

Introduction

The Sea, Bond's most complete exercise in tragicomedy, is a very different play from either *Saved* or *Early Morning*. It is set in 1907 in a small East Coast town and shows the attempt of the central character Willy who is washed ashore near a small village on the east coast of England to come to terms with the death of his friend Colin who has been drowned. While waiting for the official inquest into the death of his shipmate, a native of the village, Willy gets to know the inhabitants. The play is really less about him than the villagers, who seem peaceful enough but actually fight great anguish and frustration in their daily lives. Above all, the local draper, Mr. Hatch, and the well-to-do Mrs. Rafi are the focus of Bond's observation. Their relationship is an antagonistic one between fawning clerk and demanding client, and this antagonism takes its toll when Mrs. Rafi pushes Hatch too far. In addition to these central characters are the destitute beachcomber Evens and Rose, the fiancée of Willy's drowned friend. Evens lives in a little hut and is Bond's spokesman. Rose melancholily embodies the "woman of death" who has no future but loneliness.

The play is important in Bond's development as the clearest statement he makes on the necessity to come to terms with tragedy, to see things as they really are and to go on living. The emphasis in this drama is very strongly on the personal. Though the characters are seen in a specific social context at a particular historical point in time. *The Sea* is the least overtly political of Bond's plays. Willy is an outsider: he does not belong to this society, and it is his encounters with the three principal figures – Mrs. Rafi, Hatch and Evens – all three of them eccentrics, which enable him to understand more fully his own position. Compared with *Saved* and *Early Morning*, *The Sea* is a very static play. Very little happens: the tragic event – Colin's death – occurs off stage in the opening scene; thereafter we are presented with a sequence of scenes dramatising small-town life. Aspects of this are notably bizarre: Hatch's tearing up of the velvet and his attack on Colin's corpse, as well as Mrs. Rafi's amateur dramatics, both in her rehearsal of the Orpheus play and at the funeral. But all these features are closely related to the play's social environment and the corresponding pressures it creates on the characters.

Comic Elements

"The Sea," however, is one of Bond's more subdued works, one in which he attempts to stimulate change through humor. The majority of this play is taken up with raucous laughter. Even though it lasts for nearly three hours, the evening whizzes by with the antics of Mrs. Rafi and Hatch. Each has their troupe of comic underlings to command: Rafi has her cousins, friends and maids and Hatch has the local ragamuffins who make up the Coast Guard. The women's absurd rehearsal of "Orpheus" is a direct descendant of "Pyramus and Thisbe" from "A Midsummer Night's Dream," and their confusion later during the funeral ceremony is some of the funniest black humor around. If this were



not enough. Hatch and his cronies are convinced Willy is a space alien scouting out the town for invasion. Hatch's orations on the evils of space aliens and their sly tailing of Willy have to be seen to be believed. Unfortunately, Rafi's demands on Hatch finally take their toll and his mind snaps. At the end of the first act, in an intense performance by Laurence Ballard, he changes from buffoon to manic killer, something out of "Sweeney Todd." This is the mix of broad farce and sober poeticism that Bond captures so well in "The Sea." The play sways back and forth between these two tones, one absurdly entertaining and the other quietly menacing. Even the scene shifts performed by the supporting cast capture the silliness among the young girls and the menace when the sailors get in their way. In the end we find that what makes Hatch and Mrs. Rafi so funny is also what makes them so dangerous. These two embody the choice between "madness and discipline" that the present world offers to Willy and Rose (who develop a love relationship between sight gags). The close of the show finally brings out Bond's point, as stated by Evens, for all the lunacy we have seen: the world is sick and must change to get healthy.

Shakespearean Allusions

The Sea was written straight after *Lear* and immediately before *Bingo*. The Shakespearean allusions are significant, particularly within the context of tragicomedy. After *Lear* Bond felt the need to compose something at the furthest remove from its catalogue of violence and horror. There is perhaps an irony in the fact that whilst in *Bingo* he was to go on to present Shakespeare at the end of his career as a disillusioned suicide, thereby negating the message of hope vested in the images of rebirth and reconciliation in the last Romances, his own sequel is this gentle life-enhancing drama which has a number of close affinities with *The Tempest*. The parallel is firmly established in the opening scene with its powerful stage directions:

Beach

Empty stage. Darkness and thunder. Wind roars, crashes and screams over the water. Masses of water swell up, rattle and churn and crash back into the sea. Gravel and sand grind slowly. The earth trembles.

Willy, like Ferdinand, must suffer and learn. He must face reality: Colin will not be reborn and the future for him and Rose is a very far cry from Miranda's 'brave new world', as the final lines of the play reveal:

Rose. I followed you. We mustn't miss our train. What were you saying?

Willy. I came to say goodbye, and I'm glad you.

Bond ends on a question mark here because Willy must now reconcile the advice given to him by the old hermit, Evens, with what he has seen in the conduct of Mrs Rafi and Hatch. Mrs Rafi's Orpheus drama – a play within a play – is fraught with more problems than Prospero encounters in presenting his masque for the benefit of the young lovers, whilst Mrs Rafi's attempt to stage-manage Colin's funeral misfires as spectacularly as Prospero's wedding celebration. It is Evens, the wise old seer – quoting from the Chinese poet Li Po – imparting his knowledge to Willy who more completely fulfils the



function of the magus Prospero. In the final scene of the play he obliges Willy to observe the condition of the world with such a depth of rational analysis that the young man is encouraged to build on the foundations of his philosophical propositions.

Theme of Revolutionary Change

Everything in the drama is tending towards this final confrontation. Unlike Arthur in *Early Morning*, however, Willy is a more silent observer, still recovering from the emotional blow of his drowned friend. It is Evens who is the more articulate thinker, expounding here an evolutionary argument which – once again – has strong affinities with Shavian philosophy. Evens's credo begins with a statement recalling Orwell's *1984* – 'I believe in the rat. What's the worst thing you can imagine?' – but this drama so concerned with predictions for the future will transform Orwell's symbol of horror into a positive emblem. Evens continues:

I believe in the rat because he has the seeds of the rat-catcher in him. I believe in the rat-catcher. I believe in sand and stone and water because the wind stirs them into a dirty sea and it gives birth to living things. The universe lives. It teems with life. Men take themselves to be very strong and cunning. But who can kill space or time or dust? They destroy everything but they only make the materials of life. All destruction is finally petty and in the end life laughs at death.

This is very close to the central thesis put into the mouth of Don Juan in *Man and Superman*: the strongest expression of Shaw's faith in an evolutionary future. Elsewhere in his plays Bond's evolutionary emphasis tends to be more firmly political; here is its complement in a more abstract philosophical explanation. It is Evens too who explains – in his first meeting with Willy – the meaning of tragedy:

It's always the details that make the tragedy. Not anything larger. They used to say tragedy purified, helped you let go. Now it only embarrasses.

It is a sense of perspective, of not being lost in the individual heart-breaking incidents which represent the destructive side of life, that informs Bond's consistent ethic. From the dogged determination of Len in *Saved* through to the enlightened revolutionary action of Wang in *The Bundle* or Hecuba in *The Woman* there is a vision which looks beyond tragedy. *The Sea* is the last of Bond's plays to express an alternative essentially in the format of tragicomedy; after this he has attempted more and more to confront tragedy not so much with comedy as with an epic structure to give added strength to his emphasis on political issues.

Whilst Evens encourages Willy to hope: 'The truth's waiting for you, it's very patient and you'll find it', he also presents a picture of humanity at its worst in a nightmare image of the future:

When your life's over everything will be changed or have started to change. Our brains won't be big enough. They'll plug into bigger brains. They'll get rid of this body. It's too liable to get ill and break. They'll transplant the essential things into a better container. An unbreakable glass bottle on steel stilts. Men will look at each other's viscera as they pass in the street.



This envisages mankind entirely stripped of its humanity: a world 'without grass' and 'without tragedy' where 'there's only discipline and madness'.

Willy as agent of change

The Sea was intended as a satirical comedy by the author but deep tragic elements overshadow the comic aspect of the play. The playwright successfully illustrates man's ability to survive the worst while remaining optimistic and manfully facing the madness and injustice of the world. Bond wanted to emphasize "the strength of people, on their ability to change their society". The relationship between individual and society as well as Nature has been serious and gloomy; therefore, the author wants "to make the people laugh and experience human strength" in a light-hearted manner. Bond encourages the audience to "change the world", for betterment must be desired. He believes in social change with the will of individuals. With this aim of change, the playwright directs his satire on the rigid, aggressive and repressive class structure of English society. Amid the sad and tragic environment of the play, change seems evident. Everybody feels for the change. Everybody yearns for it but nobody attempts it in that town. It requires hope and the ability to conflict with the dominant society. Mrs. Rafi "so tired of" the way the town people respond, she wants the coast guard to do its duty honestly and professionally but her voice has no effect. She wants the town people to work but nobody listens to her though they are afraid of her. Evens, the drinker, has left all hope of change; therefore, he lives outside the town on the beach. He, too, desires change. Hatch, the draper, wants positive change in life as well but he cannot stay against the likes of Mrs. Rafi. Since nothing changes from within the town, therefore, change comes from without in the form of Willy Carson, a truthful but neglected individual. Primarily, the conflict between individual and society as well as the desire for change is depicted in the character of Willy. He is not native of this town. He is the symbol of change in this pessimistic and lunatic town. He is also symbolic of the truth which is doubted by most. He tells the people around him of Colin's drowning but nobody believes him except Mrs. Rafi and a few. He stands as a voice for the oppressed ones while the society is unable to listen. He is the voice of positive change. In the midst of extreme madness, he is the only one that remains sensible and positive. He appears as a linking force between the oppressed and the oppressor. He relieves Rose from agony of the loss of Colin. He brings her back to the present life .

Theme of Social Segregation

The implications of such a world are glimpsed already in the play through the attitude and conduct of Mrs Rafi and Hatch. The latter, a victim of the society presided over by Mrs Rafi, is a figure who elicits complex sympathies. He is bullied and put upon, a slave to the whims of his autocratic and privileged customers. But he is a chilling example of petit bourgeois vindictiveness, taking out his sense of social inferiority in a manic extension of racism. This crazed little draper envisaging an invasion from outer space is for all the world like a caricatured version of H.G. Wells whose own description of the



Martians in *The War of the Worlds* was precisely of 'unbreakable glass bottle(s) on steel stilts.' The violence in this drama is confined to Hatch: his attacks on the velvet, Mrs Rafi and Colin's corpse are risible, a particularly ironic note being struck in his conviction that he has killed an alien when Colin's corpse oozes water instead of blood. But the violence, handled here in a markedly different theatrical style from *Saved* or *Early Morning*, is no less firmly related to social and political realities. Hatch is a pathetic victim of his class, just as Mrs Rafi is trapped by her own bourgeois indoctrination. It is only the outsider, Evens, who-like the hermit, in *The Pope's Wedding* – is able to teach Willy a valuable alternative.

In Mrs Rafi there is an attempt to organise society according to an ethic which is essentially Victorian. Mrs Rafi's attempt to bring discipline into her life is the last stand of a nineteenth century authoritarian faced with a new society and a new century. Victoria died in 1901; the play is set in 1907. As with his picture of Victoria, Bond's presentation of Mrs Rafi is richly comic and this old harridan is also endowed with a much stronger depth of sympathy, notably in her lengthy final speech to Willy which counterbalances the propositions of Evens. Here she sees the futility of her life with a clarity and honesty that is at the same time endearing through its wry humour:

Mrs Rafi. I'm afraid of getting old. I've always been a forceful woman. I was brought up to be. People expect my class to shout at them. Bully them. They're disappointed if you don't. It gives them something to gossip about in their bars. When they turn you into an eccentric, it's their form of admiration. Sometimes I think I'm like a lighthouse in their world. I give them a sense of order and security. My glares mark out a channel to the safe harbour.'

There is more than a touch of Shaw's Mrs Warren here: that 'aimiable old blackguard of a woman' defending her way of life. Bond fully exploits the technique Shaw admired and copied from Ibsen, of leading from exposition through development to discussion, in Willy's confrontation first with Mrs Rafi and then with Evens at the end of the play. But Mrs Rafi asks herself the same question Shakespeare will ask at the end of *Bingo* and reaches the same conclusion: 'Has anything been worthwhile? No, I've thrown my life away'. Bond also employs a particular style of comedy in his presentation of Mrs Rafi to bring home more clearly and precisely the social implications of his critique of her world. She is modelled firmly on Wilde's Lady Bracknell, no-where more clearly than in her dictatorial handling of Hollarcut:

Mrs Rafi. You can come and work *hard* in my garden every evening for the next two months. There's a lot of especially *hard* digging you can do. That, or I must take up this matter with the local magistrate. Which?

Hollarcut. (*grumbling*) Diggin', I suppose.

Mrs Rafi. I'm glad you've got some wits left. I shall assume Hatch led you astray – an easy assumption. Present yourself at my back door tomorrow at five-thirty sharp.

Hollarcut. Mornin' or evenin'? –

Mrs Rafi. Both.

But Mrs Rafi's class is a doomed one, as she recognises in her inability to hold her society together by force. Her own failure is a microcosm of the situation Bond has



presented in *Early Morning*, handled here with a very different theatrical style but entirely consistent in its viewpoint. When Willy later teases Hollarcut over his enforced labour he receives the cryptic response: I'll tell you something you ought to know, boy. I dig for her (*He lays the side of his index finger against the side of his nose and looks crafty.*) –but will anything grow? . . . Mornin'. It is a mark of Bond's immense versatility as a comic dramatist that here he can present his continuing critique of society with a warmth and humanity which is at the furthest extreme from the grim realism of *Saved* or the outrageous satiric savagery of *Early Morning*.

