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## How the central park setting has helped to bring out the drama in Angels in America

Seven-hundred and fifty acres of preserved greenery in the heart of New York City, Central Park has long been a refuge for those wishing to escape their hectic Manhattan lives and is arguably one of the most famous parks in the world, enjoyed by millions every year. In his two-part epic about the 1980s HIV-AIDS epidemic sweeping numerous gay communities across the United States and its effects, *Angels in America*, playwright Tony Kushner anchors much of the thematic elements of the story within the park and, in doing so, uses Central Park as a stark reminder of how close to home the AIDS epidemic was to citizens. Characters spend various scenes strolling through famous and recognizable landmarks within Central Park, including an area known as the Ramble, and the Bethesda Fountain. Thus, Central Park in the play *Angels in America* represents not just a place where characters can cope with difficult news, and take a momentary leave from their busy lives, but as a place of forming character relationships and, much like the biblical Bethesda Fountain, of healing and rejuvenation.

Perhaps the most plot-advancing role Central Park plays in the story is how it acts as an area where inter-character connections are made. At the heart of the story about how the HIV-AIDS epidemic affects several seemingly-distant people greatly, an intricate nexus of character relationships, some already formed before the commencement of the narrative and some formed during the story, demonstrates the far-reaching implications of the public health crisis. Central Park serves as an area where these seemingly distant characters interact and where much of their relationship-forming takes place. Central Park is first introduced to us in Act Two, Scene 4 when Louis, visits “the Ramble in Central Park” (55). Probably to relieve the significant stress of Prior’s infection and constant sickness, Louis visits the Ramble, implied as a place where gay men find sexual encounters, and meets a character known only as the Man in the Ramble. Louis and this mysterious Ramble-man engage in protected intercourse right in this wooded portion of Central Park. The concealed identity of Louis’ partner, when taken with the context of their location within the park, represents a degree of anonymity that can be associated with the time period. Furthermore, the fact that HIV-AIDS is a sexually transmitted disease brings about the implication that the HIV virus has probably been transmitted within the park. Evidence of this can be seen when Louis, during intercourse with the Man, asks, after the condom potentially breaks, for the man to infect him. Secondly, the reputation of the Ramble being a location where gay men look for sexual encounters is further corroborated when it is learned that Joe, another gay character, has frequented the Ramble himself.

The use of Central Park as a locus where gay men can search for sexual partners serves as the

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first textual anchor to Central Park and sets the tone for future character connections that take place within the park. Although brief, this relationship, something facilitated by the existence of Central Park, serves to greatly reveal Louis' character and his mechanisms for coping with his lover's illness. The second relationship formed in the park was between Louis and Joe after Joe follows Louis to the Park. In this scene Louis, sitting "on a bench in Central park" (121), is approached by Joe, and Louis asks "do you know the story of Lazarus?" (121, Louis) and whether or not Joe believes in the biblical story wherein Jesus breathed life into Lazarus and "brought him back from the dead" (121, Joe). Throughout this meeting, the beliefs of the über-religious Joe are challenged as he extends beyond his comfort zone to a fledgling relationship with Louis. For instance, Joe asks Louis "can I please just touch you ... um, here" (123, Joe) and, after touching Louis' face, states "I'm going to Hell for doing this" (123, Joe). Next, Louis reveals his weariness of "the Republican stuff" (123, Louis) in Joe's beliefs, representing his insecurity with a group of people vocally denouncing his sexual orientation, yet also revealing deep conflicting emotions with Joe and ultimately strengthening their relationship. Following this, Louis invites Joe "home with [him]" (123, Louis), further deepening their relationship. Here, Central Park helps form the relationship between Louis and Joe as well as push both beyond their respective comfort zones: Joe's religious aversion to gay relationships and Louis' weariness of Republicans.

Unbeknownst to Louis and Joe who are engrossed in their dialogue, Prior, alone in his apartment, is being tormented by the Angel of America because "the Great work begins" (125, Angel). Thus, in this scene, Central Park also represents a place where Louis is sheltered from the reality of Prior's suffering and the distress of his tormentation by the Angel. Another important character encounter that takes place in Central Park is a rekindling of relations between Louis and Prior much later in the story. After realizing he wants to see Prior, Louis decides to meet a recalcitrant and hostile Prior in the neutral zone of a Central Park bench, thrusting Central Park into the role of mediator between the warring parties of Prior and Louis. Throughout their meeting "trying to arrive at a resolution" (217, Louis), Louis maintains that he is afflicted inside because he was never given a chance to "find [his] footing" (218, Louis). However, Prior insists that he doesn't "see any bruises" (217, Prior) and that "[he] wants to see blood" (220, Prior). His desire to see visual examples of Louis' suffering is revealed "because [he] can't believe [Louis] even [has] blood until [Louis] shows it to [him]" (220, Prior). In this scene, Central Park becomes a neutral zone where Prior and Louis can rekindle the relationship they used to have.

The next day, a similar scene takes place between Louis and Belize at the Bethesda Fountain in Central Park. Seeing Louis "sitting on the fountain's rim" (227), Belize comes in and commences their conversation with a comment regarding the Bethesda Angel on the fountain Louis is sitting on. Asking what the Angel commemorates, Belize reminds Louis of Prior and his affection for obscure history and sets an emotional tone for the rest of the conversation. Belize

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continues by revealing that “Prior and me, we went to the courthouse. Scooped [Joe] out” (227, Belize). Believing that their sleuthing is all in an attempt to extract pain out of him, Louis states “you had no right to do that” (227, Louis) and they have “extracted every last drop of, of schadenfreude” (228, Louis). Belize reveals his motive for confronting Louis by stating that Louis dating Joe “is a record low: sharing your dank and dirty bed with Roy Cohn’s buttboy” (228, Belize). Belize’s warning, phrased as Belize being disappointed at Louis, is met with incredulity from Louis; he states “Not...Roy Cohn. Joe wouldn’t - Not Roy Cohn. He’s like the polestar of human evil, he’s like the worst human being who ever lived, the, the damage he’s done, the years and years of, of...criminality” (229, Louis). His attitude changes midway through his reassurance rant when “he stops himself” (229) and Belize states that Louis doesn’t “even know Thing One about [Joe]” and that Louis was incorrect in his assumption that Prior left Belize for him. Belize summarizes the tension within Louis by stating that “big ideas are all that [Louis] loves” (230, Belize) because Louis overlooked his new beau’s other alignments and the fact that racially-motivated prejudice exists daily in the United States. In this scene, Central Park and the Bethesda Fountain serve as the metaphorical fuse of the informational bomb of Joe being “Roy Cohn’s buttboy” (228, Belize) as the fountain’s angel gave Belize an adequate conversation starter. Secondly, the city of Bethesda Maryland was where the real Roy Cohn died - further deepening the level of allusions Kushner uses in the work. Lastly, the approaching storm represents a significant foreshadowing of events to come - especially the brawl between Louis and Joe, where Louis confronts Joe about his dealings with Roy Cohn and receives the visual elements of suffering that Prior wishes to see in him.

Closing out the play, Central Park’s Bethesda Fountain hosts the play’s epilogue where Prior, Belize, Louis, and Hannah converse on the rim of the Bethesda Fountain, much like Louis and Belize did in their earlier scene, overlooked by the Bethesda Angel on a sunny day just following the fall of the Berlin Wall. Prior states, referring to Central Park, that “this is my favorite place in NYC. No, in the whole universe. The parts of it I have seen. ” (288, Prior). From someone who has seen heaven, typically considered to be paradise, the admission that Central Park is more special to Prior reveals a great deal about his character and his decision to remain among the living in the mortal world, rather than in the heavenly world as the Angel of America had previously offered. Next, Prior mentions that the Bethesda Angel is his “favorite angel” because she is stationary and because of her many contradictions: “they commemorate death but they suggest a world without dying” and “they are made of the heaviest things on earth, stone and iron, they weigh tons but they’re winged, they are engines and instruments of flight” (289, Prior). Prior’s statement about this preferred angel’s stationary position most probably refers to his terrifying account of his experience with the Angel of America. After Prior describes why he likes the fountain’s angel, Louis recalls the story of the original Bethesda Angel, who “landed in the Temple Square in Jerusalem, in the days of the Second Temple, right in the middle of a working day she descended and just her foot touched earth. And where it did, a fountain shot up from the ground” (289, Louis). Belize then adds that “if anyone who was suffering, in the body

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or the spirit, walked through the waters of the fountain of Bethesda, they would be healed, washed clean of pain” (289, Belize). This allusion to the healing power of the biblical fountain can be cross-applied to Central Park’s Bethesda Fountain where significant healing of relationships, Louis and Prior’s relationship for example, took place.

Ultimately, Central Park, a zone of pastoral stasis within the heart of New York City, represents, in the play *Angels in America*, a place where characters can escape significant stress in their lives - evidenced by Louis in the Ramble, a place where relationships are formed - evidenced by Louis and Joe, a place where identities are pondered - evidenced by Belize’s confrontation of Louis, and as a place where religious ideas are thoroughly contrasted with earthly actions - evidenced by the political banter in the epilogue.

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