

# Revolutionary Ideals and Moral Dilemmas: Exploring Leftist Politics in Edward Bond's *The Bundle*

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## Abstract

This study explores revolutionary ideals and moral dilemmas in Edward Bond's *The Bundle*, focusing on its leftist politics. It analyzes how the play critiques capitalism and presents alternatives through themes of justice, compassion, and collective responsibility. Edward Bond is known for his politically charged plays. In *The Bundle*, he addresses issues of class struggle, inequality, and survival. The play critiques capitalist structures and explores the tension between individual morality and collective action. Bond uses his work to promote social and political transformation. The study uses a Marxist critical framework to explore the play's ideological elements. Textual analysis examines the play's narrative, characters, and symbolism. Historical and social contexts are also considered to situate the play in the tradition of leftist theater. The play critiques capitalism and advocates for collectivism. It presents the moral dilemmas faced by individuals in revolutionary movements. The abandoned child symbolizes the tension between survival and ethical action, reflecting the sacrifices needed for change. The study shows that *The Bundle* critiques socio-economic systems and calls for revolutionary action. It highlights the moral complexities of achieving justice in an unjust world. *The Bundle* challenges audiences to engage with the moral ambiguities inherent in revolutionary struggles. By critiquing capitalist oppression, it forces a confrontation with the

ethical compromises that often arise in the pursuit of social change. Bond's portrayal of these tensions emphasizes the complexities of balancing morality and progress. Ultimately, the play reinforces the enduring importance of politically conscious theatre as a tool for both critique and social transformation.

**Keywords:** Injustice, Violence, Inaction, Capitalism, Struggle and Revolution

### **Introduction**

Edward Bond's *The Bundle* (1978) is a politically charged play that critiques social, economic, and ethical issues of revolution in a capitalist society. Bond is known for using his plays to challenge oppressive societal structures. His works, including *The Bundle*, engage with radical ideas about power, justice, and human suffering. The play addresses the moral dilemmas that arise during revolutionary change and critiques capitalist systems that dehumanize individuals. Bond uses theater as a tool for social critique, aiming to promote political transformation. The play focuses on a family dealing with survival, loyalty, and personal morality in a brutal, oppressive environment. These characters are forced to navigate the complexities of revolution, where survival and ethics often conflict. *The Bundle* critiques capitalist oppression while portraying the sacrifices necessary for revolution. Bond questions whether true social change can be achieved through such moral compromises. The play challenges audiences to reflect on the tensions between idealism and the harsh realities of revolution.

Although Bond's plays are widely analyzed in relation to Marxist themes, *The Bundle* has not received enough focused attention, especially regarding its exploration of leftist politics. Scholars have often discussed Bond's overall political stance but have overlooked the specific moral and political dimensions in *The Bundle*. This study aims to address this gap by examining how the play critiques capitalist oppression while addressing the ethical challenges faced by revolutionaries. The central question is how the play explores the conflicts between

revolutionary ideals and the personal moral compromises required in times of political upheaval. The purpose of this study is to explore the revolutionary ideals and moral dilemmas presented in *The Bundle*. The study will focus on how the play critiques capitalist structures while examining the personal ethical struggles of its characters. It will analyze the themes of justice, survival, and collective action, investigating how the characters navigate the moral conflicts of revolution. The aim is to demonstrate how Bond critiques capitalist systems while promoting the idea of social transformation through collective action. The study also seeks to understand how *The Bundle* contributes to the broader discourse on leftist politics and moral responsibility in revolutionary movements.

This study argues that *The Bundle* critiques capitalist oppression while exploring the moral dilemmas faced by individuals in revolutionary struggles. The play highlights the tension between revolutionary ideals and the personal sacrifices required to achieve social change. Bond suggests that although revolutionary movements demand moral compromises, they remain necessary for progress. By examining these moral conflicts, the play calls attention to the complexities of balancing individual ethics with collective action in times of crisis. This study contributes to the understanding of *The Bundle* as a politically engaged work within the context of leftist theater. It expands the existing academic conversation about Bond's works by focusing specifically on *The Bundle*. By exploring its political and ethical themes, this research sheds new light on Bond's critique of capitalist systems and his vision of social change. The study will also offer insights into the role of theater in promoting social justice, demonstrating how *The Bundle* uses moral dilemmas to engage with complex political issues. The findings will enrich the broader discourse on political theater and its capacity to challenge societal norms.

This study focuses solely on *The Bundle* and its leftist political themes, specifically addressing the critique of capitalist structures and the moral dilemmas that accompany revolutionary

change. The research will not extend to Bond's other plays or his broader political philosophy. While socio-political contexts will be drawn upon to deepen the analysis, the study will not undertake a comprehensive review of Bond's career or the historical events surrounding the play's production. Additionally, the study will focus on the play's ideological and moral themes rather than on empirical audience reception or real-world political movements. This study employs a Marxist critical framework, examining *The Bundle* through its ideological elements. A close reading of the play's text will be conducted, focusing on its narrative, character development, and symbolism, particularly regarding issues of justice and revolution. The historical and socio-political contexts of the play will be considered to understand how it fits within the tradition of leftist theater. This qualitative methodology will rely on critical analysis of the text, drawing on secondary sources that discuss the play's political and moral themes.

The paper is organized as follows: Section 1 offers a close reading of *The Bundle*, analyzing its central themes, characters, and narrative structure. Section 2 examines the moral dilemmas faced by characters in the play, focusing on the tension between personal ethics and revolutionary action. Section 3 discusses the findings of the analysis, linking the play's themes to Bond's broader critique of capitalist oppression and revolutionary ideals. Section 4 concludes the study, summarizing key findings and suggesting directions for future research. This structure aims to provide a thorough examination of *The Bundle* and its political and ethical themes, offering insights into Bond's critique of capitalist society and his vision for social change. The paper will demonstrate how *The Bundle* uses moral conflict to engage with revolutionary politics and the human condition.

## **Results and Discussion**

Edward Bond's *The Bundle* (1978) engages deeply with the central moral dilemmas of modern society, interrogating questions of responsibility, compassion, and the nature of

rationality. These issues are intricately framed through the play's setting and its symbolic figures, particularly Basho, a poet who wrestles with the burden of responsibility in the face of human suffering. Through its narrative and characters, the play presents a compelling critique of a society that permits neglect and inaction, highlighting how such failings perpetuate violence and suffering. The setting of *The Bundle* draws parallels with Bond's earlier play, *Narrow Road to the Deep North* (1968), which similarly explores the themes of abandonment, neglect, and moral crises within an irrational and brutal society. Both plays depict environments in which individuals are forced to confront the consequences of human indifference. However, *The Bundle* delves further into these themes by emphasizing the possibility of constructing a morally responsible society, one capable of nurturing and sustaining its most vulnerable members—especially children. Bond's narrative opens with the abandonment of a child, a moment laden with symbolism and moral implications. The child is left on a doorstep, a stark representation of society's failure to protect its future generations. This act of abandonment becomes a central motif in the play, reflecting the irrationality of modern societies that hinder the free and healthy development of children. Bond uses this scenario to dramatize the dysfunction and moral failings of contemporary civilization. The abandonment of the child serves as a metaphor for the broader societal neglect that allows injustice, inequality, and suffering to persist.

At the heart of the play is the character of Basho, a poet whose actions—or lack thereof—are emblematic of the moral tensions Bond seeks to explore. Basho is depicted as an intellectual figure, someone who claims to have achieved enlightenment. However, Bond invites the audience to question the validity and utility of such intellectual enlightenment when it exists in isolation from moral action. Basho's enlightenment is underscored by his self-proclaimed achievement of spending “twenty-nine years and six months facing a wall and staring into space” before concluding that he had “nothing to learn” (Spencer, 1992: 111). This

statement not only satirizes the futility of intellectualism disconnected from real-world concerns but also underscores the dangers of detachment. Basho's focus on intellectual pursuits has rendered him incapable of engaging with the suffering and needs of those around him, including the abandoned child. The play contrasts intellectualism with moral responsibility, suggesting that enlightenment devoid of compassion is insufficient to address the challenges of human existence. Basho, despite his cleverness and intellectual achievements, fails to respond to the plea of the infant's mother to take responsibility for the baby. His failure to act is emblematic of the moral lapse that Bond critiques throughout the play. In this way, Basho becomes a representation of a society that prioritizes intellectual detachment over empathy and engagement. His inaction highlights the insufficiency of intellectualism as a foundation for moral responsibility. Bond suggests that only through compassion, not intellectual distance, can individuals and societies break free from cycles of neglect and violence.

Through Basho's failure, Bond critiques the broader societal structures that allow such failures to occur. The play argues that neglect and inaction are not merely personal failings but are embedded within the fabric of modern society. This societal irrationality, as depicted in the play, perpetuates suffering and prevents the emergence of a rational and compassionate community. For Bond, the potential for societal change lies not in intellectual enlightenment but in the willingness of individuals to act with compassion and to take responsibility for the well-being of others. Bond's vision of a rational society is one that values empathy and moral engagement. He challenges the audience to consider the consequences of a society that privileges intellectualism at the expense of compassion. In such a society, individuals become detached from the suffering of others, leading to a perpetuation of violence and injustice. Basho's blindness to the suffering around him serves as a critique of this detachment. His intellectualism, rather than empowering him to address human suffering, becomes a tool of

avoidance. This critique extends to the broader societal structures that prioritize intellectual achievement over moral responsibility, reinforcing systems of neglect and inaction.

*The Bundle* calls for a reimagining of societal values. Bond argues that true societal change requires personal responsibility and a commitment to engaging with the pain and struggles of others. Compassion, rather than detachment, is the foundation of a rational and just society. By dramatizing the consequences of neglect and inaction, Bond underscores the urgency of fostering a culture of empathy and responsibility. Basho's failure serves as a cautionary tale, illustrating the dangers of intellectualism devoid of compassion and the moral imperative of taking action in the face of human suffering. Through *The Bundle*, Bond invites the audience to reflect on their own responsibilities within an irrational and often brutal society, challenging them to envision and work toward a world in which compassion and moral responsibility are central values.

In *The Bundle*, Bond critiques societies that fail to provide an environment where the most vulnerable members can grow freely and safely. This critique is starkly illustrated through the symbolic abandonment of a child by its mother at the river's edge. The mother's desperate plea for Basho, a poet believed to have attained enlightenment, to take responsibility for the child is met with his refusal. This act is significant as it marks a turning point in the play, exploring the issues of individual responsibility and moral failure. The abandonment of the child is symbolic of the broader failure of society to nurture and protect the most vulnerable, reflecting an irrational, destructive force that governs modern life. Bond suggests that man has a moral obligation towards other men in the rational society. Arthur Friedman in his review of the play says that for Bond "ethical evasiveness, political violence and moral conformism are wicked and self-defeating expedients in the search for order. The only viable alternative is compassion; without it, the City of Man cannot stand" (1970: 97-98). More to the surprise of readers Basho failed to see the darkness he is wrapped in and in a self-parodic comment he

blames others for darkness. Addressing Kiro, he says “I can’t help you... You still live in darkness” (187). Basho turns away from the responsibility pointing the whole liability to God. He is bereft of humanity to see the baby full of flesh. He responds, “Ha! He stares at me as if I was a toy ... (*Turns away*) It hasn’t done anything to earn this suffering - it’s caused by ... irresistible will of heaven. So it must cry to heaven. And I must go to the North” (8). Bond’s alternative is the cultivation of compassion, a quality that he believes is essential for the survival of the “City of Man.” Without compassion, a society is doomed to destruction, as it cannot repair its divisions or respond effectively to the suffering of its members. Basho, who refuses to assume responsibility for the child, becomes a figurehead for this moral failure. Bond critiques Basho’s rejection of the child as a refusal to embrace a more humane and compassionate path. Instead, Basho’s detachment exacerbates the irrationality of society

Bond’s Rational Theatre dismisses the attitude of this sort in his characters. He believes in one’s responsibility to other humans which will ultimately change the chaos in the society, rather than waiting for the providence to provide solutions to our problems. Irving Wardle in “A Discussion with Edward Bond” quotes Bond’s feeling towards the abandoned child at the river edge: “I mean, in fact, the child was actually left there, probably fell into the river and drowned. So this is a play about a nonexistent child. ... Human beings are produced into, are told that their environment is their enemy. They must fight it all the while. So, of course, human beings become vicious, wild, dangerous, and all the rest of it. In fact, you could say, Basho didn’t save the child so the child grew up dead” (10-11).

After thirty years an enlightened Basho returns from the north to his hometown and he learns that a tyrant named Shogo rules the City, the same child who was abandoned by Basho. Bond makes it clear that a child, who is neglected by the society will see it as the force that he has to constantly fight against. Durbach comments: “The ruler of this city (to anticipate the play’s climactic revelation) is that same child who, despite the indifference of Nature and Man,

somehow survived its abandonment— but only to grow up as a viciously aggressive consequence of Basho's neglect and moral failure. "In fact you could say, writes Bond, Basho didn't save the child and so the child grew up dead" imbued with a vicious sense of its environment as the enemy against which it must fight for its life (Durbach, 1975: 485).

Bond emphasizes the consequences of Basho's failure to take responsibility for the child he abandoned, creating a profound sense of tragic irony in the narrative. Basho does not realise his share in the aggressive and irrational society. He, like Lear, is expected to hinder the violence emanating from the aggressive society. Since he failed to do so, Bond prepares us for the further irrationality resulting from Basho's negative attitude. Basho tells Shogo's Minister: "He has (angrily) imprisoned innocent women, orphaned children, made the men soldiers, and killed them. His city is hell, ruled by atrocity. I could put up with that if I could still hope. But how can I hope if he destroys religion? He knew the pot was sacred. Of course, that's only a symbol, but we need symbols to protect us from ourselves. If he destroys them, there's no future" (27). Basho creates violence again by aligning with Commodore and his sister Georgina to knock down the city of Shogo. This does not help to lessen the conflict and fails to bring stability and peace in the city.

Bond wants to make it clear that a society built on irrationality and injustice will come to nothing except violence. Unless Basho, like Lear, realises his mistake of contributing to violence by renouncing the baby, he will not find redemption. Arthur Friedman observes that Basho, "on his way to the Deep North in quest of Truth, deliberately passes by the baby (who may or may not be Shogo), thereby losing his chance to save its life and, perhaps, the lives of untold others who will perish at the hands of Shogo, grown into an embittered, love-less tyrant" (98).

In this play the central characters like Basho, Shogo, Georgina, and Kiro don't perform any ethically appropriate action. They add to violence instead of acting to defy the violence

and repression of society. Thus they are condemned by Bond by giving them a horrible fate. From the beginning his decision to “ignore the cries of abandoned baby to his involvement in the murder of Shogo, Basho’s actions are morally self-implicating, and with them the play condemns the conventional, “humanistic” wisdom that makes such acts possible” (Spencer, 112). The play in remonstrating words castigates these acts of Basho who with his delusional enlightenment frequently contributes to violence. Bond comments that the entire play “poured out of my indignation for this man... I turned Basho into a sort of a monster, a hollow zombie. One of those people who appeared immensely cultured, with all the filigree of culture, with all the outward show, but as hollow as can be” (Qtd in Hay & Roberts, 1980: 91).

Basho comes to know the identity of despot Shogo but he does not understand what proper course of action he should take. He fails to understand the basic principles on which he could redeem the chaos of the city and says that had he known the baby would grow up to become tyrant Shogo, he would have drowned it with his “poet’s hands” (180). This is contrary to what he should have done in a rational society. He should have picked up the baby and raised it free of repression. It is due to Basho’s ignorance and lack of concern that the child becomes a tyrant. Yet to the reader’s surprise, he is the only character neither haunted nor punished in the play. Unlike him, Shogo and Georgina undergo appalling ends. Shogo is forced to flee to the north and finds himself disturbed and irritated by ghosts for his most heinous crimes. Then, after a successful counterattack against Georgina, he is kept in custody where he is grotesquely crucified and brought on stage. The mutilation makes obvious that Commodore and Georgina are even more ruthless than Basho. Their leaving Shogo’s genitals intact show the sexual repression of Georgina’s rule. Georgina’s social morality increases her insanity. She creates an authoritarian control like religion that forces guilt over human sexuality. She states her method directly: “So instead of atrocity I use morality. I persuade people— in their hearts— that they are sin and that they have evil thoughts, and that they are greedy, violent and destructive ... that

their bodies must be hidden, and that sex is nasty and corrupting and must be secret. When they believe all that they do what they are told ... That's how I run the city: the missions and churches and bishops and magistrates and politicians and papers will tell people they are sin and must be kept in order. If sin didn't exist it would be necessary to invent it. I learned all this from my Scottish nanny”(208). The play snubs this way of maintaining law and order as barbaric.

At the end of the play, Kiro, unfastening his robe, draws forth his sword to commit suicide. Georgina, in her agitation, misinterprets his actions. She envisions that Kiro is going to rape her. Even when he begins to disembowel himself, she cannot see his actions differently. This misperception highlights the distortion caused by her “social morality.” Georgina is haunted by the misfortunes and suffering created by her rigid moral framework. This makes her a victim of the very system she defends (Bond, 1972: 7). Her inability to see beyond her moral codes reveals their damaging psychological impact. “Bond's critique of moral absolutism in *The Bundle* reflects his larger political ideology. By showing how ‘social morality’ reinforces oppression, he argues that revolutionary ideals must prioritize human needs over abstract moral principles.” (Innes, 2002: 293)

Kiro's final destiny holds as much weight as the other characters. By the end of the play, he succumbs to despair and finds no alternative but suicide. “Bond portrays characters like Kiro and Basho as embodiments of leftist ideals corrupted by their own passivity. Their failure to act decisively not only undermines their cause but perpetuates cycles of oppression and violence.” (Prentice, 2000: 114) Edward Bond does not support Kiro's choice. He condemns it as nihilistic and incapable of bringing positive change. Kiro's indecision and detachment contribute significantly to the violence in the play. Although he knows Shogo is a tyrant who must be stopped, he avoids action. Instead, he chooses to believe that “God will destroy him” (199). This reliance on providence mirrors the passivity of Basho, another

character. Like Kiro, Basho abdicates responsibility and leaves others to suffer. Kiro's inaction, however, does not excuse him. Instead, it makes him complicit in the cycle of destruction.

Kiro's refusal to act repeatedly undermines efforts to resist oppression. He helps Shogo escape from Georgina's first victory over the city, undoing her success. Later, Shogo begins to lose resolve in his plans to reconquer the city. At this crucial moment, Kiro's indifference reignites Shogo's determination to march forward. Kiro's failure to take decisive action thus perpetuates the violence. "For Bond, the success of revolution depends on leaders who can navigate moral complexity. The Bundle reveals how detachment and rigid morality—whether in Kiro or Georgina—only deepen social inequality." (Itzin, 1980: 192) This inaction is as destructive as Basho's abandonment of a child. Both characters, by refusing to act, allow suffering to continue. The play ends with Shogo's death, which ironically reinstates Georgina's "social morality" as the ruling force. This outcome is presented not as a triumph but as a grim prediction. It signifies continued oppression and suffering. Georgina's return to power reflects the persistence of the flawed moral order Bond critiques. Her victory is more disheartening than Kiro's death. It signifies the endurance of a harmful and destructive moral framework.

In contrast, the survival of a drowning man at the play's end introduces hope. While Kiro succumbs to despair and takes his life, the drowning man rescues himself. His self-rescue symbolizes human resilience and self-determination. The image of the man's naked body lying beside Kiro's corpse is striking. It emphasizes the play's central message: salvation comes not through rigid morality but through simple acts of goodness. As Fiedmam explains, "mankind is not served by abstract reflection on virtue, nor by the imposition of a stern morality, but by simple acts of goodness" (97).

The drowning man's survival suggests the possibility of breaking the cycle of destruction. His self-rescue contrasts with Kiro's suicide, highlighting the value of rationality and action. Bond uses this moment to advocate for individual agency. He shows that societal

regeneration is possible through compassion and active deeds. This theme is echoed in Bond's other play, *Early Morning*. In that play, Arthur's resurrection and escape similarly symbolize hope and renewal. As Martin Esslin notes, "The man saves himself by his own exertions; Kiro dies. The message is clear: not in speculation about moral principles lies salvation, but in one man's active help for another" (Qtd. in Spencer, 188).

This emphasis on action and responsibility aligns with the play's critique of moral systems. "Bond's plays challenge capitalist ideologies, highlighting the failures of moral detachment and passive reflection. His works demand action over abstraction, arguing that revolution requires a rejection of both nihilism and moral conservatism." (Luckhurst 2006: 79) Bond argues that salvation does not come from abstract theorizing or rigid morality. Instead, it comes from tangible actions by individuals who are willing to help others. "The *Bundle* dramatizes the moral quandaries inherent in revolutionary change. Bond exposes how abstract ideals often clash with the necessity for pragmatic action, and he critiques those who use moral detachment as a shield for inaction." (Cousin: 1978: 144) The drowning man's survival represents this ideal. It offers an alternative to the suffering caused by characters like Georgina and Kiro.

Critics have recognized the significance of this climactic moment. John Russell Taylor, in *Anger and After*, observes that the play's climax is an "outbreak of carnage." He notes that the build-up is "cool and controlled," while the resolution "pulls the whole thing into shape" (1962: 110). This structured resolution contrasts with the chaos of the climactic violence. It reinforces the play's ultimate message of hope and renewal. Bond critiques both the rigidity of social morality and the dangers of moral detachment. Through Kiro's tragic death and the drowning man's survival, Bond shows the consequences of inaction. "The drowning man in *The Bundle* is a vivid symbol of Bond's insistence on active human intervention. Salvation, for Bond, does not lie in ideological reflection but in tangible, compassionate acts that confront

injustice head-on.” (Hay, 1983:21) He illustrates the power of rational, compassionate acts to create change. While Georgina’s return to power signals the persistence of oppressive systems, the drowning man’s self-rescue offers hope. The affirmation lies not in Kiro’s death but in the drowning man’s resilience and agency. This serves as a testament to the potential of individual action to break cycles of destruction and build a better world.

### **Conclusion: Breaking Cycles of Violence**

The *Bundle* presents a multifaceted critique of a society mired in intellectual detachment and moral rigidity. Basho, the play's central figure, epitomizes the dangers of prioritizing abstract thought over tangible human needs. His inability to engage with Shogo's plight, a consequence of his intellectual pursuits, underscores the destructive potential of such detachment.

The play also exposes the tyrannical nature of rigid moral systems. Georgina's authoritarian regime, rooted in guilt and repression, highlights the limitations of a morality that prioritizes conformity over compassion. Her inflexible approach exacerbates societal divisions and perpetuates cycles of suffering.

However, amidst this bleak portrait, the conclusion offers a glimmer of hope. The survival of the drowning man symbolizes the power of individual action to challenge the status quo. This act of self-preservation, born from a moment of crisis, represents the potential for human agency to disrupt cycles of violence and despair.

By emphasizing the importance of compassion and direct intervention, Bond calls for a society that actively addresses social ills. He advocates for a shift away from intellectual complacency and moral absolutism towards a more empathetic and engaged approach to human suffering. The conclusion ultimately suggests that through individual action and

collective responsibility, society can break free from the destructive forces of neglect, violence, and authoritarianism.

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