

Dystopian to an Extreme: Caryl Churchill Apocalyptic Vision in *Far away*

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Abstract

Caryl Churchill, in her predictive drama *Far Away*, foresees an apocalyptic future in which human beings turn against each other and also turn against nature, and every creature is ripe for extinction and every object is transformed into some kind of a weapon. A universal war takes place where enmity and mistrust is the dominating norm of interactions. Countries, people, animals, plants, and even minerals are grouping into opposing kinds of fronts fighting one another.

The little innocent girl of the first scene, Joan, turns, by the end of the play, into a ruthless militant who kill "cats and children under five" with cold blood on her way home. She is the outcome of her dysfunctional uncle and aunt who are involved in torturing and killing some opposing men and their families. They deceive her into thinking that she became part of a big revolutionary change, she offers them help.

She works in a hat factory where she meets her future husband, Todd, himself a murderer who "shot cattle and children in Ethiopia", "gassed mixed troops of Spanish, computer programmers and dogs". They work together to make hats for prisoners who parade in them on their way to execution. The only compassion Joan has is that for the brightly decorated hats she make that are buried with the bodies.

The paper discusses the events of the play within the dystopian genre and makes a specific reference to anti-utopia and ecological dystopia, touching upon Greg Garrard's theory of ecocriticism. This interdisciplinary study of literature and environment tackles the different kinds of relations between humans and non-humans.

Key Words: dystopia, anti-Utopia, Churchill, Greg Garrard,

Caryl Churchill Predictive Drama *Far Away*

Far Away, an apocalyptic vision of the world, written by the British playwright Caryl Churchill (1938-), was first produced at the Royal Court Jerwood Theatre Upstairs, London, on 24 November 2000, directed by Stephen Daldry. In 2002 an American production of the play ran at [New York Theatre Workshop](#) in [New York City](#), also directed by Daldry (<https://www.dramaonlinelibrary.com/plays/far-away-iid-151987/>). The most recent production of the play was in Minnesota by Wayward Theatre Company in August 2018. *Far Away* was nominated for the 2003 [Lucille Lortel Awards](#) for Outstanding Sound Design and Outstanding Costume Design (<https://www.lortelaward.com/2003-nominees>).

This predictive play was written before eleventh of September attacks on the Pentagon and World Trade Center in the United States of America and before the subsequent military campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan, when the political issues forced a climate change, yet it seems now darkly prophetic of the major anxieties of the current century namely environmental and global warfare. Daldry's production of the play stresses the ironic undertones of the play's title from the very beginning, it opened with "a picture-book front cloth ... much too close to our expectant eyes for comfort" (Marlowe 1574), and the story, that was not 'far away' and less of a fairytale, goes on portraying very grotesque pictures where Churchill envisions a very dark end of the world and at the end of the play "when that curtain, with those lush, rolling hills, drops back down, the view no longer has the pleasing associations it had an hour ago" (Nathan 1575).

The action of the play is divided into three short acts organised in a strict chronological order, highlighting three significant events in the life of the protagonist of the play, Joan. The play traces her transformation from a curious innocent child into a passive young woman, and later into an adult ruthless soldier. The catastrophic change of the world around her is manifested through the turn of localised conflicts into global atrocities where not only countries and people are fighting each other, but plants, animals and even objects are at war among themselves for no specific reason. The dystopic images metaphorically accumulate to form a nightmare in reverse: instead of

escaping from the nightmare, Joan wakes up to live through it, as the plot, extending for many years , moves from 'night' (*FA* 9) to 'daytime' (*Ibid* 34) which is even darker. The first and third acts take place in Harper's home in the country. At the beginning of the play Joan wakes up to a savage reality that was hidden from her, and then she is sent back to sleep. In the last sequence of the play, she wakes up from her sleep to become an active participant in the coming inevitable horror of environmental devastation and persistent violence.

The play joins the fairy tale with the fable to become some sort of an unusual bedtime story. Ironically it begins at bedtime. The front curtain rises to reveal a woman (aunt Harper) sleeping in a chair and wakes to find her young niece (Joan), who is visiting, too, unable to sleep.

Harper gently tries to soothe her and send her back to sleep along with a motherly care: "Are you cold?", "Do you want a drink?" (*Ibid* 133) but what really concerns Joan is gradually revealed as far away from those simple needs: the young girl has been disturbed because she has witnessed terrible horrors that she can hardly comprehend with her still innocent mind.

Her uncle was escorting frightened, wounded people into the shed in the yard, beating a couple of them savagely. Harper tries to reshape Joan's impressions around a benign hypothesis: "Your uncle is helping these people. He's helping them escape. He's giving them shelter." (*Ibid* 140) she adds: " One of the people in the lorry was a traitor." And he had to be punished. (*Ibid* 14) Joan believes those lies and she even want to be part of them: "I could help uncle in the shed and look after them." (*Ibid*) She goes to bed with a different perception of the brutal acts she's witnessed.

This bed story uncovers the disturbing meaning of the play which is subtly extended in a series of scenes over a number of years and grows to be increasingly absurd. Few years are skipped and Joan is seen all grown in the second scene, she starts working in a hat factory, preoccupied by the daily routine and by her co-worker, Todd, who passes along all kinds of gossip about corruption in the workplace. What follows is a dreadful image of a macabre, overwhelmingly bizarre tableau that foreshadows the bizarre ends of these two milliners' labors.

The ramifications of the first scene are witnessed in all that follows. The monstrous results of instilling an indifference to human suffering in a child are seen throughout the play.

Churchill foresees, in the last scene, what critic Dragan Klaic calls "The Foreclosure of the Future" (171). It is a future in which evil has spread not only among humans but also it reaches the animals and minerals. The world has been divided into two opposing forces, us and them, any creature on the opposite side is ripe for extinction, it is a fallen world where Joan can happily relates that she "killed two cats and a child under 5." (*FA* 158)

Even fawns mischievously "get under the feet of shoppers and send them crashing down escalators" (*Ibid* 156). Churchill's goes to the extreme to draw an unimaginable picture of a world where simple objects like hairspray, or pins have murderous abilities, an image that resonates in the modern unsettled age, where simple acts as opening an envelope has become possibly fatal.

Stylistic shifts in the play are noted by Amelia Howe Kritzer who states that the play moves "from realism to expressionism to absurdism" (*Political Theatre* 72). Those shifts are clear where the naturalistic mode goes hand in hand with the darkness of the secrets disclosed in the first part. While Joan gradually uncovers the upsetting scenes she has witnessed in her uncle's house, Harper keeps trying to persuade her that everything is normal. Joan eventually was able to refute her aunt's explanations (that what she saw or heard was a party, a bird, or a dog being run over), until she is forced to confess her and her husband's involvement in some sort of human trafficking. Harper keeps twisting the truth, but Joan insists on her account:

!Joan: Why was uncle hitting them
 !Harper: Hitting who
 Joan: He was hitting a man with a stick. I think the stick
 .was metal. He hit one of the children
 Harper: One of the people in the lorry was a traitor. He
 wasn't really one of them, he was pretending, he was
 going to betray them, they found out and told your
 uncle. Then he attacked your uncle, he attacked the
 .other people, your uncle had to fight him
 .Joan: That's why there was so much blood
 .Harper: Yes, it had to be done to save the others
 .Joan: He hit one of the children

Harper: That would have been the child of the traitor. Or sometimes
-you get bad children who even betray their parents. (FA ١٤١)
(٤٢)

After all of Harper's lies and cold-hearted justification for the abuse of children, this explanation comes as another false account of events, but Harper tries to persuade Joan that "You're part of a big movement now to make things better. You can be proud of that". Joan shows complicity by accepting to return to bed now and help "clean up in the morning" (*Ibid* 142). In act two, after several years Joan starts working at a hat makers factory, where she meets Todd, another milliner laborer who becomes her future husband. The obvious break in the naturalism is seen in the first part by revealing that both of them have a "degree" in hats (*Ibid* 143). The short scenes that follow show Todd and Joan work for four days to make hats "more brightly decorated" (*Ibid* 144), "very big and extravagant" (*Ibid* 26) and then "enormous and preposterous" (*Ibid* 28). On day five of this expressionist increase, the ominous truth of making the hats is uncovered. Churchill explains in the stage direction: "[a] procession of ragged, beaten, chained prisoners, each wearing a hat, [is] on their way to execution" (*Ibid* 149). Churchill calls for as many actors as possible to be used to stage this grisly parade: "five is too few and twenty better than ten. A hundred?" (*Ibid*132). Daldry employed thirty actors, including children, to make the parade. The following scene moves to the following week where Todd and Joan are placidly working to make new creations. Joan laments the fate of the hats that are "burn[ed] ... with the bodies" (*Ibid* 150), then the two talk about the possibility of exposing the "corrupt financial basis" of the hat industry (*Ibid* 151), which currently seems as a rather trivial issue because they are mainly too busy with their personal romance.

The next act, which also comes several years later, reveals that it is too late to make any change. Todd and Harper are talking about a confusing war where "a vision of a planet consumed by conflict in which not merely every country is enlisted but also every species of animal and even the elements themselves. It is apocalyptic and unnerving" (Billington, *The Guardian*) even "children under five" (FA 154) form unsteady and parlous alliances. to prove his trustworthiness, Todd reminds Harper that he had "shot cattle and children in Ethiopia", "gassed mixed troops of Spanish, computer programmers and dogs" and "torn sterling apart with ... bare hands" (*Ibid* 157). And Joan, who is resting after cold-bloodily murdered "two cats and a child under five" (*Ibid* 158)

on her dangerous journey back home just to spend at least one day with Todd. Her last speech in the play informs the audience how everything in the world has turned into a weapon or an enemy; the weather took the "the side of the Japanese", "the Bolivians are working with gravity" and she was not sure "whose side the river was on" (*Ibid* 158).

This last touch upon Kritzer's accurate description of absurdism faced a mixed response among the critics. Professor John Nathan argues that the play is "much more than absurd fantasy – this ... is prophecy" (1575), while British playwright and theatre critic Nicholas de Jongh criticised the end of the play as full of "surreal and melodramatic excesses" (1574), and journalist Charles Spencer complained of ridiculousness in the play: "Churchill's vision of a world brought to catastrophe by war, ecological disaster and scientific perversion seems merely silly rather than terrifying. When we learn that the 'elephants have gone over to the Dutch', it proves impossible to stifle the giggles" (1576). This implicit rejection of a abrupt stylistic break is a reminder of the negative critical reception of *Blasted* by Sarah Kane, and in fact critic Michael Billington made an explicit comparison between the two plays where he notices that in *Far Away* "the journey from the farmhouse reality of the first scene to the cosmic chaos of the last is too swift to be dramatically convincing. It reminds me, if anything, of Sarah Kane's *Blasted* which I know Churchill admired but which strikes me as a questionable prototype" (*The Guardian*). In terms of structure, reviewer Irving Wardle noticed that "Churchill travels from a cozy domestic interior to the end of mankind in 60 minutes flat" (1575) and by that he affirms that the two plays have much in common, in spite of the fact that all the violence takes place offstage in *Far Away*. This induced comments about *Far Away* reminiscent of those written about *Blasted*, Critic Rhoda Koenig wonders: "Is this a play about totalitarianism or ecology and, if so, what is it saying about them?" (1576) Susannah Clapp, theatre critic of the *Observer*, comments: "But it doesn't argue the case, it states it: it doesn't develop, but jumps from one state to another" (1576).

Churchill's play navigates the postmodernist zeitgeist and it takes a prominent position within political debates. Kritzer affirms that Churchill's "latest plays give theatrical power to the shock, dismay, and disillusionment which have been widely shared responses to recent events" ("Political Currents" 57).

Kritzer, in *The Plays of Caryl Churchill: Theatre of Empowerment*, connects *Far Away* to other plays written by Churchill:

The wide range of subjects and styles in Churchill's plays converge upon a consistent and coherent thematic emphasis on the societal division between the powerful and powerless. A key to this division throughout the plays is the word frighten – the most significant single word in Churchill's lexicon and one used to identify the motivation of a major character in nearly every one of her plays, beginning with the first one-act produced during her student years at Oxford, *You've No Need to Be Frightened* (١٩٥٩), (١٩٣)

Aston also refers to the 'frightening' motif in *Far Away*, and links Joan with another little girl deprived of sleep, Angie, in *Top Girls* (1982). Aston believes that "*Far Away* provides a kind of 'bookend' to *Top Girls*: shows how the failure to care differently, less oppressively, for future generations of children, leads to global destruction" (*Feminist Views* 35). Although, in *Mad Forest* (1990), Churchill broadened her focus from (local) Britain to (continental) Europe, yet *The Skriker* (1994) has been considered to have a broader scope, in the sense that it "explores the ravages and intoxications of globalization" (Amich 394). In this regard *The Skriker* paves the way to *Far Away*, in spite the fact that they are concerned with different parts of the global the environment stays a common anxiety, whether economic or political, in both plays.

Candice Amich asserts that "Churchill's words do not simply reflect the 'schizophrenic' forces of global capital in an endless loop of self-referential linguistic play", yet the postmodernist structures in *The Skriker* are used to criticise the so-called postmodern state, mirroring Fredric Jameson's Marxist thought: "Churchill foregrounds the terror associated with the loss of historicity that accompanies time-space compression, thus attempting to stir her audience from its lethargic state" (Qtd in Amich 396).

In *Far Away*, dystopia was the means by which the attempt to recapture historicity is manifested. In the play, every one of the damaged creatures "represents the amassed poisoning of the planet" (*Ibid* 410).

Anti-Utopia and Dystopia

Since *Top Girls*, a persistent theme in Churchill's plays was dystopia which she employed as a warning about the well-being of future generations; although the play is structured in a linear

progression with abruptness in leaps of time. As theatre critic Irving Wardle observed, *Far Away* "proceeds logically, almost by joining the dots, to an ending where the whole of creation has been drawn into the war" (1575). For a playwright famous for playing with time and space, this exception can be perceived through the lens of the dystopian genre, in which the connection between cause and effect is essential:

One of the lessons of both the classical and the critical dystopia ... is that the world is capable of going from bad to worse, not only in a punctual moment but more often in a complex series of steps arising from the existing social order and the choices people make within it. ... Another lesson is that whatever bad times are upon us have been produced by systemic conditions and human choices that preceded the present moment – but also that such conditions can be changed only by remembering that process and then organizing against it. (Baccolini and Moylan 241)

As a futuristic dystopian play, professor Daniel Jernigan stresses that Churchill's *Far Away* questions the notion of "ontological upheaval" that she creates for the purpose of investigating "those institutions that deny even the slightest possibility of achieving social justice" (33). In the area of utopian studies, a relevant distinction is made between anti-utopia and dystopia. According to Laymen T. Sargent, the former refers to "a non-existent society... that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as a criticism of utopianism or of some particular eutopia" the latter involves "a nonexistent society... that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as considerably worse than the society in which that reader lived" (9). Critic Klaic perceives dystopia "as an unexpected and aborted outcome of utopian strivings, a mismatched result of utopian efforts-not only a state of fallen utopia but the very process of its distortion and degeneration as well" (3). According to its general definition as "social dreaming", the "utopianism" criticised by anti-utopians comprises both dystopia and utopia, in other words, both "dreams and nightmares that concern the ways in which groups of people arrange their lives and which usually envision a radically different society than the one in which the dreamers live" (3). Furthermore, in "Dystopia Matters: On the Use of Dystopia and Utopia", Professor Rafaella Baccolini argues that "our times need utopia more than ever, but they seem to be able to recover utopia mostly through dystopia" (3). For her, the dystopian genre mainly fits feminist writers, who believe that the "patriarchal tradition [of classical utopias] was no big loss" (*Ibid* 2).

There is a considerable ideological difference between anti-utopia and dystopia, as professor Darko Suvin asserts, "the intertext of anti-utopia has historically been antisocialism", whilst that of 'simple' dystopia "has been and remains more or less radical anti-capitalism" (189). Sociologist Ronald Creagh emphasises the paradox of Marxism, that was found against utopian socialism of Owen and Fourier (which Marx regarded unscientific and even naive), and turned to be the embodiment of modern utopia and the preferable aim of neo-liberal philosophers like Frederick Hayek, who thinks that "human destiny depends on the free market" (66). Hayek also maintains that "the new form of capitalist globalization has been accompanied by a choir of anti-utopian thinkers. ... The fall of the Berlin wall offered a new occasion to identify utopia with the communist state. Thus Marxism was accused of being utopian and therefore messianic and apocalyptic" (*Ibid* 67).

Kritzer considers *Far Away* an anti-utopian play, she regards it as "a kind of parable indicting the Left for its failures in the twentieth century" ("Political Currents" 64). In this light, the first segment of the play is seen as a analogy for Stalinism, "under which those supposedly being helped were often harmed, while its apologists defended the system through constantly shifting lies" (*Ibid* 65). The second part "points to the narrow perspective of trade unionism" while the third refers to "the factionalism that characterizes the contemporary Left, along with the chaotic proliferation of intense but indecipherable conflicts around the globe" (*Ibid*). This reading of the play is not consistent and it also misses some main features.

Wardle suggests looking at the first act as referring to the Soviet Union, instead of "an English beauty-spot" (1575), would do injustice to Churchill's main strategy which aims at implying that the world portrayed in the play is not 'far away'. The main image of the second part; the selection of hats, "beyond the craziest fantasies of Ascot" (*Ibid*), indicates an approach that brings home horrors thought only possible elsewhere. Todd and Joan's trivial complaints in this part may be seen as "a critique of trade unionism, although not of the traditional left-wing type", as professor Richard Hyman explains that what is called 'business unionism' has been "the dominant tradition in the USA and Britain" (x), but "for much of the European Left in the twentieth century, the tasks of socialists (and social reformers more generally) was to transcend purely economic objectives

and imbue trade unionism with social and political aims" (9). The middle part of the play highlights the dangers of 'economism' and what came to be known as 'art for art's sake'. The focus of the third act, however, is on what Kritzer identifies as the "proliferation of intense but indecipherable conflicts around the globe" (65).

In Kritzer's book, *Political Theatre in Post-Thatcher Britain* (2008), she confirms her anti-utopian reading of *Far Away*, in which she argues that the play traces "the breakdown of idealism" (73). That clarifies the comparison with Kane's *Blasted*. In the same way that Cate comes back to take care of Ian, Joan also returns from a war zone to look after her husband, Todd. The only thing left is (personal) love in a world deprived of "traditional values" (*Ibid* 74). Coming back home safely for Joan can be seen as "a sign of hope", but one "based on personal desire and commitment rather than abstract ideals" (*Ibid* 75). Kritzer's conclusion repeats this and underlines, just like Jernigan, the inevitable postmodern condition: "Acknowledging the limits of idealism, the instability of narrative, and the unknowability of reality, Churchill allies her viewpoint with that of Sarah Kane in suggesting that loving another creates the basis for meaning even in the extremes of chaos and threat" (*Ibid*).

Reading *Far Away* through a dystopian lens defies Kritzer's assumptions. Ian Herbert sees in it a "vision of a world brought to catastrophe by war, ecological disaster and scientific perversion" (1676). Ecological dystopia is paramount in the play. Basu et al affirms that "one major preoccupation of the dystopian convention is the threat of environmental degradation" (3), an idea expressed by Greg Garrard in his theory of ecocriticism which entails "the study of the relationship of the human and the non-human, throughout human cultural history and entailing critical analysis of the term 'human' itself" (53).

This relationship between the human and non-human is distorted in *Far Away*, where the plot develops from one petty lie into a universal destruction; therefore its main concern is the lack of ideals, rather than their excess. Aunt Harper deceives Joan while she is taking her in her arms to comfort her (when other children are being hurt with her knowledge and consent); Todd and Joan are busy with their romantic relationship from one hand, and their extremely short-sighted plans to improve their own working conditions, on the other hand, and they ignore the atrocious

consequences of their art. Favoring the expression of love in personal relationships over the love for humanity (and nature) is the main cause of the indescribable future depicted in the play, and it can barely present the faint hope implied by Kritzer. In *Far Away* Churchill recalls a dilemma inspected by David Edgar before:

One of the sharpest accusations Conservatives fire at the Left concerns the supposed contradiction between love for all humanity and caring for people you actually know (as Burke puts it, the apparent mutual exclusiveness of love of 'kind' and 'kindred'). ... It seems to me clear that both forms of love are limited and insufficient. The first has blighted the socialist experiment, the second challenges the moral pretensions of the enterprise culture. (xii)

The post-socialist dystopian future of *Far Away*, shows that the 'love of kindred' has been preferred at the price of a total negligence of anyone out of a close circle. That affirms the notion that the play, according to Aston, tries to demonstrate "that social, not just personal, responsibility for others must come into view if global catastrophe is to be avoided" (Caryl Churchill 116-17). In *Far Away* the main message, Churchill reminds the audience of, is that caring for others, not only one's own, is fundamental.

Conclusion

The British playwright Caryl Churchill employs the premonition of a little girl to send a message to humanity in general. Her futuristic dystopian play *Far Away* serves as a warning for those who abuse each other on one hand, and abuse technology, and nature on the other hand.

She draws a very gloomy picture of a future made by the wrong choices and practices of the present. A little girl loses her innocence watching her kindred orchestrate a mass murder of innocent people including children her age or even younger, she grows up to become part of this growing destructive power that dominate the whole universe.

Her readings of the present atmosphere affirms that the world is marching steadily towards the abyss, willingly or absent-mindedly, and the only way to avoid that is by returning to innate humanity social unity.

Churchill's play is a call for favoring universal love and empathy over private love. Otherwise the only natural end for selfishness and fanaticism is a catastrophic one as seen by the global warfare between humans and non-humans, people and animals, adults and children, rivers and hillsides, Japanese and Bolivians.

المخلص

تتنبأ كاريل تشرشل ، في مسرحيتها *Far Away* ، بمستقبل العالم ونهايته ، حيث ينقلب البشر ضد بعضهم البعض وضد الطبيعة ، وكلّ مخلوق يصبح عرضة للانقراض ، و كل كائن يتحول إلى نوع من الأسلحة. تحدث حرب عالمية حيث العداء وعدم الثقة هي القاعدة السائدة للتعامل. تتجمع الدول والناس والحيوانات والنباتات وحتى المعادن في جبهات مختلفة تقاوم بعضها البعض.

تحولت الطفلة البريئة الصغيرة في المشهد الأول ، جوان ، بحلول نهاية المسرحية ، إلى متشددة لا ترحم حيث تقتل "القطط والأطفال دون سن الخامسة" بدم بارد وهي في طريقها إلى المنزل. إنها نتيجة لعمها و عمتها اللذين يشتركان في تعذيب وقتل بعض الرجال المعارضين وعائلاتهم، واللذان يقومان بخداعها في التفكير في أنها أصبحت جزءاً من تغيير ثوري كبير ، فتقوم بتقديم المساعدة لهم.

تبدأ جوان بالعمل في مصنع للقبعات حيث تلتقي بزوجها المستقبلي ، تود ، وهو نفسه قاتل "أطلق النار على الماشية والأطفال في إثيوبيا" ، و "سمم بالغاز القوات المختلطة الإسبانية ، ومبرمجي الكمبيوتر والكلاب". إنها يعملان معاً على صنع

القبعات للسجناء الذين يقومون بالاستعراض مرتدين تلك القبعات في طريقهم إلى الإعدام. الشفقة الوحيدة التي تظهرها جوان هي للقبعات المزينة بألوان زاهية التي تصنعها ويتم دفنها مع الجثث.

تناقش الورقة أحداث المسرحية في هذا النوع من أدب عالم الواقع المرير وتشير بشكل محدد إلى المدينة الفاضلة والدستوبيا البيئية ، وتتناول نظرية غريغ غارارد للنقد البيئي الاقتصادي. تتناول هذه النظرية البيئية للأدب والبيئة الأنواع المختلفة من العلاقات بين البشر وغير البشر.

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