to deepen, and solidifies Cohn's own personal story and his role as the tragic villain.



Fig. 1 Roy Cohn's AIDS Memorial Quilt 1985, National AIDS Memorial

Roy Cohn's story is woven into the fabric of the AIDS Memorial Quilt, but also throughout our history. The different pieces of his life create a quilt of many collisions: a gay man, though homophobic, and a proud lawyer, though a fraud. Cohn is remembered for his work in the McCarthy Hearings and the Julius and Ethel Rosenberg trial; significant historical events that US history will never forget. But Roy is also remembered for being a bully to the people, a coward hiding from the truth, and a victim of the AIDS epidemic. He was a murderer whose hands played part in ruining the lives of a number of innocent gay people, a hypocrite and a money launderer, and a casualty to the war inside himself. So we ask ourselves: what can we learn from his ruined legacy? Fear of the truth, and fear of witnessing the empire of work he built come crumbling down were aspects of his life that consistently motivated what he did and the choices he made. To his dying day, he never presented himself as someone who escaped denial; we only ever saw fabrication he created, never the true Roy. We celebrate the victory of defeating a bully, but mourn the internalized homophobia that plagued Roy's life until his last breath. Roy is proof that hatred, both inside and out, will never allow someone to live a life of happiness. Death has hidden him from himself, but revealed everything to us, and we learn from his tainted legacy that allowing hate and fear to control oneself will ultimately never grant one happiness, perhaps only an ounce of power, and the title of ruler for a day.

Works Cited

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