

VIOLENCE - A RECURRENT THEME IN EDWARD BOND' PLAYS IMAGERY AND SYMBOLS

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Abstract

Bond's treatment of violent actions has more than once been considered as cathartic. The actual act of violence triggers a strong emotion of reaction as it should. What seems to happen is that we respond to actions, to real events not theatre events taking place in a theatre structure. Events, especially the violent ones, in Bond's work, have both causes and consequences and cannot be seen in isolation. With elements of comedy to control the judgement of the audience emotions are not diminished.

Key words: *violence, symbol, animal imagery, the wall, the river, the bridge.*

Edward Bond is probably one of the finest contemporary British playwrights who seems to understand the commitment of his plays to the human values. Bond's involvement in theatre sheds a light on the position of the writer, of the creator of art in society. His awareness of belonging to a certain class and social structure provides the special "flavour and character" of his plays.

His parents and his grandparents were farmers and in 1940 the child Bond was evacuated in Cornwall. His sensitivity made him understand why he was sent away from his parents, namely in order not to be killed as a result of bomb attacks, but he also understood that his parents will die. This traumatic break, shared by many other children of his generation seems to strengthen an acute sensitivity. The evacuation made him aware of many things and this awareness, the vivid and intense experience common to other children who lived the same drama turned Bond into a playwright who succeeded in unifying his genius, his talent with the purity of vision of a child.

The 20-year-old young man, with a working class background, who set out to write his first

play, was a clerk who knew well enough what disruption and poverty meant. The experience of evacuation, the national service -it was probably the army with its peculiar English mixture of sentimentality, routine and brutality, that had a great influence on Bond as a writer, and his retaining into adult life, his childhood sense of justice.

Bond's first contact with the theatre was at the time when he saw "Macbeth" directed by Donald Wolfit. "For the first time in my life, I met somebody who was actually talking about my problems, about the life I'd been living, the political society around me." (*The Plays of Edward Bond*, A Study by Tony Coult)

His plays "Klaxon in Atreus Palace" and "The Fiery Tree" which he wrote when he was a script reader at the "Royal Court" theatre retained Keith Johnstone's and Bill Gaskill's attention, then one of the theatre's directors. Included in the "Writer's Group" in 1958 Bond found a uniquely encouraging context in which his talent could grow. It was while then that he wrote "The Pope's Wedding" one of his best plays.

In the preface of his second volume of plays entitled "Two Plays", while speaking about Shakespeare's plays, Bond is trying to point out that the theatre of today must be rational, must have immediate consequences in real life, or at least it must reflect them. "Shakespeare wrote a series of plays about individuals and their psychology..., but none of these individuals could have fitted into the society of the good government he had spent so long in describing and praising in the history plays", Bond is trying to point out that Shakespeare's plays pictured a world which had nothing, or almost nothing in

common with the real one. He was too much part of his own time to fully understand it. Perhaps his opinion is too farfetched but his exaggeration aims at drawing the reader's attention upon a certain kind of theatre, one that should be a 'slice of life'.

Shakespeare's romantic comedies are considered by Bond as being the first the first plays of the theatre of absurd, thus Shakespeare being a modernist of his time. Shakespeare could not answer all the questions and problems of his time but what he did was to show "the strength with which people can ask these questions ... man can't stop struggling to answer them till they created the rational order which will give them peace" (The Rational Theatre, p. XI). Bond clearly and openly judges everything and tries to come with a problem and an answer to it in each of his plays.

Bond considers that literature, art in general, cannot exist outside society. The act of creation is related and at the same time limited to the individual's involvement in the structure called society. An individual can only exist through society and that is why the subject of all literature is society. Tackling the problem from this point of view literature becomes, in Bond's opinion, a 'social act'. Any individual is characterized by a social self, which makes him aware of his need to integrate in a group. Literature is the interpretation of human life in its fullest social sense including the union between society and individual.

His favourite themes can easily be traced in his approaches to art, culture and society, which he sees as being closely connected and with deep roots in reality. Violence, morality and religion as a cause of political and personal tragedy, the split between the reality inside an individual and the social reality, the individual's relationship with his family and society are recurrent themes in Edward Bond's plays.

Bond's plays are complex, the complexity being given by the fact that one cannot state that in a play he approaches just one theme mainly. He often starts from images, concrete things, memories from his childhood, a great variety of aspects, of problems which he tries to encompass. In this regard, a good example is Bond as a child witnessing the explosion of a bomb in a park and

picking up a dead bird. Right then and there an association was made in his mind between the two elements: the park and the dead bird/the bomb. The result was that for the future playwright the park will become a symbol of death, the place where violence takes place. This is true because later in his plays "Saved" and "The Fool" we find scenes of violence taking place in the park.

In Bond's plays the theme of violence is always associated with or presented through an image or a symbol. One of these images is that of *the park*, which was already mentioned. Another image is that of *the river*. The river is the place where Shogo drowns his victims, the river is the element which starves the people as in "The Bundle", the river is the means by which Shogo, in "Narrow Road to the Deep North" kills the children. In one word the river stands for the malefic element. It is therefore no wonder when Basho in "The Bundle" says: "Men are a dark river. We get and spend time, fret and oddly twist into whirlpools till the water seems to devour itself in its frenzy."

Another image associated with the theme of violence is that of *the wall* in "Lear", the wall which was meant to protect the people but in reality it destroys them.

Edward Bond's plays are full of imagery of animal life and this is especially to be noticed in "Lear". It is not at all surprising this fact if we consider everything Bond said about violence, and in this context the comparisons he had drawn between men and animals. "I must begin with an important distinction. The predator hunting its prey is violent but not aggressive in the human way. It wants to eat, not to destroy, and its violence is dangerous to the prey but not to the predator. Animals only become aggressive, that is destructive in the human sense, when their lives, territory or status in their group are threatened or when they mate or are preparing to mate. Even then the aggression is controlled. Fighting is ritualized and the weaker or the badly placed animal will be left alone when it runs away or formally submits. Men use much of their energy and skill to make more efficient weapons, to destroy each other, but animals have often evolved in ways to ensure they can't destroy

each other." (Preface to *"The Fool"* & *"We Come to the River"*, P.XV)

In *"Lear"*, scene one shows a confident leader inspecting the wall, dealing with order and discipline. He complains that his men are treated "like cattle" not because they are deprived of freedom but because the pits they are kept in are damp. "You waste men", he tells his Foreman. His daughters' suitors, dukes from other kingdoms are threats: "they'll be like wolves in the field" and his people: "they are my sheep, and if one of them is lost I'd take fire to hell to bring him out". (*"Lear"*, act I) It is the imagery of a rural culture. The language of the king is that of one who sees his subjects less than human though he thinks he loves his people.

When his daughters throw him out of office, a great change takes place in Lear. He begins to see himself as an animal but his self-images are self-pitying. He realizes that he had always fooled himself. "I am a famished dog that sits on the earth and howls" "my daughters turned a dog out of his kernel because it turned fond of his sack." (*"Lear"*) In his attempt to understand what has happened to him he uses terrifying parables in which animals appear as victims in landscapes of fear. The mouse comes out of his hole and stares. The giant wants to cut the dragon, but the dragon has grabbed the carving knife." (*"Lear"*) Lear's consciousness in these in these passages is at its most self-dramatising and melodramatic and the imagery matches it with the visions of terror and death. "I slept in the morning because all the birds were dead". (*"Lear"*). Then, as Lear begins to climb slowly back to reality, his vision begins to change at the same time.

In the trial scene Bodice gives his her father a mirror to push him further into his madness, and although he sees his own reflection, he characterizes it as "a little cage with bars with an animal in it. No, no, that's not the king." In his agony he shifts the focus of his self-pity to an image that mingles with some unidentified tormented animal: "There is a poor animal with blood on its head and tears running down his face.... .Is it a bird or a horse?... .Who broke its wings? Who cut off his hands so that it can't shake the bars?" (*"Lear"*, act II)

In the next scene Lear has gone mad but he can now hold the animal image at a distance and is able to control the horror of his new experience: "There's an animal in a cage. I must let it out or it will be destroyed." (*"Lear"*, act II) The entrance of his daughters Bodice and Fontanelle as children makes Lear return to a time when he might have changed the course of history, or at least of his own history. The moment of stillness makes him have an idealistic vision of peace in which the animal Lear finds hope: "The animal will slip out of its cage and lie in the fields, and run by the river, and groom itself in the sun, and sleep in its hole from night to morning". (*"Lear"*, act II)

But the vision disappears with his daughters leaving the stage and the dreadful present bursts back into his imagination. These contrasting images affect him deeply and in the process he begins to feel and understand other people's suffering. Being forced to attend his daughter's autopsy, Fotanelle, Lear is overwhelmed by the beauty and order of human nature. It is a terrifying admiration, yet it makes him understand his own responsibility for the death of his daughter. His animal images change: "She sleeps inside like a lion and a lamb and a child." (*"Lear"*, act III)

After the final scene of his blinding Lear again plunges in his search until his eyes are taken out, but then he begins 'to see.' He has come to terms with the experiences of his suffering inside his mind because he realizes what suffering is and how much suffering he has caused. It is now that he uses the parable about a bird in order to teach the others what he has learned. It is the story of a bird trapped in a cage and later crippled by having its wings broken thanks to human cruelty and vanity.

Lear demanded to be built a wall to protect and defend his kingdom. In doing so he creates slaves by forcing the men to leave their homes, their families and work on the wall. The wall that should defend the people becomes a prison, the wall that confines them turns into a source of violence. It is this wall that generates many violent actions: the blindness of Lear, the raping of Cordelia while being pregnant, Warrington's murder in prison, and so on. The scenes of violence reach sometimes the grotesque. Cordelia

watching the soldiers kill her husband and then rape her, happen while she is defending the rebuilding of the wall in order to create a just and free society.

The feeling of frustration that gives birth to violence is to be traced further in the character of Shogo in the play "*Narrow Road to the Deep North*". In the play, another image appears, that of the river. From the very beginning we find out that Shogo is a tyrant and that he throws the prisoners and the criminals into the river. "They're prisoners, criminals; they bring them here every day and throw them in the river. They put them in sacs and hold them under with their poles", Kiro says. ("*Narrow Road to the Deep North*", scene I part one). All this is happening while the other prisoners sing: "Shogo is head of the city, Shogo is protector and friend, Shogo is the guide and leader" (scene I, part one). We are to discover by the end of the play that in fact Shogo, the tyrant, is the baby, Basho saw by the riverside when he set out to North in order to get enlightenment. He never knew who his parents were and he grew alone. We are not told, and it is not important how he came to be the leader of the city; what is important is the fact that the trauma from his childhood affects both himself and his subjects. He tries to create his own morality out of the chaos and despair of his own experiences. We know that he misses his dead parents that he knows that he is an abandoned child, denied love when he most needed it, and the fact that he suffers. Thus Shogo gets just as ruthless as Cornelia just because of the feeling of frustration he experienced as a child. He suffers from some unknown and terrible guilt. That is why his morality is twisted and distorted. He kills five children to make sure that he had killed the child of the king. This kind of violence might be called *motivated, justified violence*. In acting so, Shogo wanted to protect himself and to prevent the mercenary army to take over the town. Shogo's acting like that is counterbalanced by his death, that is by the way he was killed by the foreign army. He was crucified and then cut to pieces, a monstrous kind of violence worse than the primitive behaviour Shogo had.

Both bridges and floods, in connection with rivers recur frequently in Bond's plays. Bridges carry men safely over danger but they are

structures that can be easily destroyed both by nature and by man. Thus they are, therefore, symbols of both safety and threat. Bond's characters often use a bridge to a kind of meeting place between safety and danger. In "*Early Morning*" Arthur's mental landscape is shaped by fear "I don't get near rivers when the bridges are burnt, They look like bones of charred hippopotamuses". For Albert, they confirm his ideas of the human nature: "Every time you open a bridge you know people will throw themselves off it". For Lear they confirm his experience of the treachery of life: "Once I knew a man who drowned on a bridge in a flood". The old woman in "*Bingo*" states mockingly: "Start building bridges when your feet get wet".

Flooding too carries a similar ambiguous charge of meaning. Rivers swelling beyond their banks, transforming the landscape in inland seas and temporary lakes, are both threatening and beautiful. The myth of the flood in Genesis must have influenced Bond in using it as symbol. It gives to the natural event something of a historical force connected with the idea of change. The old woman in "*Bingo*" for instance, thinks of the good years she had with her husband as "time 'fore the flood". In "*The Sea*" where huge forces of nature threaten to overwhelm a small community we are told the parable of a man drowned at sea and washed out by a flood which left him hanging in an apple tree in his garden, watched by his whole family. Floods invade places and take everything to sea. The seas which once were the source of all life, have turned into a force of the evil which brings about death.

Rivers related to violence, often recur in Bond's plays as mute, silent witnesses to the suffering of human beings. In "*Narrow Road to the Deep North*" a river is the place where Basho ignores an abandoned baby, the place where thirty years later he makes his home, and the place where Shogo drowns innocent people. Beside another river in the deep north Shogo and Kiro talk and it is there that Shogo organizes his army to fight the British. In the south, besides another river, Basho regrets not having drowned the baby Shogo while the adult Shogo is torn into pieces by the mercenary soldiers.

A river is, as it may be expected, the dominant image in "*We Come to the River*". It is the place

where children and old people are murdered by soldiers, the river is the symbolic barrier to freedom that the oppressed people have to cross: "We stand by the river. If there is a bridge we will walk over it. If there is no bridge we will wade. If the water is deep we will swim. If it is too fast we will build boats. We will stand on the other side. We have learnt to march so well that we cannot drown" (scene 16).

Individuals are forced into being violent by the society they live in, violence becoming their source of living. Society is held responsible for violence in "*Early Morning*" where alienated individuals have no longer control over their actions and consequently behave like animals in the jungle. The scene in which a man is being eaten at a queue reaches the grotesque and the unbelievable but its meaning may be taken almost literally. The individual does not matter in a 'mad' society.

Another sample of individual violence is to be found in "*The Pope's Wedding*". Having no future, Scoopey, the main character, uses the old man to look for life in the past. Everything the old man speaks about is the passing of time. This is a false solution for Scoopey's problems and he begins to suspect it when he realizes that Allen uses the mysterious pile of newspapers not for 'his work' but just to stand on it and look out through the hole in the wall. Allen is empty for Scoopey, so disappointed in him he kills the old man and attempts to take on his personality by wearing his coat and living in his hut.

There are many instances when human beings are killed just for the pleasure of a leader or because they stand in their way. In "*Lear*" such examples are many. A memorable scene is the beating up of Warrington, the horrible torture of Lear's old minister which occurs in the framework of a comedy. The soldier to whom the techniques of torture are professional skills discusses with Bodice over this matter "Yer wan' 'im done in a fancy way?" (act one, scene 4) As the soldier begins to kick and punch Warrington, Bodice settles herself to knitting apparently unconcerned but later on she asks the soldier to playact begging for Warrington's life so that she can playact refusing his pardon.

Lear's blinding is another instance of violence, again being described as a work which requires

professionalism: "Understand, this isn't an instrument of torture, but a scientific device. See how it clips the lid back to leave it unmarked" (act two, scene 6). One has the feeling while reading this that he attends a course in anatomy, so minutely and scientifically is the description of blinding carried out and the device with which it is accomplished is the latest generation acquisition of science. This violent blinding finds its counterpart in "*We Come to the River*" where the General's blinding is also a political act of violence emphasising the long experience and skill and practice of those who accomplish it. The stage directions are meaningful for the act: "Second Assassin takes the knife from First Assassin. First Assassin holds the General's head. Second Assassin draws the knife neatly across the General's eyes. The General struggles". The same as with Lear, the blinding proves to have a positive outcome on the General. The blinding in both cases leads to enlightenment, to the possibility to see the world as it is, to become human. "My eyes, what happened to my eyes? I see such beautiful things", says the General. (act III)

The development of the theme of violence in Bond's plays could also be approached from another point of view: taking into consideration the pairs *victim* and *victimiser*, *aggressor* and *the one who suffers the aggression*. The characters in different plays are one and the same character in different stages of development. Len who appears in "*Early Morning*" is of course Len from "*Saved*" and the trial in the play "*Saved*" is that from the first act of "*Early Morning*" seen through Arthur's eyes. Len in "*Early Morning*" stresses the identity between himself and Len/Arthur in "*Saved*": by kicking the dead man's clothes they point out that in most of Bond's plays most of the aggressors are also victims. So it is appropriate that they wear the dead man's clothes. The identity between the victim and the victimiser, the aggressor, this duality between characters is very important for the meaning and message of each play. The hero always appears with a counterpart: Scoopey-Allen; Len-Fred; the Twins and thus the conflict between these pairs is already settled. They all are attracted and rejected by one another and they all involve each other in death.

Bond's most characteristic stagecraft is a kind of theatre counterpoint where two events are juxtaposed, sometimes in ironic contrast, sometimes to enlarge and explain the individual actions. Events are thus seen as happening in connection with other events and not as self-sufficient inevitable incidents. He has a very strong visual sense and some of the most important events in his plays are a kind of stage pictures in which the arrangement of people and all the other elements are very suggestive. Bond's plays show social processes in action so, his characterization is firmly rooted, in particular, in classes and society, the writer concentrating on the actions of human beings in complex situations

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