

# Science Fiction on Stage: Dystopia in Caryl Churchill's Far Away

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## **ABSTRACT**

Most people do not think of drama as science fiction and fantasy, and although science fiction does not really exist as a genre in theatre in the same way it does in the world of fiction or cinema, theatre - from its first existence - has lent itself to fantasy. The British playwright, Caryl Churchill (1938- ) is one of the most innovative dramatists; she has written a great number of plays that have been associated with feminist, surrealist and postmodern theatre. She is known for her social, ecological, political and moral commitment, and her drama is widely recognized for surrealist experimentation, exploration of language and abandoning realist approaches. *Far Away* (2000) is a dystopian vision of a world turned against itself, where there is an on-going war of all against all. The play is mysterious and powerful with an extraordinary element of darkness, posing an intriguing question: how far away we are from this world of paranoia, hatred and loss. The audience is engaged in a search for answers and significance of this dramatic experience.

**KEYWORDS:** Caryl Churchill, science fiction, dramaturgy, dystopia

## **INTRODUCTION**

Science fiction is based on imagination; it creates a hypothetical world of different realities. It is a means by which the artist anticipates future life, usually based on technical or scientific discoveries, in which man lives in different social and political conditions. Usually an unrealistic world like myths, fairy tales, robots, outer space and time travel is created. Utopian worlds in an unspecified time and place are sometimes presented, depicting perfect societies that are possible but unlikely to exist as a means of criticizing different social or political systems. Other times dystopian worlds are depicted with the aim of shocking people and governments to reconsider their relations with the rest of the human and non-human world, especially the environment. Writers of science fiction are usually concerned with global challenges and

ecological conditions like pollution, nuclear wars and plagues with the aim of understanding this world and preserving its resources.

Science fiction is a bridge between science and literature, between reality and fantasy, and at the same time it tackles themes like loss, love or fear and highlights man's role in changing the world; it is man who is responsible of creating his own utopian or dystopian world. Thus, science fiction helps speculate about the future while at the same time warns against not appreciating the gift of nature and stresses the fact that technology and machinery endanger human existence. It has had its effect not only on people's minds but on science itself through introducing new limitless visualizations.

Several terms reflect the art of science fiction like fantasy, utopia, fairy tale, and metaphysics. Utopias/ dystopias are the fruit of wide imagination; they present either an idealistically perfect world or a terrifying

nightmarish horror as that depicted in Churchill's *Far Away* (2000). In several science fiction works, dictatorial and tyrannical political systems are satirized along with the belief in the superiority of machinery and technology over man with the aim of changing this reality. Although dystopias do not inspire hope in the human condition, they sound the alarm. Moreover, science fiction literature focuses more on ideas rather than structure, complex plots or characters, with the aim of setting the human mind at liberty to speculate the future; for example, in time travel fiction the focus is not on how characters travel through time, but on what happens after they do, the internal and external struggle that they go through, how they act, and the implicit message. Plots are usually nonlinear, but rather dream-like fragments that are illogical sometimes and chaotic in other times. The characters – mostly representing a particular idea or notion - remain within the general framework of magic realism. All these elements unite to reflect a bizarre future in some stories and a grim future in dystopias. In science fiction in general the unthinkable is depicted without even being limited to earth; it encompasses the whole universe while presenting speculations or premonitions. Using a wide scope of imagination, new intellectual and emotional dimensions are created and negative/positive aspects of the writer's society are presented. Sometimes science fiction is realistic in terms of discussing real events but with going to metaphorical and literary extremes while tackling different themes that are not limited to any time or place, like the themes of distance or ecological ethics. Sometimes science fiction writers include details that bring the audience to understand that some nations' assertion of their right to a large share of the earth's resources and depriving others of their share will definitely have its consequences. The aim here is to

show that such aggression gradually becomes easily acceptable to people and nations, and to warn against some common forms of violence against people and environment. That is why some science fiction works, like *Far Away*, present environment not only as poisoned or damaged but also as a hostile combatant because some natural elements and phenomena ally against mankind. Science fiction in general intensifies the audience's ethical awareness and motivates people to stand against different forms of injustice, persecution and abuse through increasing their understanding and appreciation of their existence and of the surrounding world.

Caryl Churchill (1938- ) is one of the contemporary playwrights who, through several decades, wrote experimental innovative serious science fiction plays which reveal her sensitivity to human suffering. She carefully chooses different dramatic forms that successfully deliver her message without abiding by the traditional unity of time and place. Churchill started her post-college career writing radio and television dramas for the BBC. In 1972 her first stage play, *Owners*, was premiered at London's Royal Court theatre and since then she has worked with numerous theatre companies. She has won several awards, including three Obie Awards for *Cloud Nine* (1979), *Top Girls* (1982) and *Serious Money* (1987). More experimental works of audacious imagination were produced during the 1990s and 2000s.

Churchill's constant invention with form is thought-provoking. Her works encompass almost everything: serious, postmodern, bold, and political. Her eagerness to experiment with different forms and develop her tools resulted in producing masterpieces that accurately reflect her political and social convictions while maintaining the aesthetic sense. Churchill is known for philosophically exploring the possibility of a

post-human ecological understanding. *Far Away* is one of her most controversial works in terms of form and technique, while still reflecting her feminist, social, ecological and political ideas. The play was first performed at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs, London on 24 November 2000. It comprises a triptych of short acts, each separated in time by several years. Every act depicts a stage of the heroine's life: Joan is a young girl in act one, a young woman in act two and a wife in act three.

Act one depicts a contradiction between Joan's innocence as a child and the atrocities she witnesses while spending the night at her aunt Harper's house. Joan is unable to sleep and upon hearing a shriek the young girl climbs out the window on a tree, to explore, only to find her uncle in the nearby shed pushing and hitting men and children. Upon asking her aunt, she tells her, at first, that these people are friends of her uncle and he is having a party with them. Joan mentions that she heard crying coming from inside a lorry parked outside and there was blood everywhere. Harper then tells Joan that she has discovered a dangerous secret: her uncle is helping people who need shelter and the one he was hitting with a metal stick is but a traitor who attacked her uncle and was going to betray the others. She also tells her that the child that her uncle was beating up is the child of a traitor. Harper even goes further to tell Joan that she should be proud for being on the side of the good people who are putting things right. Harper's shifting responses leaves the audience uncertain about the conflict that is violently unfolding outside her house. The parties are identified only as "us" and "them" but with no further explanation other than Harper's claim to righteousness. Joan eventually accepts her aunt's explanation, unlike the audience who cannot trust that Harper and her husband are "putting things right" (p. 10).

In act two, which is subdivided into six scenes, five of which occur on successive days, no direct answers are given to the questions provoked in act one. There is a sudden shift in time and place: the setting is a millinery where adult Joan works; Todd, her co-worker, and other hat makers are sitting at a workbench. Joan is working on her first professional hat, and as she and Todd speak, the audience learn that one of the fancifully ornamented hats that are made to be worn in some kind of parade, can win a prize. In scene two Joan and Todd speak about themselves and Todd states that he stays up "till four every morning watching the trials" (p. 13). Churchill further exposes the corrupt materialistic world which might exist in any time or place as Todd expresses his suspicion that there is corruption inside the factory. The next day the hats "are getting very big and extravagant" (p. 14) and Joan urges Todd to do something about the corruption instead of merely complaining. In the following day (scene four) the hats become "enormous and preposterous" (p. 15); humour is generated about the shape and form of the hats that are made to be worn in a parade by prisoners on their way to their execution. The audience now is able to anticipate that Joan's aunt and uncle were engaged in a covert operation to transport detainees. This shadowy politics give way to images of a terror state.

The parade is seen in scene five which is one of the most famous scenes in the play and exists only as stage directions: "*A procession of ragged, beaten, chained prisoners, each wearing a hat, on their way to execution. The finished hats are even more enormous and preposterous than in the previous scene*" (p. 17). The contrast between the raggedness of the prisoners' clothes and the extravagance of the hats is evident. The pared-down conversation between Joan and Todd about the corruption of the factory management extends the

play's political concern. It is notable that Joan and Todd are more concerned about the management corruption than the trials. Joan's first hat has won a prize and will be saved in the museum, the rest is burnt with the corpses. A change is detected in Joan's personality, she has moved from innocence to experience and her values are corrupted: all that she feels pity for is the hats that will be burnt with the prisoners. Todd also expresses the joy of the ephemerality of their product: "... I think that's the joy of it. The hats are ephemeral. It's like a metaphor for something or other" (p. 18), he tells Joan. They both agree that the hats are "a metaphor for ... life": "You make beauty and it disappears ..." (p. 18). They are both working to beautify cruelty and violence that no longer shock or frighten them. The audience as well are involved in an attempt to figure out the metaphorical significance of the hats: do the prisoners and their hats reflect the human condition? People of all ages, races, rich or poor and of both sexes, symbolized by the chained prisoners, are outlived by material things, the symbol of which are the hats, and in order to move or function they need to cooperate (like the chained prisoners) since all people are connected by their use of the same natural resources.

Act three moves again forward in time. The setting is Harper's house where Joan is there to visit her now-husband, Todd. Joan is asleep off-stage while Todd is chatting with Harper. He describes the all-encompassing war going on outside and bickers with Harper over the loyalties involved in the conflict. It is a cosmic war of all against all with no resistance: not only people and nations are at war, but even the elements of nature and commodities are recruited and they side with one group or another. For example, antelopes ferociously attack humans, the weather sided with the Japanese, crocodiles invade villages at night

and take children out of their beds, mallards commit rape and they are on the side of the elephants and the Koreans. Act three echoes act one, but only this time it is Harper who cannot sleep and she argues with Joan on the reason behind her coming walking off in the middle of this cosmic war. In order to visit her husband, Joan came navigating on foot the internecine landscape in which every creature and element has been recruited. Similar to act one she walked through piles of bodies that are killed by one "thing" or another, like hairspray, petrol, foxgloves, bleach, pins, coffee, or any other thing. These atrocities that are now rampant all around earth are definitely the outcome of man's deeds, a symbol of which is Harper's lie that killed Joan's innocence in act one. This dystopian world is the new world order, and the fact that elements of the natural world have become weaponized is the new reality that all the characters accept.

Churchill offers a social and political aphorism in *Far Away* which she presents in the form of a parable. The world, since the beginning of this century faces fanaticism and extremism called for by different social, ideological and political movements against which different countries take radical measures. Churchill depicts a horrific image of what people have come to be without realizing: the killing of innocence (symbolized by Harper's deceit in act one) will come with a price. The terrifying dramatic landscape that Churchill depicts suggest a nightmare and primal horror. She does not maintain a main strand of events; she constructs the dialogue and shapes the characters in a way that renders the whole play a nightmare that has no time or place limit.

Churchill's political and social commitment is primarily humane. The world of *Far Away* will not be destroyed, it is already destroyed when the play begins whether the characters know it or not. Act three is an

exemplification of the cruelty and injustice that nations practice against one another through their violence, deceit, religious indoctrination, populism, division, hatred and controlling the means of sustaining life. Thus, the playwright sounds the alarm to alert people and warn them: what might have seemed far away is now prophetic. Death and agony are hardly far away but already here and now.

Joan's final speech reveals the danger and the necessity of action, nevertheless, she is part of the conflict – she killed two cats and a child under five on her way to Harper's house. Both necessity and danger reveal themselves in the final image of *Far Away*: Joan, who did not know whose side the river was on, steps into the river without knowing whether the river will drown her or help her swim, since "the water laps round your ankles in any case" (p. 27). Churchill here apprehends a changing political reality and invents a new dramatic landscape. Characters change alongside the change of events. Joan, in her final speech, describes the surrounding world and she acts the way she does with no further explanation, and the audience are left to discern the play's lessons.

Churchill has played a leading role in changing the language of theatre. Through the groundbreaking narrative in *Far Away*, she succeeds in delivering her message, and although the dialogue is sometimes humorous, it significantly functions in a grim and humourless way. She does not write on terror but she normalizes it into being familiar and acceptable while she alters an understanding of the ethics of such a statement in which Harper tells Todd "you were right to poison the wasps" (p. 20). It is a world of shocking fantasy in which characters refer to animals and commodities as their enemies. The combatants are cats, children under five, birds, mosquitos, deer, Portuguese car salesmen, Latvian dentists,

crocodiles – all locked in opposing but shifting camps and fighting to death. Familiar products like coffee, pins, petrol, hairspray and bleach are murder weapons. Moreover, the way the characters speak of the on-going terror makes it reasonable:

Joan: ... I killed two cats and a child under five so it wasn't that different from a mission.... We were burning the grass that wouldn't serve.... Who's going to mobilize darkness and science?

(p. 26)

The word "mission" shows that people in this dystopian society are familiar with it and they accept all forms of violence as normal. On the other hand, Harper, like Joan in act one, cannot sleep; her paranoid questioning of Joan as to whether or not anyone saw her arrive indicates that she is terrified to be seen accommodating Joan and Todd, while Joan herself no more fears her aunt's displeasure with her deeds, yet, she fears the weather which is on the side of the Japanese. Thus, surrealism in *Far Away* is presented in a realistic fashion, woven into everyday life.

The dramatic form that Churchill introduces reflects the speedy changeability of the world and mirrors the current reality in which humanity and nature are enemies. The plot carries variants and contradictions, there are sudden shifts in the dialogue and different characters complete the same speech as if they are one. Churchill uses innovative dramatic forms in order to pose the philosophical, scientific and political questions of her time; thus, she succeeds in depicting the conflict between individuals and authorities and displaying the inability of different nations to interact, mingle or co-exist. Humanity is not far away from a world in which everyone and everything are at war with one another because, as Harper tells Joan, "Maybe you don't know right from wrong yourself..." (p. 26). The lack of

information Churchill gives in the play is meant to drive the audience to encounter their own fear, thought and dark sides. The fact that the end of the play is open makes it up to the audience to draw conclusions as to the possible ending of the play's events. The play appeals to the mind, sense and emotion, while it provides no answer to its main question: how far away are we from such a world of war, hatred, paranoia and loss?

*Far Away* is a dystopian fantasy in which moral degradation is shown to begin at home and to end in a cosmic calamity. It is Harper who originally corrupts Joan into becoming an active participant in a nightmarish cosmic war. The dramatic speech is as close to real speech as possible and the dialogue brilliantly mirrors the nightmarish human condition. The characters are presented with their individual manner of thought, and the realistic dialogue is, thus, effective and succeeds in associating the audience with the incidents of the play by questioning their responsibility in the context of social, ecological and political issues. Furthermore, Churchill does not establish unity of time; yet, the structure is chronological as the events escalate in an alarming way from a domestic setting to a cosmic war. Although no answers are given to the questions raised in the play and the audience is not provided with the details of cause and effect, the thematic meaning is consistent and Churchill succeeds in linking personal behavior to global destruction on a more metaphorical level.

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