Seeing with the Eyes of Another:
A Study of Empathy in *The Skriker*

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Abstract

This study aims to explore empathy in *The Skriker* by Caryl Churchill. Empathy plays a pivotal role in the play, showcasing a state of affairs that is the result of an absence of empathy between the characters. The importance of empathy is not limited to the state of affairs between characters, as it also plays an important role in the audience's understanding of the play. By drawing on Martha C. Nussbaum's theory of empathy and applying it to the play, this paper examines the distinct roles of empathy in the play. Through analyzing the absence or presence of empathy, the study points out the subtle ways the relationship and understanding between characters in the play take form and how, in turn, this would affect their actions. This paper contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of how literature can serve as a vehicle for exploring complex relational and interpersonal dynamics within specific societal contexts.

Key Terms: Caryl Churchill, empathy, *The Skriker*, Martha C. Nussbaum, Interpersonal dynamics

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Introduction

Caryl Churchill's *The Skriker* (1994) is a haunting and experimental play that fuses myth, folklore, and contemporary reality into a surreal theatrical experience. At its center is the Skriker, a shape-shifting fairy from English legend who preys on vulnerable young women. Through fragmented language, unsettling transformations, and dreamlike sequences, Churchill explores themes of ecological destruction, psychological trauma, and the lingering power of ancient myths in modern society. The play resists straightforward interpretation, instead immersing audiences in a world where the boundaries between human and nonhuman, reality and nightmare, constantly blur. This essay intends to investigate *The Skriker* in light of the theory of empathy and compassion proposed by Martha C. Nussbaum.

Churchill's work functions as a powerful modern fable, where the Skriker is not merely a malevolent entity but an embodiment of a damaged and vengeful natural world. She emerges from a polluted earth, her language a toxic torrent of puns, portmanteaus, and linguistic debris that mirrors the contamination of the environment. Her ability to morph from an old crone to a seductive American, from a lost child to a figure of authority, destabilizes any fixed sense of identity and reality for the play's human protagonists, Josie and Lily. These two young women, one reeling from the trauma of infanticide and institutionalization, the other facing the anxieties of impending motherhood, become the focal point for the Skriker's parasitic desires. The play's theatrical landscape is one of radical instability, where grotesque folkloric creatures invade a London flat and ancient rituals collide with the bleakness of urban life.

This very instability makes the play a fertile ground for an analysis through Nussbaum's framework of compassion. Nussbaum posits that empathy is a complex cognitive-emotional process requiring certain judgments: a belief in the seriousness of the sufferer's plight, a judgment that the suffering is not the person's own fault, and a recognition of shared human possibilities. The Skriker fundamentally challenges an audience's ability to make these judgments. How can we assess the "seriousness" of a threat that is simultaneously a fairy and a manifestation of postpartum psychosis? How do we assign "fault" when the characters' agency is terrifyingly ambiguous? By plunging both characters and audience into a state of profound disorientation, Churchill dramatizes the very conditions under which empathy collapses. This essay will argue that the play's fractured form is not an obstacle to its meaning but is, in fact, its central argument: it forces us to experience the breakdown of communication and compassion in a world where trauma, mental illness, and ecological collapse have rendered shared realities terrifyingly fragile.

Martha Nussbaum on Compassion

This essay intends to incorporate Nussbaum's theory of empathy and Roger D. Sell's theory of communication as complementary theories due to their overlapping nature, providing us with a more substantial framework, which in turn allows us to conduct a more detailed analysis of the play in terms of empathy and compassion, particularly in those instances where an absence of empathy is noticeable. While Nussbaum provides us with a detailed and comprehensive framework regarding empathy and compassion, and while it is possible to understand the reasons behind the existence of empathy in most cases, this framework proves insufficient in some cases where empathy is absent. In such circumstances, the theory of communication will be employed to detect the probable reasons. This will apply to both instances where characters fail to show compassionate feelings and those instances where readers or the audience might not feel empathetic toward the characters.

Martha C. Nussbaum suggests that compassion has a basic structure composed of "three thoughts as necessary parts." The first, the thought of seriousness, is the spectator's judgment that another's suffering is important and not trivial; if observers dismiss someone's pain as insignificant, they will not feel compassion or sympathy for them (142–43). The second is the thought of nonfault: people are unlikely to feel compassion if they believe the sufferer brought their condition on themselves (Nussbaum 143). This explains why many Americans show little sympathy for the poor, often attributing poverty to personal failure or laziness (Clark). Nussbaum also warns that erroneous or biased judgments of fault can be especially harmful: "Women have frequently experienced … inability to judge fault, and their failure to judge their abusers can be a very serious failing" (152). Nussbaum later broadens this point to all people, noting that humans often assign blame hastily and according to poor social norms (153). The third necessary thought is that of similar possibilities: the recognition of common ground between the sufferer and the one who feels compassion. This recognition need not be limited to human sufferers—people can feel sympathy for animals because of shared vulnerabilities (Nussbaum 144). For Nussbaum, awareness of our shared vulnerability underscores human similarity and undermines claims of moral superiority; as Rousseau reminds us: "Men beings are not naturally kings, or lords, or courtiers, or rich men. All are born naked and poor; all are subject to the miseries of life; to sorrows, ills, needs, and pains of every kind. Finally, all are condemned to death. This is what truly belongs to man. This is what no mortal is exempt from" (222). Nussbaum treats those three thoughts as traditional components of compassion while proposing a fourth: the eudaimonistic thought. This is the judgment that another's suffering matters to one's own conception of a

flourishing life—that the other's welfare is relevant to the individual's plans and projects—thereby integrating compassion into one's own life commitments (Nussbaum 144).

Turning to the hierarchy of compassionate emotions, it is first argued, following Frans de Waal, that experiments confirm such hierarchies exist in animals. However, Nussbaum refers to other research on human infants, which demonstrates signs suggesting that, despite observable differences, similarities also appear with the hierarchy of compassionate emotions found in animals (Bloom 114–115). According to Nussbaum, the most basic form of compassion is contagion, which itself includes two kinds: behavioral contagion and emotional contagion, though distinguishing between them can often prove difficult. A more advanced form involves perspective-taking, a behavior that reveals concern for the suffering of others. This too has two degrees: the first, a simpler version, occurs when there is no clear recognition of the distinction between self and other; the second, more developed, appears when that distinction is acknowledged—an ability characteristic of humans (Nussbaum 148).

On the other hand, a number of points made by Roger D. Sell regarding communication need to be discussed. Sell speaks of two complementary emphases regarding the pragmatics of communication: one is the historical emphasis of disparate sitedness of "sending" and "receiving" and the other is a non-historicist emphasis considering human beings as "social individuals endowed with a capacity for co-adaptations between the social and the individual, and with a fairly protean power of empathetic self-projection" (Sell 119). Both of these points are of interest to this essay, as they will be discussed later. Continuing with the non-historicist emphasis, it can be stated that two individuals trying to communicate need to share the same context; although, it is worth noting, when an act of communication does happen, it does not entail an entirely shared context as contextual disparities can be negotiated in a communication; and although slight, there will always be differences of recall, awareness, or attitude. Sell also points out that: "Such discrepancies can be so infinitesimal that the communicants themselves are quite unaware of their existence, and of having to negotiate them" (120). No matter how great or small the mental distance between the communicants, an act of communication always entails a third context as well. (Sell 121) Take, for instance, a class activity where the teacher asks a student some questions regarding Tom Stoppard's *Travesties,* which they were supposed to have covered in that session of class. First, there is the context of the sender, which is the teacher; then there is the context of the receiver, which is the students, and lastly, there is the context of the play. If the student has not covered the play, it is most likely that they will not be able to answer the teacher, and communication will not take place as it was intended. It is claimed this third context has an ontological status and is understood easiest "when the third entity is a hypothetical or

fictional human being, an abstraction, or an inanimate object such as a car" (Sell 122). Sell also states that: "Any piece of language to some extent has to model the triangular situation of its own use. It provides a kind of replica of what is going on, so that communicants can empathize their way into each other's general life-world, and into the particular negotiation (122). When it comes to a play, the value and meaning of the words can be quite different for the character on stage from what they are for the audience (Maingueneau 141-161). Sell also implies that the authors of different works of literature surround their text with an obligatory context, which results in the confining of the reader within the boundaries of the literary work set by the author and responding only in the way he would have wished (124). While it may be true in some cases, it is also noteworthy that for readers and critics, their own "here-and-now" matters more than the author's "then-and-then" as they tend to respond to the work based on their own values and judgements (Sell 125).

Compassion in *The Skriker*

Before we start with the study of empathy, it is paramount to have a better understanding of what the Skriker is. It is possible to consider the Skriker as having two different natures: one as an embodiment of a damaged and vengeful natural world, and the other as an embodiment of postpartum psychosis, which is a medical condition. Considering the Skriker as having each of these two different natures allows us to consider her in different lights, such as her relation to the audience and her relation to the characters.

Should the Skriker be considered as an embodiment of a damaged and vengeful natural world, our main interest would be rooted in finding out the answer to two questions: Do the audience show empathy toward the Skriker or toward Josie and Lily? And considering the Skriker's gender and her symbolic role of being "mother" nature, do Josie and Lily feel any empathy toward her? Answering the first question might not be a feasible task without a proper survey, as every individual's response may differ; even then, the results may prove unsatisfactory. However, it is possible to arrive at some conclusion regarding the possible reaction the audience might show. To do so, there are a number of points one needs to pay attention to. First, as it had been pointed out before, a play's dialogue holds one meaning for the character speaking it, while it can hold another for the audience watching the performance (Maingueneau 141-161). Second, we have to keep in mind that the author of a literary work often establishes a context that guides readers, potentially limiting their interpretation to a single, intended response, which can be considered the case in this play, considering that the emphasis in centered on Josie and Lily predicament

rather than the Skriker's as the embodiment of nature (Sell 124). Lastly, we have to keep in mind that while the Skriker has been wronged, nothing of it is shown during the play to arouse the empathy of the audience, while the predicaments of Josie and Lily are shown to a great degree. Keeping these three points in mind, it is possible to conclude that it is more likely that the audience will show empathy toward Josie and Lily rather than the Skriker.

Josie and Lily's empathetic response toward the Skriker varies. While Josie shows hostility and enmity toward the Skriker and, rather than understanding her plight, blames her for her own, Lily shows more empathy and friendship toward the Skriker. While there are many instances to be found pertaining to the aforementioned relations, one example of particular importance will be mentioned here. Josie, in one scene, tries to murder the Skriker by stabbing her (in that particular scene, him) (Churchill 34). Lily, on the other hand, goes to the hospital to visit the Skriker, who seems to be a very old lady (Churchill 37), and eventually agrees to go with her to the underworld (Churchill 38).

While the Skriker can be considered an ancient, shape-shifting fairy, there is another point of view that is of interest here. The Skriker can be considered as an embodiment of postpartum psychosis, which involves the abrupt onset of psychotic symptoms shortly following childbirth (Osborne). Some symptoms common between the Skriker and postpartum psychosis are: delusions, hallucinations, disorganized speech, and abnormal motor behavior (American Psychiatric Association). All these symptoms can be witnessed in the play and either in the Skriker or the characters she possesses. Both Josie and Lily (although she has yet to give birth till later in the play) can see and interact with the Skriker (Churchill), Both Lily (Churchill 37) and Josie (Churchill 20) have hallucinations of visiting the underworld and the different creatures there, the Skriker monologue at the beginning of the play is incoherent and disorganized (Churchill 1), and abnormal motor behavior which may exhibit several symptoms including repetitive or stereotyped movements which can be seen done by the different creatures within the show.

The Language of *The Skriker*

The Skriker employs an incoherent and distorted language (Jankowska 97). This employment, in contrast to the rather negative reviews given just after its premiere at the Royal National Theatre in 1994 (Aston 23), is one of the strengths of the play. Looking at it from the viewpoint of Roger D. Sell, it is possible to conclude that when the Skriker, and sometimes even Josie and Lily, are speaking, it is hard to communicate. This problem mainly arises due to a lack of shared context between the different characters on stage and the audience. Though it is possible to add that

while certain members of the audience cannot possibly have undergone the same experience, some others might share a similar context. While this is true to a degree, it is necessary to point out that having undergone the same experience does not necessarily provide the same context for different individuals. This point will be analyzed in more detail later. Not having a shared context, then, takes away the opportunity for most people to understand and sympathize with both the play and the characters in the light that they are supposed to be understood. While having undergone a similar experience does provide the opportunity to understand the play more deeply, it can be stated that it is almost impossible in most cases for an individual to have attained the same experience and context, and thus the ability to sympathize with the characters, considering that every individual's experience of postpartum psychosis can be unique and subjective.

Language and its symbolic systems continually operate to mask several key "Lacanian" contentions, emphasizing how the subject's entrance into symbolization entails a traumatic "experience of loss" (Wilson 179). The Skriker, by invoking the "absolute absence which haunts language", exposes what attempts at symbolic mastery strive to suppress. It highlights how "the mastering narratives that an audience—or any social subject—constructs through language are deceptive, insofar as the explanation erases what is repressed" (Wolfe 242). This type of psychoanalytic approach seems especially fitting for a play that treats language as a site of constraint. Early in the play, the Skriker directly affects Josie and Lily by attacking their speech, using a distinct strategy for each girl. After resisting the creature, Josie discovers her speech has been overrun by toads (Wolfe 242-243): "What? uh uh I'm sick, what, it's alive, it's—it's toads is it, where from, me is it, what?" (Churchill 26).

Churchill, however, adds a "speculative" twist to this dynamic. The episode with the toads seems tied to Josie's rejection of the Skriker, while Lily, having embraced it, experiences a different disruption of her speech—accompanied by a flow of money. Coins cling to her words, spilling from her mouth the more she speaks, compelling her to talk as much as possible. Although Lily is spared the writhing life of the toads, Churchill introduces a different kind of Real, one that complicates a conventional Lacanian reading. Like Josie, Lily's speech cannot achieve complete "mastery," yet what eludes her is a product of her own language. Her speech is eternalized because its link to money evokes an absolute Value that can never be attained—no amount of speaking will yield completion, since there is always more money to come (Wolfe 243).

Empathy Deficiency in Josie-Lily Relationship

At the beginning of the play, Josie is hospitalized due to her mental condition, and Lily, who also happens to be pregnant, is visiting her. During the visit, it is clear, although Lily tries hard enough, that there is a lack of empathy. Lily is pregnant herself (thought of similarity), clearly states that the death of Josie's child was not her fault (thought of nonfault), Josie is obviously having a hard time (thought of seriousness), and Lily is visibly trying to act compassionately towards Josie (eudaimonistic thought). So, the question is: why is there a lack of empathy between the two? To answer this question, it is paramount to look back at Sell's theory of communication. Looking back at this theory, we come to the conclusion that, although they share a similar context, it is still different enough for a lack of communication to take place. This is why Lily cannot empathize her way into Josie's general and particular life-world and negotiate an understanding.

There is another way to analyze the absence of empathy between Josie and Lily: Sigmund Freud's concept of the uncanny. The uncanny in The Skriker operates by making the familiar grotesque: shapeshifting bodies, toads erupting from Josie's speech, and coins spilling from Lily's mouth all collapse the stable cues—bodily integrity, coherent narrative, reliable language—that normally allow one person to recognize another as a fellow sufferer. These aesthetic strategies produce epistemic opacity and bodily estrangement; rather than offering the particular, textured life-story Nussbaum argues is necessary for genuine moral imagination, Churchill's play fragments interiority and scrambles the signs audiences and characters use to read one another. The result is a deliberate interruption of ordinary empathic exchange between Josie and Lily: they are rendered into uncanny figures whose suffering is not simply hidden but transfigured, so that ordinary perspective-taking is frustrated.

Seen through Martha Nussbaum's account of empathy as narrative, particularized perspective-taking, the play stages a paradoxical pedagogy. By stripping characters of narratively stable particulars, Churchill prevents easy interpersonal empathy—but the theatre's embodied, sensory presentation forces spectators to perform the imaginative work Nussbaum prizes. Rather than being handed a transparent story to inhabit, the audience must attend to fragmented sights, sounds, and gestures and piece together the girls' vulnerabilities; this demanding imaginative labor cultivates a disciplined, reflective sympathy directed at the social conditions dramatized (postnatal neglect, institutional failure) rather than at consoling individual feelings. In short, the uncanny closes off naturalistic recognition between characters while opening a harder, Nussbaumian form of moral education in the spectator: empathy earned by imaginative effort rather than granted by narrative convenience.

Josie’s and Lily’s Medical Condition

Josie and Lily both share the same medical condition. The very fact that they can both see the Skriker, who it was proven can be considered the embodiment of postpartum psychosis in the play, proves this point. There is, of course, one problem with this statement: while it makes sense for Josie, who has given birth, to be suffering from postpartum psychosis, it makes no sense for Lily, who is still pregnant, to be suffering from this condition. It can be inferred that Lily’s ability to see the Skriker can be a sign of her problematic mental condition – possibly even more severe than that of Josie, because there is no mention of Josie having this condition before giving birth – and potential for postpartum psychosis.

As the first one to give birth, Josie is the first of the two to visit the “underworld.” Before going to the underworld, however, Josie and Lily have a conversation where Lily tries to dissuade Josie from going to the underworld with the Skriker.

“Lily: Josie, don’t do it. When you feel her after you it’s . . . Josie, remember what it felt like / before, don’t do it.”

“Josie: But when you’ve lost her you want her back. Because you see what she can do and you’ve lost your chance and it could be the only chance ever / in my life to –“ (Churchill 20)

Similar to Edgar Allan Poe’s *The Raven* where the protagonist, being depressed and in a state of hallucination, tries to inflict more sadness, pain, and depression upon himself by having that bizarre conversation with the raven, Josie here seems to be suggesting the same thing by claiming there is no other hope. She is in a state where she tries to inflict as much sadness on herself as she can, perhaps to win some empathy from other people, including Lily. Even during her stay in the underworld, she is clearly warned that everything there is glamour, and should she eat or drink anything, she will not be able to leave ever again. Despite this warning, she still surrenders herself to the depression and sadness without much resistance (Churchill 20, 21).

When Josie returns from the underworld (or so she thinks), she believes she has been gone for a very long time. However, she finds out that not only has she not been away for a long time, she has not been away at all and has been with Lily all this time (Churchill 24, 25). This event proves that, again, while Lily and Josie share the same mental condition to a degree, the mental context they each experience differs by a large margin, large enough that it prevents them from communicating but also from empathizing.

According to Cuder, the anti-logocentric quality of trauma is manifested in Churchill’s *The Skriker* through both anti-naturalistic language and the use of fantasy, which Cuder defines as “an unreal

mental image or vision" (68). Cuder further explores how Churchill's atmospheric construction—featuring an underworld and ghostly omens of death that shapeshift into various forms—produces a symbolic intrusion of traumatic memories for the two teenage girls.

Shapeshifting is one way Churchill employs the uncanny in her play, as the Skriker's transformations destabilize familiar physical forms for the audience. The first instance occurs in a mental hospital, following a conversation between Lily and Josie about the postpartum trauma they endure. Josie references an older woman who "looks about fifty" and whose "magic" had impressed her (Churchill 16). Immediately afterward, the stage directions note: "WOMAN about 50 approaches. Dowdy, cardigan, could be a patient. It is the SKRIKER" (Churchill 17). When the Skriker speaks in this form, her words follow standard English and are easily comprehensible, defying the audience's expectations based on her earlier distorted speech. This shift further unsettles the audience, disrupting prior anticipations of both her language and bodily appearance. Presenting the Skriker as an older woman who might be a mental hospital patient produces an uncanny effect, as the stability of the body is called into question. Placing this first shapeshifting instance alongside the teenage girls' concerns—Lily's pregnancy and Josie's institutionalization, implied to relate to her own baby's death—highlights Churchill's commentary on the neglect of young mothers and the realities of postnatal psychosis in 1990s England. (Bullard 47-48)

In her analysis of *The Skriker* as a performed articulation of trauma, scholar Eva Gil Cuder argues that theatre provides the most compelling representation of trauma because it can extend beyond language to include bodily and physical expression. Since postnatal trauma among young mothers is one of the societal issues Churchill addresses through coded political commentary in the play, theatrical performance enables repressed unconscious feelings to emerge through the uncanny. Reflecting this, Cuder observes that "[trauma] is … disassociated from the rational and the analytical as well as from the logocentric, since the use of verbal language alone seems to be discredited in its potential to articulate it" (67). Because the trauma Churchill portrays—experienced by Lily and Josie postpartum, inflicted upon the environment through slow violence, and embedded in English culture via materialistic practices—cannot be fully captured through written language alone, the performative dimension of theatre allows these traumas to come alive for the audience. This staging exposes the uncanny and, in turn, enables Churchill to embed her political commentary within the play's embodied and affective dimensions (Bullard 52-53).

The Lasting Effects of Postpartum Psychosis

Caryl Churchill seems to suggest that postpartum psychosis can have long-lasting effects on people experiencing it. While the whole play deals with this medical condition and both Josie and Lily are entangled in it, one particular part showcases the lasting effects of this medical condition on Josie's mental health:

"JOSIE. She's a changeling.

LILY. She what?

JOSIE. That's not your baby. They've put one of theirs and taken yours off.

LILY. Don't say that, don't.

JOSIE. Changeling. / Changeling.

LILY. I warn you, I'll kill you / don't say it,

JOSIE. You believe me don't you?

LILY. I don't want, I don't believe you no / but I

JOSIE. Lucky for them.

LILY. don't want to hear it.

JOSIE. They'll keep yours down there. It makes them stronger. They'll breed from it. And you'll always have this one watching you. Look at its little slitty eye.

LILY. Don't even think it. / I'm not listening.

JOSIE. Shall I tell you what? If you want your own one back? You put the changeling on a shovel and put it in the fire, that's what they used to do. So we'd use the cooker and put it over the gas. And sometimes they turn into a cat and go up the chimney. How'd it get out of here? Round and round the walls. I'll open the window. Then you get your own one back in the cot.

LILY. I can't live with you if you're like this.

JOSIE. You've got to fight them. You say you love her and you won't even do something to get her back. This isn't human. I can tell.

LILY. Whatever you are, if you're really there, if you can hear me, I want a wish.

JOSIE. She'll come back, look out.

LILY. I wish Josie wasn't mad.

JOSIE. Don't wish me." (Churchill 27, 28)

While the example above clearly shows the long-lasting mental effects of postpartum psychosis, particularly considering that Josie has been discharged from the hospital for some time, it also showcases another important point. By looking at the aforementioned example, we can clearly see a lack of empathy and compassion not only on the side of Lily but also on the side of Josie.

First, let us examine Lily's case. Going through Nussbaum's theory, it is safe to say that: Lily is experiencing the same medical condition as Josie and the same thing (loosing a child) may very well happen to her (thought of similarity), she is a mother herself and not only cannot stand if anything were to happen to her child, but also understands much better than before the pain the Josie has been put through (thought of nonfault); considering that Lily is experiencing the same condition as Josie, then she understands the severity of her condition with the only exception being that the severity of their condition differs (thought of seriousness), taking into account that they are friends, it would only make sense Lily has Josie's best interest at heart (eudaimonistic thought). So, what is the problem? To better understand the situation here, we need to observe two possibilities. First, let us assume that Lily, upon experiencing the same medical condition as Josie, has concluded that her condition is not severe enough; thus, she does not deserve compassion and empathy. This brings us to the point that postpartum psychosis as a medical condition has varying degrees, and we cannot possibly expect even people who have undergone this medical condition to sympathize with one another. Second, let us consider that the lack of compassion and empathy does not stem from the thought of seriousness, and turn our attention to Sell's theory of communication. As stated before, every communication requires a triangle of contexts in order to work: the context of the sender, the context of the receiver, and the context of postpartum psychosis as both a medical condition and an experience. It can be understood from the play that both the contexts of sender and receiver exist in this attempt at communication. The only thing left is the context of postpartum psychosis as both a medical condition and an experience which brings us to two conclusions: first, it can be concluded the severity of this medical condition can differ from one person to another so considerably that even two people sharing this medical condition might not share the same context enough to communicate; second, it can be deduced considering how every person's experience is subjective, it is possible that two people with the same medical condition might not share the same context and thus be unable to not only communicate but also sympathize with one another even despite clearly having a desire.

Lily's Compassion toward Josie

While it is true that, for most of the play, a lack of compassion and sympathy dominates the states of affairs between Lily and Josie, things take a turn towards the end of the play when Lily seeks out the Skriker:

"LILY. I came to say I'd go with you.

SKRIKER. Where are you going, dear?
LILY. You said you wanted me to. Like Josie.
SKRIKER. I've no idea who these people are.
LILY. Yes, because I miss . . . You'll leave everyone else alone if I do that, I'm not bringing the baby so don't ask, you're to leave her alone always. And Josie alone. Because if I go it'll help, won't it?
SKRIKER. Have you tried dialling 999?
LILY. I know I said I didn't love you.
SKRIKER. Aren't you afraid a fade away?
LILY. No because if it's what Josie did I'll be back in no time. It could feel like hundreds of years and I wouldn't leave the baby for five minutes but when I get back she won't know I've gone.
SKRIKER. Gone with the wind hover crafty.
LILY. Even if it's a nightmare. I'll be back the same second. I'll make you safe. Take me with you."
(Churchill 37)

Earlier, when Josie had experienced the same condition, Lily had refused to believe her claims regarding her having been to the "underworld. Now, however, her asking the Skriker to take her proves several points: first, Lily is in the same condition Josie was experiencing earlier in the play and considering the theory of communication by Sell, it is possible to conclude that now that they share a similar context, an act of communication and thus, an instance of empathy can be expected between the two. Second, this conversation shows how far Lily's mental state has deteriorated. She is willing to leave with the Skriker, even if it is a nightmare, so long as she gets to run away from her current condition.

Conclusion

Caryl Churchill's *The Skriker* stages a disturbing collision between myth and mental illness that resists simple moral resolution; read through the combined lenses of Martha C. Nussbaum's account of compassion and Roger D. Sell's pragmatics of communication, the play's persistent failures of sympathy become both intelligible and morally urgent. Nussbaum's "three (and a half) thoughts" — seriousness, nonfault, similar possibilities, and the eudaimonistic tie that makes another's suffering matter to one's own life — clarify why compassion often fails in the play: Josie's grief and the grotesque logic of the Skriker are too strange, too "other," to trigger reliable judgments of seriousness or shared possibility without sustained contextual work. Sell's triangular model of communication simultaneously explains why that contextual work is so difficult onstage and in life: interlocutors who ostensibly share experience (Josie and Lily) can

nonetheless inhabit incommensurable life-worlds that prevent perspective-taking and produce missed or distorted responses.

Together, these frameworks show that *The Skriker* does more than depict pathology; it dramatizes the conditions that produce empathic failure — subjective variation in suffering, contested judgments of blame, and breakdowns in the shared contexts necessary for communication — and, in doing so, indicts social tendencies to isolate and delegitimate the mentally ill. Churchill's surreal language and disorienting stage action are not merely stylistic effects but theatrical devices that make audiences feel the very communicative and ethical gaps the essay has discussed: they compel spectators to confront how easily similar possibilities can be obscured and how fragile the judgments required for compassion really are.

Finally, the play's bleakness is not purely nihilistic. By exposing the mechanics of empathic collapse, Churchill (with the analytic aid of Nussbaum and Sell) opens a space for ethical reflection: if compassion depends on correct judgments and on shared contexts, then social and institutional efforts to restore those contexts — through attentive listening, destigmatization, and narrative practices that reframe blame and highlight common vulnerability — are moral necessities. Future criticism and practice might therefore ask not only how literary texts represent mental illness, but how theatre itself can repair communicative fissures and cultivate the conditions for genuine empathy.

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