

32. Secrecy and disclosure in *Angels in America* and *How to Get Away with Murder*

Olgahan BAKřI YALÇIN¹

Sultan KOMUT BAKINÇ²

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Abstract

The emergence of various sexual subcultures and communities is part of a larger process that has characterized the twentieth century, resulting in ever-growing social complexity and social differentiation. This differentiation process has produced “a new pluralism of class, ethnic, racial and cultural forms as well as a diversity of gender and sexual experiences,” as Jeffrey Weeks puts it in his work, *Sexuality* (1986, p. 75). *Angels in America* (1992-1995) by Tony Kushner is a play set in America in the 1980s against a backdrop of conservatism, sexual politics, and a new mysterious disease: AIDS. On the other hand, *How to Get Away with Murder* (2014-2020) is an American legal thriller television series created by Peter Nowalk and produced by Shonda Rhimes in ABC Studios, in which the LGBTQ community finds its long-neglected place in American society. In both works, written twenty years apart, secrecy and disclosure strongly tied to sexual identity is the real nexus of the storyline in which the protagonists fight with their sexual identities along with social, cultural, and political attitudes, thus, transforming their entire lives into a battleground. In this paper, we aim to discuss the secrecy and disclosure of sexual identities in light of the USA's social, political, and cultural changes in *Angels in America* and *How to Get Away with Murder*.

Keywords: *Angels in America*, *How to Get Away with Murder*, Secrecy, Disclosure, LGBTQ community, AIDS, Same-Sex marriage

Angels in America ve *How to Get Away with Murder* bařlıklı eserlerde gizlilik ve ifřaat

Öz

Farklı cinsel alt kültürlerin ve toplulukların ortaya çıkışı, yirminci yüzyılı karakterize eden ve giderek artan sosyal karmařa ve toplumsal farklılařma ile sonuçlanan daha büyük bir sürecin parçasıdır. Bu farklılařma süreci, Jeffrey Weeks'in *Cinsellik* (1986, s. 75) adlı eserinde belirttiđi gibi, “sınıfsal, etnik, ırksal ve kültürel biçimlerin yanı sıra çeřitli toplumsal cinsiyet ve cinsel deneyimler için yeni bir çođulculuk” doğurmuştur. Tony Kushner tarafından yazılan *Angels in America (Melekler Amerika'da)* (1992-1995), muhafazakârlık, cinsel politika ve dönemin yeni gizemli hastalığı olan AIDS'in arka planını oluřturduđu 1980'ler Amerika'sında geçen bir oyundur. Öte yandan, *How to Get Away with Murder* (2014-2020), LGBTQ topluluğunun Amerikan toplumunda uzun zamandır ihmal edilen yerini bulduđu, ABC Stüdyolarında Peter Nowalk tarafından yaratılan ve Shonda Rhimes'in

¹ Dr. Öğr. Üyesi, İstanbul Yeni Yüzyıl Üniversitesi, Fen-Edebiyat Fakültesi, İngiliz Dili ve Edebiyatı (İstanbul, Türkiye), olgahanbaksi@gmail.com, ORCID ID: 0000-0002-5527-9200 [Arařtırma makalesi, Makale kayıt tarihi: 12.05.2022-kabul tarihi: 20.06.2022; DOI: 10.29000/rumelide.1132589]

² Dr. Öğr. Üyesi, Haliç Üniversitesi, Fen-Edebiyat Fakültesi, İngilizce Mütercim ve Tercümanlık Bölümü (İstanbul, Türkiye), sultankomut@halic.edu.tr, ORCID ID: 0000-0001-7815-389X

yapımcılığını üstlendiği hukuk odaklı Amerikan gerilim dizisidir. Yirmi yıl arayla yazılmış her iki eserde de, cinsel kimlikle sıkı sıkıya bağlı gizlilik ve ifşaat anlatı izleğinin esas bağlantı noktasını oluşturur; başkahramanlar toplumsal, kültürel ve siyasi tutumların yanında kendi cinsel kimlikleriyle de kavgaya tutuşur, böylece bütün yaşamları savaş alanına döner. Bu çalışmada, ABD'deki sosyal, politik ve kültürel değişimler ışığında *Angels in America* (*Melekler Amerika'da*) ve *How to Get Away with Murder* başlıklı eserlerde cinsel kimliklerin gizliliğini ve ifşasını tartışmayı amaçlıyoruz.

Anahtar kelimeler: *Melekler Amerika'da*, *How to Get Away with Murder*, Gizlilik, İfşaat, LGBTQ topluluğu, AIDS, Eşcinsel evlilik

Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* (1992-1995), subtitled "A Gay Fantasia on National Themes," is a two-part epic that takes place over the course of five years in New York City. The play focuses on a gay couple along with other characters struggling with their sexual identities and social attitudes under a conservative regime. *Angels in America* covers the height of the Reagan administration (1981-1989) and the start of the first Bush administration (1989-1993), during which the gay community was fighting not only to become a part of contemporary American society but also to survive a mysterious disease: AIDS. John M. Clum highlights the significance of the play in the history of gay drama and American drama with these words: "For the first time, mainstream audiences [saw] gay men talk openly about their sexual predilections, dance together, kiss, and retire upstairs for sex" (1994, p. 255). Created by the openly gay Peter Nowalk and produced by Shonda Rhimes in ABC Studios, *How to Get Away with Murder* (*HTGAWM*) is an American legal thriller television series in which the gay community finally finds its voice and visibility as significant members of American society. Premiered between 2014 and 2020, in the series, the audience follows the story of a criminal defense professor along with a group of ambitious law students who find themselves entangled in a murder plot that changes the course of their lives for good. This paper aims to explore the secrecy and disclosure in Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* (1992-1995) and Peter Nowalk's *HTGAWM* (2014-2020) and thus, track down the social, political, and cultural changes portrayed in these two texts written twenty years apart.

The subtitle "A Gay Fantasia on National Themes" in *Angels in America* highlights the importance of sexual politics through a play in which all the lead male characters are gay. When Kushner is asked about why he chose to write a play with an AIDS theme, he replies that he did not actually mean to do so: "I set out to write about what it was like to be me, a gay man in New York, in the mid-1980s, and it was not possible to do that without placing it in the middle of the epidemic. It also seemed like there was a huge shift in the political climate with President Reagan. The world I was born into was receding and something new and rather terrifying was taking its place" (Berson, 2014). As clear from these lines, Kushner was simply both a representative of the gay community and a witness of the era who was anxious about not only the present but also the future of his community. In this vein, in his article "Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* or How American History Spins Forward," Alfonso Ceballos Muñoz recalls Walter Benjamin's metaphor of the angel of history, stating that it "stands for both the absence of the idea of a future and the intolerable situation of a present" and the characters express their views on an apocalyptic picture of both the history and possible future "by recalling the AIDS epidemic, racism, homophobia and the dismantlement of the World" (Ceballos Muñoz, 2006, p.3).

In the 20th century, various sexual subcultures and societies started to become more visible, which led to "a new pluralism of class, ethnic, racial and cultural forms as well as a diversity of gender and sexual experiences," as Jeffrey Weeks puts it in his work, *Sexuality* (1986, p. 75). In this context, the gay community had a vision of an apocalyptic present and future in the time period when *Angels in America*

was written because America was experiencing the Reagan Era, an era famous for the conservative Republican president who was first unresponsive to the AIDS crisis, and even after it became an epidemic, his treatment towards the illness was unethical. The conservative government did not attach much importance to the illness, believing that it affected people whose lifestyle was not acceptable according to their political stance. In his commentary “Deadly AIDS policy failure by the highest levels of the US government: A personal look back 30 years later for lessons to respond better to future epidemics,” Donald B. Francis claims that even though the United States Centres for Disease Control (CDC) was capable of dealing with this illness, “the Reagan administration prevented it [CDC] from responding appropriately to what very early on was known to be an extremely dangerous transmissible disease” (2012, p. 291). The AIDS epidemic was not treated only as a mysterious and incurable virus by the Reaganites. However, as it was associated with gay men, it thus aroused the feelings of “homophobia and abhorrence” in the heterosexual majority (Güçlü, 2020, p.114).

On the other hand, with the beginning of the new millennium, especially during the presidency of Barack Obama (2009-2017), LGBTQ rights were expanded immensely after struggling with the growing discrimination carried by the AIDS stigma. For instance, in addition to signing The Matthew Shepard and James Byrd Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act (2009), and the Don't Ask, Don't Tell Repeal Act (2010), the Obama administration supported the passage of ENDA (Employment Non-Discrimination Act) to prohibit discrimination against employees based on gender or sexual identity (Sink, 2013) and the Equality Act although both failed to pass (Benen, 2015). It is also significant to note that Obama was the first sitting president who supported same-sex marriage in 2012 (Gast, 2012); he also appointed Todd M. Hughes, who is known to be the first openly gay federal judge in U.S. history, to the Court of Appeals for the Federal Circuit in 2013. Following all these legal contributions to the rights of the LGBTQ community, in 2015, the Supreme Court also ruled that the Constitution guarantees the right to marry for same-sex couples. Such changes in the social, cultural, and political attitudes and agendas of the USA are undeniably reflected in many other gay characters that have become prominent on mainstream television series such as *Will & Grace* (1998-2006; 2017-2020), created by Max Mutchnick and David Kohan and Peter Nowalk's *HTGAWM* which remarkably includes the intersectionality of race and sexuality.

One of the main issues both *Angels in America* and *How to Get Away with Murder* deal with is secrecy and disclosure, which is directly related to sexual identity. In both works, the characters struggle with their sexual identities, which in turn changes their whole life into an area of struggle. Considering the dates of both productions, *Angels in America* (1991) and the first release of *HTGAWM* (2014), one can easily detect the differences between these works in terms of how their characters prefer to keep their homosexuality a secret or how they are open about their sexual preferences. In other words, even though both works include homosexuality as a theme and gay, lesbian, or queer individuals as characters, one cannot deny the diverse representations of such identities. In the world of *Angels of America*, especially for characters like Roy and Joe, homosexuality is socially or morally unacceptable since “secretiveness about one's homosexuality was widely viewed as normal and desirable” (Cain, 1991, p.25). On the other hand, in *HTGAWM* almost all characters are more open to accepting their sexual identities now that homosexuality is normalized and openness about one's sexual preference is desirable/acceptable in the new millennium. Nevertheless, this is not always the case for all the show's characters as soon will be discussed.

One of the most critical aspects of *HTGAWM* is that it made queer lives visible and acceptable to the public. In an interview posted by GLAAD (2020), the creator of the show, Nowalk, says, “The LGBTQ

legacy is something I am most proud of, but I never set out to make a show that was so LGBTQ. What has been awesome for me is the self-discovery of what a queer point of view I have and to freely inject that into the show.” As he makes clear, it was not his initial intention to create a show about queer lives; yet, having seen the show's positive impact on the public, they decided to embrace this queer angle in the show. Furthermore, not only the creator but also the actors/actresses of *HTGAWM* announced their supportive attitude towards the storyline, making positive comments on it. For instance, Amirah Vann, who plays a lesbian attorney, Tegan Price, focuses on both the significance and necessity of the show in the same interview as follows: “When people see two men or two women kissing on TV, those moments are seen around the world, and it sends a message that this is the world we live in” (GLAAD, 2020). Her emphasis on raising awareness of queer lives and their issues is worth mentioning. As a matter of fact, the queer community around the world is getting more visible each day, thanks to platforms such as Netflix and other production companies.

On the one hand, this increase in visibility helps the queer community to disclose themselves easily; yet, it can still provoke some conservative people. Thus, shows like *HTGAWM* help the audience to normalize what is indeed normal. In this way, the message, just as Vann argues, is spread around the world: “*This is the world we live in.*” Similar to Amirah Vann, Conrad Wayne Ricamora (2020), who plays the gay character Oliver Hampton in *HTGAWM*, openly shares his experience with the show in the GLAAD interview:

The show has really healed a deep part of me. I did not have a great coming-out experience in high school. I lost most of my friends. When the pilot came out, I had a little bit of a panic attack after I watched it because I realized how many people were going to see this gay story. I felt exposed, the same way I did in high school. But to see the love and support that came out of that experience has truly healed a part of me that was really traumatized.

Disclosure and acknowledging one's true self are not as easy for Joe Pitt in *Angels in America* as Ricamora experienced during high school. In the play, as a devout Mormon, Joe is portrayed as a deeply closeted gay man with a wife. Even though he believes that he hides his sexual identity very well, he cannot. In *Act I, Scene VI* of Part One: Millennium Approaches, in a dialogue with Louis Ironson, with whom he eventually openly starts a relationship and leaves his wife, Harper Pitt, it is easy to see his uneasiness about the fact that he cannot hide the reality of his sexual identity. His political stance and religious commitments force him to act in a way that even his own body reacts:

JOE: I voted for Reagan.

LOUIS: YOU did?

JOE: Twice.

LOUIS: Twice? Well, oh boy. A Gay Republican.

JOE: Excuse me?

LOUIS: Nothing.

JOE: I'm not . . .

Forget it.

LOUIS: Republican? Not Republican? Or . . .

JOE: What?

LOUIS: What?

JOE: Not gay. I'm not gay. (Kushner, 1995, p.35)

This is their first interaction and meeting scene; Louis is very sorry, even crying, after learning about his boyfriend's grave condition. Joe sees him crying in the toilet and hands him some tissues. Only then do they start communicating, and the above dialogue shows us that Louis is almost sure about Joe's sexual orientation and thus, there is not the slightest chance that he is straight. The following part of the dialogue is a clear indication of this interpretation:

LOUIS: Oh. Sorr

(Blows his nose loudly) It's just . . .

JOE: Yes?

LOUIS: Well, sometimes you can tell from the way a person sounds that ... I mean you *sound* like a . . .

JOE: NO I don't. Like what?

LOUIS: Like a Republican. (Kushner, 1995, p.35)

JOE *(Making sure no one else is around)*: Do I? Sound like a . . . ?

LOUIS: What? Like a . . . ? Republican, or ... ? Do I?

JOE: DO you what?

LOUIS: Sound like a . . . ?

JOE: Like a . . . ?

I'm . . . confused.

LOUIS: Yes.

My name is Louis. But all my friends call me Louise.

I work in Word Processing. Thanks for the toilet paper.

(Louis offers Joe his hand, Joe reaches, Louis feints and pecks Joe on the cheek, then exits.) (Kushner, 1995, p.36)

Consequently, their first meeting shows the reader that no matter how hard Joe tries to hide his sexual orientation, it is visible, in particular, to the trained eyes. The dialogue also displays Joe's diffidence and anxiety; he is panic-stricken and in complete denial. Secrecy about one's sexual identity is usually associated with low self-esteem and social isolation. Understanding his emotional turmoil, Louis does not insist and ends the conversation by properly introducing himself and pecking him on the cheek before he exits.

From the very beginning, Joe's marriage is perfect proof of his denial and secrecy. However, when he meets Louis, he finds it more difficult to conceal his inner conflicts and desires. When his wife Harper asks him, "Are you a homo?" Joe, taken by surprise, first answers, "What if...", yet he cannot reveal his true identity and assures Harper that he is not (Kushner, 1995, p. 44). In another scene, when Joe criticizes Harper for her addiction to Valium and making up conflicting stories, he urges Harper to pray and ask for God's help:

JOE: I think we ought to pray. Ask God for help. Ask him together . . .

HARPER: God won't talk to me. I have to make up people to talk to me.

JOE: You have to keep asking.

HARPER: I forgot the question. Oh yeah. God, is my husband a . . .

JOE (*Scary*): Stop it. Stop it. I'm warning you. Does it make any difference? That I might be one thing deep within, no matter how wrong or ugly that thing is, so long as I have fought, with everything I have, to kill it. What do you want from me? What do you want from me, Harper? More than that? For God's sake, there's nothing left, I'm a shell. There's nothing left to kill. As long as my behaviour is what I know it has to be. Decent. Correct. That alone in the eyes of God.

HARPER: NO, no, not that, that's Utah talk, Mormon talk, I hate it, Joe, tell me, say it . . .

JOE: All I will say is that I am a very good man who has worked very hard to become good and you want to destroy that. You want to destroy me, but I am not going to let you do that.

(Kushner, 1995, p.46)

It is clear that Joe is fighting against his own sexual identity not only because of the social constructs of what is right and what is wrong but also because of his strict religious beliefs. His insistence on being “a good man” shows his personal beliefs about homosexuality that are consistent with the regimes of truths of the time. As a public official, Joe knows that his sexual orientation, after years of denial and secrecy, would harm his career and “destroy” his excellent reputation. (Kushner, 1995, p.46)

Although Joe and Louis's introduction scene implies that Louis is an openly gay man, this is a performance that does not tell the whole truth since Louis is closeted among his family members. This paper does not explicitly deal with the role of religion in *Angels in America* or *HTGAWM*. Nevertheless, it should at least be stated that religion plays a major role in the characters' lives, in particular, the characters in *Angels in America*. Hence, while analyzing the play's characters, their religious background cannot be ignored. In *Angels in America, Act I Scene V*, Louis is shown to be attending his grandmother's funeral in a Jewish cemetery with his family members, indicating his ethnicity and religious background. Since he keeps his homosexuality a secret among his family members, Louis is there alone while Prior Walter, his partner, is waiting for him outside the cemetery. This part of the play also foreshadows Louis's concerns over his lover and his serious health condition. Louis openly asks about what “the Holy Writ say[s] about someone who abandons someone he loves at a time of great need?” and when the Rabbi asks about the reasons for such an action, he answers frankly:

LOUIS: Because he has to. Maybe because this person's sense of the world, that it will change for the better with struggle, maybe a person who has this neo-Hegelian positivist sense of constant historical progress towards happiness or perfection or something, who feels very powerful because he feels connected to these forces, moving uphill all the time . . . maybe that person can't, um, incorporate sickness into his sense of how things are supposed to go. Maybe vomit. . . and sores and disease . . . really frighten him, maybe . . .he isn't so good with death. (Kushner, 1995, p.51)

This honest confession clearly illustrates to the readers that Louis, though in love with Prior, will not be able to cope with the difficulties that AIDS brings.

The difficulty and even impossibility of disclosing one's sexual preference are observed in another significant character in *Angels in America*, Roy Cohn, a closeted conservative gay lawyer based on real-life Roy Cohn who was the Assistant US Attorney on the sensational Ethel Rosenberg case in which she and her husband were accused of and convicted of spying for the Soviet Union. As in real life, Roy is portrayed as a hateful, wicked, and corrupt figure diagnosed with AIDS yet too proud and hateful to accept his own reality on the grounds of social and political issues. In the play, Roy offers Joe a job in the Justice Department to secure his position and have his man in the Department ensure that his unethical and illegal operations remain safe. Though portrayed as a cruel, vicious man at the beginning, the readers might build sympathy for the character, in particular when he is under treatment at the hospital through the end of the play. When the symptoms start to ruin his life, Roy sees his doctor, Henry. The dialogue between Roy and him reveals Roy's denial of his sexual orientation and fatal

disease. Upon learning about his actual condition, he tries to intimidate his doctor Henry, saying that he will end his career:

HENRY: What are you doing, Roy?

ROY: No, say it. I mean it. Say: "Roy Cohn, you are a homosexual."

(Pause)

And I will proceed, systematically, to destroy your reputation and your practice and your career in New York State, Henry. Which you know I can do.

(Pause.) (Kushner, 1995, p.50)

This intimidation and direct threat from Roy are serious and knowing Roy for many years now, the doctor is aware of the severity of the situation, which forces him to distort reality: "Roy Cohn, you are . . . You have had sex with men, many, many times, Roy, and one of them, or any number of them, has made you very sick. You have AIDS" (Kushner, 1995, p. 51). As a part of his profession, the doctor is obliged to name the illness and cure it even if he is forced to hide the reality underlying the situation. However, even the name of the illness, AIDS, makes Roy furious, and he starts to accuse the doctor of stereotyping people with labels, for the name of his illness bears the cause of his condition: his homosexuality. In this scene, Roy is portrayed as a proud, hateful, and vicious person who brags about his political power claiming that the power someone has is not related to his sexual affairs but his personal engagements: in other words, as Roy claims, whom he calls and who owes him is much more important than with whom he has sexual intercourse. At this point, one can argue that Roy acts like a spokesperson for the Reagan government, its institutions, and the media that strive to silence the gay community in their fight against the AIDS epidemic.

It is also worth discussing how Roy positions homosexuality as weakness and powerlessness. In his dialogue with Henry, speaking of homosexuals in derogatory and abusive terms, he claims, "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 the City Council. Homosexuals are men who know nobody and who nobody knows. Who have zero clout. Does this sound like me, Henry?" (Kushner, 1995, p.50) His definition of homosexuals, which is condescending and pejorative, is vital to understanding why Roy does not want to be associated with homosexuality. Obviously, it is a sign of weakness, powerlessness, and incompetency for him, which he cannot tolerate. Throughout the play, Roy boasts about his political connections, his position in society, and the privileged job that allows him to reach anyone, even the president. Thus, being associated with homosexuality is unbearable considering what it means to him. In other words, disclosure meant a personal and political threat for people like Roy Cohn, who "were conscious of their social position and sought occupational mobility and prestige" (Cain, 1991, p.30).

Unlike Roy, who hides not only his homosexuality but also his disease related to his true sexual identity, Joe finally accepts his reality and comes out in *Act II Scene VIII* after having spent his entire life in the closet and hiding from his own sexual identity. However, when he has the courage enough to reveal this fact, his own family tends to ignore his attempt for disclosure. Finally, in complete despair, he calls his mother and directly talks about his homosexuality, which is significant because it reflects his uneasiness and years of repression. He seems to have repressed his identity too long, and his direct utterance and acknowledgment show that he is impatient about his identity reconstruction.

HANNAH: Joe?

JOE: Mom. Momma. I'm a homosexual, Momma.

Boy, did that come out awkward.

(Pause)

Hello? Hello?

I'm a homosexual.

(Pause)

Please, Momma. Say something. (Kushner, 1995, p.81)

However, as can be seen, his mother Hannah does not seem to or want to understand his confession, which indicates that disclosure of homosexuality even to family members was not often encouraged during this conservative period in American history. Finally, after a long pause, his mother simply states that drinking is a sin and that they should forget about this dialogue between them, advising him to go home to his wife (Kushner, 1995, p.82). However, by disclosing his sexual preference, he gets rid of the walls around him, the barriers that make his life unbearable, and even overcomes the feelings of self-hatred and shame.

While characters like Joe and Roy are presented as sensitive about their sexual identities, as a gay couple, Prior and Louis strive to deal with different kinds of problems in *Angels in America*. Prior is diagnosed with AIDS at the beginning of the play, and as his condition deteriorates throughout the first few scenes, his partner Louis leaves him feeling overwhelmed and even burdened by the symptoms of the disease. As the ending reveals, the play brings together the past representations of gay lives via deeply closeted gay characters and the future of a gay man who falls out/apart with his partner during the battle against a deadly disease. When Prior defies death and the tragic fate that lies ahead for him, he reshapes the past and future lives of all queer individuals. In this context, with his defiance of death, in other words, AIDS, he is indeed a prophet foreseeing the future of gay couples in the new millennium when the increased visibility of public disclosure undermined the common belief of the 1970s and 1980s that gay individuals are immoral and sick.

In line with this, in *HTGAWM* the representations of gay lives are much more different than those in *Angels in America*, indicating the positive effects of the social, cultural, and political changes one can observe in the history of the USA. For instance, the romantic relationship between Connor Walsh (Jack Falahee) and Oliver Hampton (Conrad Ricamora) reflects the open acceptance of the LGBTQ community in the USA, contrary to the gay couples' troubles presented in *Angels in America*. In the pilot episode, Connor, a law student at Middleton University, is presented to the audience as overtly gay with rampant sex life. At the same time, Oliver, an IT specialist, is timid and at times insecure about himself due to his appearance and his ethnic background. However, although Oliver was supposed to appear only as one of Connor's one-night stands, he was promoted to serious regular since the character was liked both by the creator Peter Nowalk and the audience. In a similar vein, the actor Jack Falahee comments on Connor Walsh's character with these words: "When I first read [the script], I was mostly interested in Connor because he seemed like someone I knew—a guy from school or one of my brother's colleagues. [Peter Nowalk] crafted this character that's flawed but likable. You want to hate him but he's so charming at the same time. It's so honest" (Dockterman, 2015). It is clear that Nowalk understands the significance of representing sexual diversity in his show to increase the visibility of gay lives in the USA and worldwide.

Throughout the show, homosexuality is normalized, and Connor does not hesitate to use his manipulative charm to obtain the information he needs to impress the lead character Annalise Keating (Viola Davis), in her criminal law class. For example, in Season 1, Episode 15, when the clinic nurse asks him the number of sexual partners he has had during the past year, he estimates between 30 and 40. Accordingly, Connor and Oliver have an on-and-off casual sexual relationship in the first few episodes of the series while Oliver hacks various sources to obtain illegal information for Connor. To our surprise, in the same episode, it is Oliver whose test result is positive for HIV while Connor tests negative although he engages in more high-risk sexual behavior with multiple partners. As one of the side stories in *HTGAWM*, the romantic relationship between Oliver and Connor also shows us that there are plenty of people like Oliver who can lead long, high-functioning lives with the virus. Actor Conrad Ricamora also states this fact in the interview posted by GLAAD (2020):

There is this tendency to approach storylines with characters living with HIV and AIDS with such a heaviness and I think that just in showing Oliver living his day-to-day life, even in episodes where we haven't mentioned it, it is allowing people to see characters and a person living with HIV that is thriving and it's not about them having a crisis.

Although Oliver is diagnosed with HIV, unlike Louis in *Angels in America*, Connor proves his commitment to Oliver by moving into his apartment, as revealed in Episode 1 in Season 2. In the following season, the relationship between Oliver and Connor gradually deteriorates after Oliver begins working for Annalise, and they even break up for a while. In the scene in which Oliver confesses to Connor that he has deleted his Stanford acceptance letter, we see how Connor genuinely cares for Oliver and cannot even get angry with him despite what he has done. Oliver, however, sees his lack of anger as a sign of an unhealthy relationship and breaks up with him. Yet, later things work out for them, and they get married in Episode 8 in Season 5, entitled "I Want to Love You Until the Day I Die," with a memorable wedding in which they declare their love and commitment to each other publicly. Their wedding is significant for two reasons: first, it reflects the current historical moment they live in: as soon as the Supreme Court legalized same-sex marriage in all fifty states in the USA in 2015, Connor and Oliver got married in the show. Next, Connor's wedding vow normalizes their relationship as a gay couple, as is apparent in these lines:

It's no secret that I didn't want this kind. It's too normal. But as I'm standing here now, I don't think I have ever wanted something so normal in my life. Because of you, I want things I told myself I never did. Like I want to buy a house with you, and I want that house to have a family so we can finally embrace our daddy status. I want to go to bed each night beside you. I want to be faithful and jealous if any guy even tries to smile at you. I even want to get in fights with you, to fight and yell and make up. I want to love you until the day that I die. And you'd better not die before me because life wouldn't be worth living without you. I didn't think that I could ever feel these things before I met you, but, Oliver, I want a long, boring, normal life because it's with you. You're everything to me.

The future that Connor envisions with Oliver is not so different from the future prospects of a heterosexual couple. Encouraging gay individuals to disclose their sexual preferences was viewed as a way to bring about a real change in the social situation of gays in the 1980s. In the new millennium, gay individuals can benefit from the social, cultural, and political changes that American society has gone through as in the case of same-sex marriages or the positive and tolerant attitude displayed toward gay identities. Furthermore, increased visibility through same-sex marriages can also promote further political changes. By revealing themselves as normal, ordinary, and even boring individuals with homosexual preferences gay individuals can eradicate the negative stereotypic representations of their community. Thus, such a wedding scene would also help younger gays embrace their sexual identities more easily and may even assist them to feel less marginalized in contemporary society.

On the other hand, although the gay individuals in the show are presented in a freer and more democratic environment, HIV is still portrayed as a frightening and demonizing event as in *Angels in America* regarding health. For instance, Louis Peitzman, a deputy entertainment editor for BuzzFeed News, considers the show's approach to HIV as "an embarrassing representation of HTGAWM's muddled queer politics" (2015) despite its extraordinary focus on an interracial, gay, mixed-HIV-status relationship. Almost all of the characters in the show engage in casual sex, but none of them display any concern about whether they have contracted any sexually transmitted diseases or not. It seems that it is only Connor who might pay the price for his promiscuity, which in a sense, seems to be "presenting the same ideas that were on television three decades earlier" (Peitzman, 2015). Nicholas-Brie Guarriello (2019) argues that "fan fiction writers might perceive HIV as an angsty or sad plot that would not connect well with their audience," which explains the happily ever after ending of Connor and Oliver's romance.

The scene in Season 3, in Episode 6, is also worth mentioning to show how people still cannot handle HIV in the new millennium. During a time apart from Connor, Oliver is turned down by his date Thomas when Oliver reveals that he is HIV positive. Similarly, in *Angels in America*, Louis abandons Prior when he is hospitalized since he cannot handle the symptoms of AIDS. After this point, Prior begins to have visions of an angel who tells him that he is a prophet whose mission is to tell the human race to stop any forms of social progress. Not only does the angel symbolize the embodiment of Prior's physical destruction, but also, she "serves as a pillar of the neoconservative ideals held by Reagan and his contemporaries," who favor the socio-political hegemony of straight white men instead of embracing liberal multiculturalism (Muratore, 2019, p. 2). In other words, when Prior and the human race is commanded by the divine principalities to "stop moving," (Kushner, 1995, p. 172), they are expected to confirm and support the conservative politics of Reaganite republicans, which promoted the death of the gay individuals with AIDS by preventing them from getting proper treatment.

Prior is one of the marginalized individuals as the protagonists of the play, and he is also the weakest character who is abandoned by his partner after he is infected with a fatal disease. Yet, throughout the play, Prior gains power, and authority by displaying physical and mental strength in his defiance of the disease that plagued thousands of individuals and the harassment of an angel that voices resistance to change. Finally, as the ending of the play shows, he not only rises and survives a terrible, incurable, fatal disease but also resists the hegemonic ideals and practices of the time and takes his place among new and old friends. In other words, the conflict between an outnumbered, marginalized, terrified homosexual community (represented by Prior) and the predominantly heterosexual American society (represented by the angel) is resolved with the creation of a new community, a community of diversity that strengthens human relations. This dramatic change observed in the revolutionary character, Prior, seems to be one of the significant themes that Kushner conveys in the play. For instance, in *Act III, Scene V* of Part Two: *Perestroika* in *Angels in America*, the following dialogue between Harper and the Mormon Mother at the Mormon Visitor's Centre illustrates how the concept of change affects people:

HARPER (*A beat, then*): In your experience of the world. How do people change?

MORMON MOTHER: Well, it has something to do with God so it's not very nice. God splits the skin with a jagged thumbnail from throat to belly and then plunges a huge filthy hand in, he grabs hold of your bloody tubes and they slip to evade his grasp but he squeezes hard, he *insists*, he pulls and pulls till all your innards are yanked out and the pain! We can't even talk about that. And then he stuffs them back, dirty, tangled and torn. It's up to you to do the stitching.

HARPER: And then get up. And walk around.

MORMON MOTHER: Just mangled guts pretending.

HARPER: That's how people change. (Kushner, 1995, p. 200)

While the Mormon Mother highlights the destructive aspect of change which can cause a lot of pain and suffering, she also simply states that people are capable of healing and thus, can continue their lives. Accordingly, the characters Harper, Hannah, and Prior display the capability of dramatic change in the course of their lives: at the same time, they reflect not only the difficulty of avoiding change but also the impossibility of preventing change from happening.

In this vein, while *HTGAWM* embraces sexual diversity and is an outspoken advocate for LGBTQ rights and HIV health care, it also mirrors the anxieties and troubles of secrecy and disclosure that gay individuals experienced in their history. The difficulty of disclosing one's sexual preference can be observed in the case in Episode 7 in Season 6, which involves a middle-school teacher, David, who accidentally shoots one of his students, Ryan. As it is revealed later, David is a closeted gay, and he kills his student (the victim), who happens to find out his sexual identity fearing that people will learn about his homosexuality. However, the fans of the show in the 21st century, with so much discussion and open acceptance of the LGBTQ community, cannot relate his homosexuality to the shooting as they cannot imagine why people can become wild and even dangerous in order to keep their sexual preferences hidden especially in the new millennium (Panigrahi, 2019).

Episode 3 in Season 4 is also worth discussing in relation to the impact of disclosure on families as it reveals that Connor's father is gay and married to another man. In the next Episode of the same Season, his father informs Oliver that Connor came out to his family at the age of 12, which encouraged his father, who was closeted and married to Connor's mother, to come out to the family a week later. While this disclosure prompted his mother to have a nervous breakdown, it strained Connor's relationship with his father. In line with this revelation, Ricamora shares his own experience in the interview as follows:

On a weekly basis, there will be people who say they have been able to see themselves in the character of Oliver or that they have been made more comfortable with who they are because of Connor and Oliver's relationship. People have also said that they have been able to come out to their friends and family because of these characters they could identify with and gain strength from. (GLAAD, 2020)

While the overtly gay couples in *HTGAWM* reflect the open acceptance of the LGBTQ community in the USA, Annalise Keating can be considered an exception to this statement. Keating, a successful lawyer who also teaches at Middleton Law School, is the lead character in the show; everything revolves around her. In the Pilot episode, the show opens with a party scene, and soon the viewers see a group of students trying to bury the body of Sam Keating, Annalise Keating's husband. The show's first season deals with the students' effort to "get away with the murder" of Sam Keating with the help of their professor and the wife of the deceased man. Even though Keating's portrayal as a black attorney has been criticized as being "based on the same traditional negative stereotypes of Black women that date back to slavery," (Toms-Anthony, 2018, p.77) it is our contention that she has been a revolutionary figure in terms of representing a powerful black woman. According to Michaela D. E. Meyer, on TV bisexual characters do not generally open up about their sexual orientation: rather, they disclose their sexuality generally as a secondary plot element. This might be seen as a muddled concept of sexual identity or an attempt to present a more fluid sexual identity while maintaining heterosexual and gay identities as acceptable and uncontroversial (Meyer, 2010, p.380). In this regard, though being secretive about her sexual orientation at the beginning, Keating as a character helps "refixing hegemonic discourses by stabilizing heterosexual and homosexual as valid, nondebtable identities" (Meyer, 2010, p.380).

At the beginning of the show, Annalise is not open in terms of her sexuality but later in the show, as the viewers learn more about her background, it is clear that she is a closeted queer. She has had a lesbian

relationship with Eve Rothlo, which ends because she is concerned about her status as a black lesbian attorney. She implies that being black was hard enough for her while trying to build a career; as a result, she could not risk coming out as a lesbian. However, when Eve visits her years later, she denies her queerness but tells Eve that she was lucky enough to be a white woman who could do whatever she wanted. However, Keating is more candid when she speaks with Bonnie in Season 6, Episode 5, “We’re All Gonna Die”, she openly says, “I was afraid to be gay. Should’ve stayed with Eve, loved her, but I wanted to be normal, I wanted to be accepted.” This disclosure makes it clear that she was publicly in denial of her sexual identity, and she was, in reality, concerned about having a visible relationship with a woman and revealing her queerness not only because of her own disadvantaged position as a black lawyer, but also social pressures about normality. Keating’s secrecy in her youth is understandable considering the political sphere in her college years. Though not explicitly given, when Keating’s age and career are considered, her relationship with Eve must have been in the late 80s. One can argue that similar to the characters in *Angels in America*, Keating might be viewed as a victim of political turmoil regarding gay rights. Annette Saddik contends that in “*Angels in America*, the public merges with the private and the political is the personal” (2007, p. 160). In *HTGAWM*, similarly, we observe that as a result of this merger between private and political, Keating cannot run the risk of being a black, openly lesbian attorney in such a problematic era.

However, in the following seasons, the viewers anticipate a possible romantic involvement between Annalise Keating and another lesbian attorney Tegan Price (Amirah Vann), with whom Keating works at the law firm Caplan & Gold. In the episodes in which their close relationship is portrayed, Keating is almost always in secrecy and does not openly express her feelings for and attraction to Tegan Price: she neither affirms nor denies how she feels until the last season when Price reveals that she is in love with Annalise. Although Keating does not reciprocate Tegan’s love, we might argue that their relationship is ambiguous. In the show’s final episode, the viewers see them dancing happily for a short time, which maintains this intentional ambiguity. The producers did not want to lead the viewers in a particular direction; instead, the viewers might produce multiple endings. In an interview, Nowalk says: “I just want people to dream what they want to dream” (Lenker, 2020). Finally, in Season 6, in Episode 15, Keating makes peace with her sexual identity only to present herself to the court: “Who I am is a 53-year-old woman from Memphis, Tennessee, named Anna Mae Harkness. I’m ambitious, black, bisexual, angry, sad, strong, sensitive, scared, fierce, talented, exhausted. And I am at your mercy.” This public disclosure is perfectly in line with the sexual politics of the 2010s.

Surprisingly, as a play that is praised for its portrayal of diverse groups in terms of social, sexual, religious, and political identities, *Angels in America* can and should be criticized for its women characters. The women in *Angels in America*: Harper Pitt and Hannah Pitt are stereotyped throughout the play as a result of being introduced “in the traditional female roles” (Foster, 2002, p. 177). Harper, for instance, is a Valium addict, a delusional, weak, submissive character who keeps dreaming all day without any actual intellectual activity. She is confined in her house, kept in denial, if not in darkness, and tries to save her marriage with the help of a baby. In *Part One: Millennium Approaches*, Hannah, likewise, is portrayed as a traditional, very conservative mother who does not want to accept her own son’s sexual identity and refuses to hear about it, although she displays a change in her treatment of homosexuality towards the end of the play. Even though the angel of the play is a woman, this does not change the stereotypical representations of women. On the contrary, it supports and enhances these representations. In this respect, *HTGAWM* is more progressive in terms of presenting a better portrayal of women through strong women characters such as Annalise, Tegan, and Bonnie, who have professional careers, and strong personalities formed by the difficulties they have experienced. This difference

between the two is significant in that it shows the changes in the woman's place in society and the phallogocentric language of Kushner, which might be a topic for another article.

To conclude, *Angels in America*, in Jonathan Freedman's words, "received equal doses of critical praise and audience enthusiasm" and "restored to American Theatre an ambition it has not enjoyed since the days of Eugene O'Neill or Arthur Miller" (1998, p. 91). Moreover, the play reflects the cultural moment in which America needed to recognize the growth of a politically active and culturally accepted gay and lesbian minorities as well as indifference to their fight against the AIDS epidemic. As a result, it is regarded "both the culmination of history and as that which rewrites the past" (Savran, 1995, p.208). The ethnic, religious, sexual, and political differences displayed by all the seemingly unconnected characters in the play weld them together as they form the community in which each and every individual are mutually dependent. In this vein, Tony Kushner has rightfully asked, "The question I am trying to ask is how broad is a community's embrace. How wide does it reach?" (Lahr, 1992) Verna A. Foster similarly argues that the play's major characters "represent various sexual-political attitudes and collectively present a portrait of late twentieth-century America" (2002, p. 176). While the characters like Joe Pitt and Roy Cohn represent "individualism and undemocratic communication," the other characters in the play "value inclusivity and democratic communication," (Ferriter, 2018, p. 2), which makes a room for further representations of queer individuals such as in *HTGAWM*.

As for the show *HTGAWM*, it is clear that the gay community has become more visible and admissible as an integral part of society especially thanks to the romantic relationship between Connor and Oliver and the lead character Annalise Keating. In a similar manner, Nowalk says that he regularly hears from queer people all over the world who say that show finally made them feel seen and represented (GLAAD, 2020). In the new millennium, especially during the Obama Administration, one can observe the increase in tolerance, acceptance, and the gradual integration of homosexual individuals into society. Throughout *Angels in America*, Kushner's iconic characters undergo changes, but they also learn to embrace major changes in their identities and beliefs (Omer-Sherman, 2007, p. 87). Likewise, the main characters in *HTGAWM* experience transformations in their identities. These portrayals of transformations of both the show and the drama positively influence the readers/viewers, thus helping to embrace queers in American society. Although the gay rights movement in America might have posed some threats to the dominant values of the society, it is believed to be a "patriotic protest" (Hall, 2010, p. 562). The LGBTQ rights movement struggled to make the nation's democratic principles and promises more tangible, according to many of its activists and leaders, which was a fervently patriotic speech (Hall, 2010, p. 562). In this regard, both the movements of the 1980s and today's portrayal of queer lives to make queers visible can be viewed as struggles to continue the promise of democracy.

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