



LURKING SHADOWS: MENTAL, EMOTIONAL AND PHYSICAL VIOLENCE IN CARYL CHURCHILL'S 'FAR AWAY'

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Far Away is contemporary British playwright Caryl Churchill's most widely acclaimed play. It masterfully thematizes subjects such as the ever-present threat of totalitarian regimes, innate human violence, and modern dehumanization. Presenting an apocalyptic world caught up in a universal war, where people, animals, and even elements of nature fight each other to death, Churchill points at the imminent destruction of the Earth at the hands of unbridled violence and a general human tendency to look away and ignore the most pressing issues. In the present paper we attempt to analyse how Caryl Churchill thematizes mental, emotional and physical violence in *Far Away*, and whether she relates to them to an innate human tendency towards evil, or to a historic process of ignoring violence until it escapes human control.

Caryl Churchill, contemporary British drama, totalitarianism, violence, nature vs. nurture

Caryl Churchill is one of Britain's most acclaimed and revered contemporary playwrights. Born in 1938, her work focuses primarily on power as a human tool of abuse and feminist issues. Among her most successful plays one might count *Cloud 9*, *Top Girls*, *Serious Money*, *Blue Heart*, and *Far Away* (staged for the first time in the year 2000). Churchill has been referred to as "one of Britain's greatest poets of and innovators for the contemporary stage"¹. In the present paper we will attempt an analysis of the play *Far Away* from the point of view of Churchill's chief topic: power as a tool of abuse, and violence as an inherent human trait. The play has earned a variety of reviews, ranging from the highest of praise to skepticism regarding Churchill's excessively negative view. Matthew Cheney for example wrote that "the play is full of suggestion and ambiguity, and utterly lacking in resolution; an effect that, in this case, is haunting rather than, as it would be in the hands of a less skilled writer, frustrating. [...] Like all great tragedies, it contains more than any summary can say. Its meaning is not merely a moral statement; its meaning is the play itself: its imagery and words, its lacunae and aporias"². In 2012, April de Angelis stated that *Far Away* is one of Churchill's "landmark" plays³. In 2020 Howard Loxton also granted the play high praise, claiming that the play "lasts only 45 minutes but has power out of all proportion. [...] *Far Away* is unsettlingly dramatic and well worth seeing"⁴. On the other hand, reviewers such as Michael Phillips find fault in the play's apparent pointlessness and exaggeratedly open ending: "a two-thirds masterpiece [...] Moving from mundane realism to ham-

handed surrealism, '*Far Away*' undercuts its own eerie effectiveness."⁵

Published and performed first in the year 2000, *Far Away* is a typical millennial text, abounding in anguish, existential dread, pessimism and an all-pervading feeling of hopelessness. Made up of only three acts, this relatively short play is masterfully crafted in such a manner as to condense and synthesize as much subject matter as possible into few, powerful lines and verbal exchanges. Act 1 is comprised of one scene, Act 2 of six scenes, and Act 3 again of only one scene. This perfect symmetry is not at all accidental: the most ideologically powerful acts are the first and the last one, and they both take place in the same location, Harper's home. Where evil commences is also where it ends – or rather, where we find out that it will never end, because the world is caught up in a horrible war that can only end in total destruction. The individual evil of the first act becomes universal evil in the end of the play. When *Far Away* opens, we are introduced to Harper and Joan, aunt and niece, sitting in Harper's home at night, with Joan not being able to fall asleep because of a horrific thing she accidentally saw: her uncle, Harper's husband, was brutally beating a group of adults and children, and then loaded their bodies into a lorry. Initially, Harper tries to lie and downplay the situation, telling Joan that she most probably imagined everything. When the truth can no longer be concealed, Harper admits that her husband had indeed killed those people, but that it had to be done because they were plotting something evil. Harper goes on telling Joan that her uncle is actually fulfilling a noble mission of saving

1 Woodhead, Cameron. "Love and information review: fresh work captures the zeitgeist". The Sydney Morning Herald, June 17, 2015.

2 Cheney, Matthew. "Dystopia on Stage: Caryl Churchill's *Far Away*". Tor.com, accessed February 12, 2021.

3 De Angelis, April. "Caryl Churchill: Changing the language of theatre". The Guardian, 2012.

4 Loxton, Howard (2020-02-27). "Review: *Far Away*, at Donmar Warehouse". *Camden New Journal*.

5 Phillips, Michael (2004-02-19). "Far Away's 3 acts nearly a masterpiece". *Chicago Tribune*.

the world, and that they are also part of it, so they have to keep quiet in order to help him. Joan finally accepts her aunt's explanation and goes to sleep. Act 2 introduces us to an adult Joan, after many years have passed. Joan is working as a novice in a factory that produces hats for parades. Later on in the Act we will find out that the hats are placed on the heads of prisoners before their execution, and are judged and receive prizes from a committee. The hats are then burned along with the bodies. Joan and her work colleague Todd discuss the corruption rampant in their factory, and Todd promises to confront the manager about it, threatening him with a journalist who holds information about the factory's illegal affairs. Todd confesses that he loves watching the trials of the prisoners on TV at night, after coming home from work. Joan replies that she does not like watching them. In the final Act, the action returns yet again to Harper's home. The world is caught up in an apocalyptic war, where people, animals, and nature are fighting each other brutally and mercilessly. Joan has escaped the battlefield in order to see Todd. In the end of the play, she delivers a frightened and frightening monologue, describing the war and the feeling of not being able to trust anybody. The play ends with the line: "When you just stepped in you can't tell what's going to happen. The water laps around your ankles in any case."⁶ The play's main theme is violence in all its forms: from the violence of aunts lying to their nieces, to uncles beating innocent people and children to death, from prisoners being paraded around in silly hats for the amusement of others before they are executed, to factory workers caring more about rigged contracts than about the hats they are making for people to be killed in, from a young man watching trials on tv to animals, men, women, creeks, trees and all living beings killing each other.

Once violence starts, it never stops, is what Churchill seems to be saying here. Violence starts verbally in the play (Harper's lying to Joan and trying to make her seem crazy), continues as exacerbated physical violence (the public executions of the prisoners), and ends in a general apocalypse of violence and death. The background idea here is obviously that we tend to dismiss the first, seemingly unimportant, signs of violence, like lying, or trying to make people seem crazy for telling the truth. By dismissing them, we enable and mandate further violence, which will eventually get out of control. A more detailed analysis of the manifestations of violence in the play's three acts will shed further light on the matter.

In Act 1, girl-Joan is subjected to two types of violence: the emotional one inflicted on her by watching her uncle beat innocent people and children to death, and the mental one resulting from her aunt Harper's (a possible allusion to the word "harpy", hinting at the old woman's moral rottenness) trying to make her look crazy and downplaying what the girl saw. But probably the most terrible type of violence in the opening section of the play is the one we would like to call "the violence of distorting the truth". Harper initially tries to lie to Joan, telling her that she must have imagined what she saw. When the lie becomes impossible to sustain, Harper resorts to another method: brainwashing and manipulation. She tells the shocked young girl, who cannot sleep because of the horrors she witnessed, that her uncle is actually on a noble mission, that he is fighting the evil in the world. She distorts facts, she alters reality, she presents evil as good. This is one of the typical methods employed by any totalitarian regime, masterfully described by Orwell in his 1984, where newspeak has the sole role of brainwashing people into believing that lies are the truth. This is a type of violence

6 <https://pdfslide.net/documents/caryl-churchill-far-away.html>, accessed February 16, 2021.

that lingers forever, because the affected individual will no longer be able to discern make-believe from truthfulness, he/she will henceforward live in a world of illusion – and what is even worse, he/she will overlook injustice, violence, murder, genocide, and any other atrocity, by convincing him-/herself that it is all for a greater good.

We can actually see this happening with adult Joan, in Act 2: as a result of her aunt's upbringing and the legitimization of violence she has been taught as a child, Joan finds it perfectly normal to work in a factory making hats for innocent people to be paraded in before their public execution. From Joan's and Todd's dialogue (actually, they are mostly monologues, because the two rarely seem to really listen to each other) we find out that the two are appalled not by the nature of their work, which they never pause to question (actually they are very proud of some of their hats which have been saved from the fire and exhibited in a museum), but by a corruption scandal regarding the factory's having obtained illegal contracts. Churchill hints here at the postmodern society's myopia: we are outraged by petty issues, while completely ignoring real and pressing ones. While in the real world child labor is rampant in developing countries, while in some countries women are being flogged or beheaded for adultery, while other countries keep parts of their population in forced work camps, the modern citizen argues about the proper use of gender pronouns or public restrooms. The madness of the world, its unwillingness to face the truth, its sweeping of all real issues under the carpet of a convenient lethargy, are the same that we witness with Harper in the play's first act. I do not wish to see it, therefore it is not true – this seems to be the leitmotif of the entire play. Harper does not want to admit that her husband is a brutal mass murderer, Joan does not want to accept that her family are criminals, Joan and Todd

do not want to accept that by making the hats they are indirectly contributing to the human atrocity unfolding outside. Turning a blind eye to evil – society's most painful shortcoming in Churchill's view. Act 2 is also a masterful depiction of the workings of each and any totalitarian regime, based on fear and blind obedience. The public killing of the prisoners, their humiliation by parading them around in huge hats, the silence of the factory workers who know what they are making the hats for – all of these bear obvious totalitarian undertones and are reminiscent of an Orwellian dystopia.

Finally, in Act 3, the action is once again placed in Harper's home. Several other years have passed, and violence seems to have grown exponentially, until the point it got completely out of control. Not only one man is beating and killing others now, not only a group of prisoners are being humiliated and killed – the entire planet is at war with each other: cats kill Chinese babies, Chilean soldiers kill cows, Todd has killed children, Harper wishes to kill all crocodiles. The world's only reality is now violence, a never-ending, brutal, dehumanizing, apocalyptic one. The symbolic act of Joan waking up from her sleep and delivering the play's final monologue hints to the fact that even if humanity will wake up to its own truth someday, it will be too late to change anything or make amends:

Of course birds saw me, everyone saw me walking along but nobody knew why, I could have been on a mission, everyone's moving about and no one knows why, and in fact I killed two cats and a child under five so it wasn't that different from a mission, and I don't see why I can't have one day and then go back, I'll go on to the end after this. It wasn't so much the birds I was frightened of, it was the weather, the weather here's on the side of the Japanese. (...) The rats are bleeding out of their mouths and ears,

which is good, and so were the girls by the side of the road. It was tiring there because everything's been recruited, there were piles of bodies and if you stopped to find out there was one killed by coffee or one killed by pins, they were killed by heroin, petrol, chainsaws, hairsprays, bleach, foxgloves, the smell of smoke was where we were burning the grass that wouldn't serve. (...) But I didn't know whose side the river was on, it might help me swim or it might drown me. (...) But I knew it was my only way of getting here so at last I put one foot in the river. It was very cold but so far that was all. When you've just stepped in you can't tell what's going to happen. The water laps around your ankles in any case. This final monologue, that forms the play's open ending, is a philosophical outlook on the general violent nature of life itself. The act of coming in symbolizes birth, and the seeming innocence connected to it. When we are born, we step into unknown waters, which might carry us to success, or drown us. Either way, our fate is sealed from the first moment: the water laps around our ankles in any case. Our path is drawn out for us, and we will be forced to walk it. The war Joan describes is nothing else but the omnipresent struggle of all living things: the struggle to survive, the struggle to prevail, the struggle to die. Joan's name becomes highly symbolical in connection to the water-metaphor in her final monologue: her name recalls John the Baptist, but here the baptism metaphor becomes inversed. Whereas the biblical John baptizes people in order to save them, Joan gives herself a baptism of fire: she crosses the Styx to reach the underworld of her own human degeneration and decay. She was bred as a child to accept violence, she turned a blind eye to it and even aided it indirectly as an adult, and in the end she takes active part in it. The biblical passage of Jesus on the cross uttering "Forgive them, Father, for they know not what they do!" also comes to

mind here, but again in an inversed manner: Joan knows what she is doing, just like she instinctively knew as a child that what her uncle did was wrong. Therefore, one final pressing question is posed by the play: is violence and evil inherent to human nature or is it the result of nurture? The play does not offer a definite answer to this question, but we might get a precious hint from its title. *Far Away* suggests not physical, but mental and emotional distance, the distancing of the one who chooses not to care, to the one who is being aggressed and oppressed. Violence and evil are always choices – and so is ignoring them until the point of no return. Thus, we would argue that Churchill's plays advocates rather the nurture hypothesis: we are not born evil or violent, but we learn to legitimate them, accept them, look away from them, encourage them, and finally, partake in them.

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