Uirtus **(Peer-reviewed Journal of Arts and Humanities)**
Available online at https://uirtus.net/
E-mail: soumissions@uirtus.net / revueuirtus@gmail.com
Vol. 5, No. 3, December 2025, Pages: 99-119
DOI : https://doi.org/10.59384/uirtus.dec2025n25
ISSN: 2710 - 4699

Dystopian Topographies of the Mind and Nature in Edward Bond's *The War Plays*

Ousmane Aly Pame

Article history:

Submitted: Sept. 10, 2025
Revised: Sept. 29, 2025
Accepted: Oct. 10, 2025

Keywords:
Nature, culture, bestiary, mind, decadence, rebirth

Abstract

This article examines the dialectical interrelation between the human consciousness and the environment in Edward Bond's *The War Plays* (1994), a theme that has often been overlooked in Bond studies. It offers an analysis of the aesthetics of physical settings and animal imagery as potent symbols of cultural decline, while also pointing to possibilities of renewal and growth. This study portrays the dystopian vision of *The War Plays* in relation to Bond's wider body of work and in contrast with broader trajectories of classical and contemporary theatrical writings.

Corresponding author:
Ousmane Aly Pame
Département d'anglais
Université Cheikh Anta Diop de Dakar

Uirtus
– UIRTUS –
vol. 5, no. 3, December 2025 ISSN 2710-4699 Online

Introduction

English playwright Edward Bond (1937) first rose to prominence in the early nineteen-sixties with the production of provocative, iconoclastic, and often violent works. His early plays, such as *The Pope's Wedding* (1962), *Saved* (1965) as well as his irreverent portraits of major British establishment figures, like Queen Victoria in *Early Morning* (1977) and William Shakespeare in *Bingo, The Scenes of Money and Death* (1987), established his reputation as a radical and uncompromising working-class dramatist. In the playwright's view, the British ruling elite bore responsibility for the exploitation of the working masses both domestically and overseas, and also, to a large extent, for global tensions.

The nineteen-eighties, characterised by frantic military, economic, and ideological rivalries, and the looming threat of nuclear war between the West and Eastern blocs, marked a decisive turning point in Bond's dramatic work. Abandoning the traditional frameworks of tragedy inherited from classical culture, he developed innovative contemporary forms in which royal figures and cosmic forces, traditionally regarded as purveyors of order and transcendence, disappear from the narrative and from the stage space. Bond also distances himself from the Theatre of the Absurd. He constructs a theatrical universe with no symbolic reference points, but peopled by somnambulistic and disoriented figures drifting across vast wastelands. These aesthetic and thematic shifts reveal his determination to redefine tragedy in the light of postmodern realities, confronting his audiences not with grand epic legends, but with the dead ends and convulsions of a brutal, dehumanized world bereft of transcendence.

In his two collections of *The War Plays*, published respectively in 1985 and 1994, Edward Bond undertakes a radical exploration of the devastating aftermath of nuclear apocalypse, extending his critique to both the human condition and the natural environment. His dramaturgy foregrounds the intertwined destruction of mental landscapes and ecological systems, insisting on the inseparability of environmental collapse and human suffering. Bond reveals that the violence inflicted upon the earth is mirrored in the disintegration of the human consciousness. Conversely, he shows that the distortion of human values inevitably manifests in the degradation of nature.

The second edition of *The War Plays* (1994), which includes *Red Black and Ignorant*, *The Tin Can People*, and *Great Peace*, develops the vision of the interconnectedness of nature and human mind even further. Bond treats both

the environment and consciousness as a single and indivisible entity. He projects each reality in and through the other. His stage landscapes become paradoxical as they are simultaneously materially empty yet dense and charged with meaning. Backgrounds are never passive in Bond's theatre. They are active agents that catalyse tensions, embody existential anguish, and provide a precise measure of the moral and political failures of modern civilisation.

Animals, presented on stage or recurrently evoked throughout the plays in Bond's 1994 trilogy, acquire a symbolic and ethical dimension. Their presence and eradication, not only reflect the fragility of life but also serve to mirror humanity's moral posture. Their vulnerability and the unnecessary trauma inflicted upon them fully reveal the grimness of a world that has abandoned compassion and rationality, thereby reinforcing the playwright's indictment of a society that perpetuates crimes against humanity and the planet.

This article argues that *The War Plays* stages a dialectic in which ecological devastation and psychic disintegration mirror and produce one another. Part I examines wastelands and ruins as stage metaphors of political and spiritual vacancy. Part II analyses the bestiary motif that allegorizes moral decadence. Part III sketches the plays' fragile pathways toward a reawakening of human consciousness.

I) Deserts and Ruins or the Topography of Existential Emptiness

In *The War Plays*, Edward Bond portrays the vision of a humanity detached from any precise historical and geographical contexts, and yet placed under the scrutiny of a hall of magnifying lenses. In this way, his theatre seeks to engage its readers and spectators in a profound and radical meditation on the essence and fate of the human condition in a technologically advanced age. The stark scenography consists of chains of ruins, empty spaces and desolate landscapes heightened by haunting imagery. This serves to unsettle rather than reassure. Bond confronts audiences with the fate of a humanity trapped in a stalemate.

Bond's trilogy hurls the audience into a dystopian, post-apocalyptic world which is devastated by neutron bomb and the mindless exploitation of natural resources. His theatrical production immerses its readers and spectators in a surrealistic environmental vacuum where nature, seasons, farms, light and time itself have vanished. The entire space is in ruins and

covered with ashes, and the flow of time is suspended in this desolate universe. Like Beckett's *Endgame* (1957), the décors of *Red Black and Ignorant*, *The Tin Can People*, and *Great Peace* are configured as a continuum of a dead and void landscape: derelict and abandoned buildings, scattered human and animal remains, and empty underground bunkers.

For Bond, the desert landscapes are not merely geographical settings but stark metaphors of spiritual and political emptiness. The barrenness and lifelessness of his plays' topographies embody a world stripped of political guidance, faith and moral authority, reflecting a universe where chaos reigns unchecked. The desert territories thus become a potent symbol of collective paralysis and disorientation, where the absence of leadership and spirituality leaves humanity exposed to the void, wandering without purpose and hope across vast wastelands. Humanity's tragic destiny does not arise from the arbitrary decision of a senile and irresponsible monarch, as in Shakespeare's *King Lear* (1608) or Bond's *Lear* (1978). Rather, that fate stems from a systematic assault on the environment whose repercussions return in boomerang effects. The characters of *The War Plays* are caught up in a vicious cycle of self-mutilation and environmental degradation, and have lost a sense of inner and outer direction. On this issue, Bond comments:

> The people in *Great Peace* have no guide. They live in hell and you do not have a guide to your own house. No existing philosophy can guide them. No one has gone before and returned to tell them to turn back… It is as if they had internalized their landscape and become the stories that wander over it. But that is how all of us live in a nuclear age; even before the bombs are dropped. Inside our head we browse through the maps of ruins… the people in *Great Peace* wander and scavenge in the ruins in our heads…Their inner and outer landscape are one. What they do in one they do in the other, whether it is to build cities or ruin them. (Bond, *Commentary on The War Plays* 350)

In the barren land of *The War plays*, most creatures are literally and figuratively immobile, fossilized, or buried beneath layers of stone, rubble, ashes and dust. With the abrupt ending of life, humans, like the animals around them, are fossilised in their routines. "A crate was suspended from a crane: a few bones sat the controls" (Bond, *The Tin Can People* 57). Everywhere, in offices and homes, human skeletons with "*faces like stone*," emblems of dehumanisation, sit at petrified consoles and stone computers. "The food had turned to stone,

even the rats stealing food trapped forever in stone" (Bond, *The Tin Can People* 71). Living permanently in a stifling atmosphere which turns alternatively red and grey, and surrounded by lifeless seas, Bond's characters are caught up in never-ending cycles of violence, death and mourning. They perceive their condition as '*uman rubbish*' (Bond, *Great Peace* 108), living in a dark and fierce "Stone Age" (Bond, *Great Peace* 225), in a civilisation bereft of empathy and meaning.

The mineralized landscapes of *The War Plays*, like the biological sterility of the survivors or the leafless trees, are indicative of the cultural and ecological barrenness of the modern world, where all-out military campaigns and absurd economic competitions have drained the environment of its vitality. In Bond's dramatic iconography, the earth itself is stripped of its regenerative power and has become as lifeless as the lead sea or the arid desert in Beckett's *Endgame* (1957), where seeds lie dormant in the ground and germination is no longer possible. This imagery of infertility and desolation that define both the land and the humans who inhabit it, recalls the barren earth Eliot describes in his poem "The Waste Land" (1922), a desert with dry stones and dead trees, which is indicative of untenable prevailing spiritual drought. In the Beckett's and Eliot's literary productions, like in Bond's, the world is depicted as a vast cemetery-like terrain where human bodies, rather than grains, are sown, thereby rendering hope of renewal inconceivable.

In the creative worlds of Bond, Beckett, and Eliot, the lifeless territory highlights, on the one hand, the sterility, absurdity of human interactions, and on the other, the estranged relationships between humans and nature. In the perspectives of the dramatists and the poet, the bleak and unproductive terrain is not simply physical; it is emblematic of the spiritual and moral decay afflicting humanity. The arid mineralised landscape reflects the destructive nature of human lifestyles, the disastrous ecological impacts of a modern civilisation that increasingly seeks to detach itself from the rhythms of life and from nature itself. In other words, both Bond and Eliot indict the absence of compassion and the lack of resonance with the regenerative power of natural ecosystems. The infertility of the land parallels the paralysis of the global consciousness. The concomitant breakdowns of the physical and mental ecosystems are, in their works, a poignant criticism of the ethical collapse, human brutality and disregard for life in all its forms.

The dystopian logic of isolationism and survivalism, prevailing in the

world of *The Tin Can People*, forces the few survivors of a neutron bomb to retreat into an underground concrete-and-metal bunker. Above ground, the world lies silent and desolate. In the nearby warehouses and supermarkets, staggering numbers of food tins remain intact, sustaining the survivors: "We have tins: millions: enough to live on for a thousand years" rejoices Second Man (Bond, *The Tin Can People* 56). The canned provisions, which are sometimes suspected of being poisoned, function as a paradoxical symbol of both material affluence and existential deprivation. On the one hand, this important packaged food stock represents material security. It is, however, an illusion of abundance in the midst of devastation. On the other hand, its lack of variety and its artificial nature reveal the monotony and poverty of existence, reduced to mechanical repetition. The existence of survivors, stripped of vitality, creativity and renewal, portrays their unsustainable and dull way of living. Industrial food, considered an emblem of progress and also an essential component of the characters' identity becomes a component of the identity of the characters. As the title of the play implies, the abundance of processed junk food is a poignant symbol of standardisation, confinement and collective alienation.

The stark sense of standardisation and dehumanization is conveyed, in Bond's trilogy, through the denial of individuality by a mechanized social order. The systemic erasure of individual differences is sensed through the anonymity of most of the stage characters. With the disappearance of proper names, which are primary markers of identity, many figures are reduced to impersonal designations based on roles, ranks, or numbers, underscoring their interchangeability and anonymity within the society. The figures, who gravitate around Mrs Symmons and Pemberton, for example, appear not as distinct personalities but as functional labels. They are called: Son, Daughter, Mother, Man, Officer, Soldiers 1, 2, 3 and 4. They barely speak but when they do, they use broken language or cries. They stand as voiceless shadows of their beings in the sense that they have no definite identities and no agency of their own.

The systemic denial of each figure's individuality highlights the common strategy of tyrannical regimes: to maintain citizens or subjects in subordination to ruling political powers, authorities refrain from acknowledging the identity and uniqueness of the individuals. Humans are perceived and treated like herds by oppressive administrations. The generic

names, given to Bond's figures, strip away their subjectivity and transform them into mere interchangeable elements within a dehumanizing social machinery. In his *Commentary to The War Plays*, the playwright explains his strategy:

> The characters are not named because although they are not symbols their lives are social forces – and the forces are clarified by the crises (…). They have lost their names because they have lost themselves. Names are a sign of our humanity. In a nuclear age we still have to create our humanity. I would have felt I was christening bits of limbs I had dragged from the rubbles. (Bond, *Commentary on The War Plays* 361)

Besides the anonymity imposed on them, the ragged outward appearance and inner state of Bond's heroes, like a form of adaptation, blend perfectly with the dull and ruined landscapes. Most of his figures are, in fact, shabby and unkempt. Their clothes are riddled with holes, their skin and hair are filthy, and their broken nails full of dirt. Their "blood stinks" with "bandages: rags: rotted in blood" (Bond, *Red Black and Ignorant* 11-12). Their repulsive, sick bodies are covered with pustules. Their unhealthy-looking skins, which are comparable to those of frogs, are, in fact, extensions of the disrupted landscapes they inhabit. They are also the visible signs of the deeper psychological and emotional wounds they carry. Environmental collapse and degraded physical conditions are the visible markers of the deep inner scars, psychic traumas and ontological uncertainties.

The decaying topographies, which lie "open to the skies like a broken coffin" (Bond, *Red Black and Ignorant* 21), where the caves and rooms themselves, like coffins, are full of dead, functions as a palimpsest of history, inscribed with the scars of persistent and all-encompassing wars. The material destructions, the haunting absences of the dead, the sufferings of the survivors, together with the empty supermarkets and trollies, the vacuity of the steel and concrete bunkers that were meant to protect but now stand as archaeological vestiges, all combine to embody recurrent collective losses and traumas over time and across various geographical areas.

The landscape of *The War Plays* is treated like an unhealthy living organism, endowed with consciousness and a language of its own. The setting of Bond's plays and the manifestation of the natural elements convey powerful expressions of a body and mind in deep trauma. The elements in the setting

reveal and bear witness to deep psychic wounds, voiceless pain, and the lingering presence of the losses. The decors of his stages actually function as active agents of memory. They are memorial sites on which persistent traumatic experiences and recollections are carved. In fact, just as storms relentlessly sculpting geological elements of desert landscapes, their past and present torments continuously corrode, haunt and shape their lives into unrecognizable forms. The geographical and mental spaces merge into the same reality. They become graphic indexes of the figures' losses and grief, the visible architecture of their psychology.

Through its depiction as a whistle-blower, nature takes on a personified form in *The War Plays*. As humans mindlessly destroy other humans and the planet with their nuclear arsenals, the whole atmosphere reverberates with deafening, cacophonous, and strident natural and man-made noises, saturating the air with the discordant sounds of death, grief, and derision. As Monster, the central character of *Red Black and Ignorant* (1994), poetically points out, nature unleashes its alarm system in full force in a desperate attempt to end and deter human folly and atrocity:

> When the rockets destroyed the world everything whistled / Every hard surface and hard edge whistled / Mouth of medicine bottles and whiskey bottles / Cracks in rocks whistled in derision (…) The mountain whistled/ The last breaths and whistled from dead mouths (…) The earth whistled in derision / In final derision at the lord of creation / In derision in derision / That drowned the sounds of explosions and the last screams of the world's masters / The whole earth whistled in derision at the lord of creation. (Bond, *Red Black and Ignorant* 4-5)

From the perspective of Monster, an unborn figure assuming the role of an oracle, Mother Nature is neither silent nor passive. She uses her own language to express anger and warnings, and her elements to inflict sanctions on her children: storms, droughts, floods, earthquakes, and wildfires are not arbitrary phenomena but prophetic signs that hold human responsible. Each disaster becomes a reminder that human greed, excess and violence against the natural order inevitably provokes a harmful reaction. On the other hand, positive collective conduct has the potential to generate goodness among humans and in the natural world. In this sense, nature appears as an active moral force, demanding acknowledgment and accountability. In Monster's view, the

natural warnings and punishments situate nature as a cosmic judge, whose verdict is manifested in elemental convulsions that can neither be ignored nor avoided.

The dramatic space of Bond's *The War Plays* (1994) transcends the limits of the stage and unfolds on a planetary scale. The scenery is no longer confined to one location but extends across deserts, ruined city centres, devastated rural areas, and heavily polluted atmospheres, all of which embody a universal sense of desolation. It becomes a platform where absence, emptiness and mourning are the central actors that dramatise the collapse humanity's spiritual, social, and ecological foundations. The world appears as a chaotic arena in which humans display their most animalistic tendencies.

II- The Bestiary as a Dramatic Narrative of Moral Decadence

In *The War Plays,* Edward Bond aligns himself with the existential reflections of writers such as George Orwell, Albert Camus, and the absurdist tradition of Eugene Ionesco and Kafka, employing animal symbolism as a prism to highlight the complexities of human existence. Like Orwell, for instance, in *Animal Farm* (1945), who exposes the corruption and power struggles of society through the behaviours of animals, or Camus in the Plague, where the epidemic displays collective emotional and social paralysis, Bond uses animals to mirror the absurd fractures and violence of the modern world. Blending absurdist and existentialist motifs, his stage highlights the vulnerabilities, fears and blindness of humanity on the verge of extinction, waging war against itself as vermin colonise the earth and thrive in the shadow of ruins.

In the post-apocalyptic, nuclear-ravaged landscapes of *The War Plays*, human relationships are shaped by trauma and the constant threat of annihilation. Survivors, inhabit ruins, caves and bunkers. They strive to navigate a bleak and hostile world in which trust is tenuous, and every movement may provoke more destruction. The animals in the social jungle of Bond's trilogy do not merely populate the ruined natural landscape, they act as metaphors for human collective and individual behaviour under extreme conditions - instinctive, sometimes as ferocious as the alligators Son evokes in the second play of the trilogy (Bond, *Great Peace* 112), often as defenceless and fearful as the "startled pigeons" in *Red Black and Ignorant* (Bond, *Red Black and Ignorant* 8). Through these allegorical beings, Bond dramatises and highlights the absurdity of human existence and the persistence of basic survival instincts

in a world stripped of moral order and purpose.

The totalitarian world of *The War Plays* is, ironically, not as peaceful as the title of the play may suggest: it is, like Big Brother's state in Orwell's *1984* (1949) or the city of Shogo in *Narrow Road to the Deep North* (1978), under tight surveillance and control. The citizens' movements are closely monitored and every transgression is ruthlessly repressed. As a result, their territories are as quiet as graveyards. This is not because harmony reigns, but because the few survivors in Bond's drama, are like clans of wary meerkats tiptoeing through ruins, skulls, bones and stones. They stifle their noise and limit their motion so as not to trigger the rockets poised in the sky, ready to unleash new waves of destruction. People step lightly in the streets: they fear the vibrations of their steps could set off the rockets. In the privacy of their dark caves, bunkers, and shelters, they refrain from moving their furniture, fearing that the slightest disturbance might register on a radar screen and bring catastrophe upon themselves. As Monster observes: "There were so many rockets, the world looked like a hedgehog" (Bond, *Red Black and Ignorant* 28).

The pathos of human existence is intensified by the haunting presence of famished dogs, emblems of unconditional fidelity, roaming aimlessly among ruins and corpses in search of their dead masters. Their unwavering loyalty, even in the face of annihilation, evokes both tenderness and tragedy, a final echo of devotion in a world emptied of meaning. This image of faithfulness contrasts sharply with the nonsensical spectacle of the old general, scurrying between skeletons in the desert battlefield to steal and collect dead military officers' medals. While the dogs embody unconditional attachment and love persisting beyond death, the general's frantic and egoistic quest for symbols of honour in a time of deep crisis reveals the corruption and mindlessness of human posture. In other terms, the attitudes of the wandering dogs and humans highlight the vanishing moral ground of a dehumanised universe. In their world, the values of loyalty and common sense are incarnated by starving animals, while vanity, greed, and the absurd pursuit of meaningless glory are the defining aspects of humanity. Commenting on this issue, Bond wrote: "Man's unique aggression is that it is turned against his own life, the life of his own species. So, men are dehumanized. Oddly enough, if you must for 'humanity' you must look for it in animals" (Hay and Roberts 44).

The moral corruption of mankind is underscored by the proliferation

of scavengers (hyenas) and vermin (rats, cockroaches, flies) infesting the ruins and shelters of the atomic bomb survivors. The invasive presence of insects, rodents, and hyenas – creatures of darkness and damp that emerge at night to feed on refuse, carcasses and decay are depictions of gangrene and contamination. The expansion of diseases extends the theme of devastation into a potent metaphor of the moral and cultural decomposition. The widespread infestation reflects not only the collapse of material infrastructures but also the disintegration of ethical foundations, exposing a decadent civilisation reduced to verminous survival.

In *The Tin Can People*, the exhibition of human and animal corpses in advanced putrefaction, lying side by side or heaped one upon another, swarming with necrophagus maggots, ants and flies, in both open and closed spaces, from the streets to the mouths of the caves reveals a dramatic amalgamation and equalization between the human and the animal conditions. The functions and fates of humans and animals are no different in times of war: they are both agents and victims of human destruction. The image of "the human maggots on a dead earth" (81) seals their nature together. The similarity is highlighted by the inextricable juxtaposition of their remains on what resembles a vast open-air graveyard: "The bones of animals and people, says The First Man, lie together on the road like broken picture frame. The flies flew: great swarms: I thought the sky was full of funerals: the drumming" (52).

The human body, carrier of culture and reason, becomes the home and food for voracious larvae. When the Third Woman relates to another seriously injured woman and tries to comfort her, her testimony immerses the audience in the inexpressible trauma of the characters:

> The sick came together in a few places- crawled and limped along the streets, followed each other's cries. When the blind touched the walls, they fell on them (…). In the morning there were rooms full of the dead. I watched an old man on a heap of bricks – a whole day (…). The next day I saw the maggots crawling from the dead onto the living: they were too weak to pick them off: they waved in their wounds like sea-anemones. Babies suckled their dead mothers and mothers tried to give milk to their dead babies. (58)

In the charred city of *Red Black and Ignorant* (1994), which is reminiscent of the "corpsed universe," where "nothing stirs," that Beckett portrays in *Endgame*

(1957) (Beckett 106), human suffering is unbearable and universal. "There were so many bodies they buried the earth" (Bond, *The Tin Can People* 93) and some corpses are buried under rubbles and other dead bodies hanging over bridges. The exposure to death and trauma is continuous. To protect their mental health, in the midst of such an apocalyptic world, the play's figures often strive to remain emotionally detached so as not to be overwhelmed with pain. Through their attempt to create insulated mental spaces, they try to disconnect with their own pain and with the suffering of the people and animals around them. The confession of the aptly named Monster, "My nerves are burned, so I feel no pain," is like the woman who goes through the ruins "with all those dead and she never cries" (Bond, *Great Peace* 196). The apathetic posture of these characters in the face of barbarism and trauma are desperate collective attempts to set up psychological and emotional barriers and remain resilient amid cruelty and horror.

Absorbed by their personal anxieties and survival exercises, the characters move like automatons, incapable of compassionate action. Even the most urgent call for help – such as the plights of the charred squirrel, the three-legged dog or the woman trapped under the debris, go unnoticed. Sensitivity, compassion, and moral responsiveness have eroded. The superimposition of Monster's self-imposed numbness and the distress surrounding him amplifies their tragic condition. It echoes the distress and desperate calls for help of Pozzo and Lucky, in Act II of *Waiting for Godot* (1952). Incapable of moral action, Vladimir and Estragon, "like the birds perched on a wall gossipin" (Bond, *Great Peace* 221), get lost in meaningless philosophical speculations. They fail to respond to persistent pleas for rescue and end up in the situation of distress in which Pozzo and Lucky find themselves. The collective plight resembles the fate of "the birds whose feathers turned lead overnight" in *The War Plays* (Bond, *The Tin Can People* 82).

Driven by instincts of self-preservation and by fear, the figures of *The War Plays* (1994) resemble a herd of enraged pachyderms similar to those Ionesco depicts in *Rhinoceros* (1960). They rampage across and further ravage fragile landscapes already reduced to ruins and ashes. They burn farms, poison rivers and food reserves, and set fires to bread convoys on camp squares before rows of dishevelled and starving children, who are often "crushed like flies" (Bond, *Great Peace* 119). Such merciless and unsparing scorched-earth tactics recall contemporary images of civilian suffering in war zones. The

collective murderous rage and the senseless sufferings of innocent people the nomadic belligerents provoke in their wake, exposes not only a complete absence of moral grounding but also the collapse of any framework of responsibility or ethical restraint.

In *Great Peace* and *The Tin Can People*, the recurrent image of the imperturbable stupid cow, grazing mechanically in the middle of ravaged cities and wilderness, while children, dogs, rabbits, monkeys, along with other living creatures are being ruthlessly exterminated by pigs and mice, serves as a powerful allegory of human passivity in the face of systemic violence. Through this persistent metaphor, Bond does not merely expose the paralysis of human empathy but also the normalization of the abnormal in modern societies. The cow, frozen in its mechanical routine, becomes a poignant symbol of the collective complacency, herd-like conformity and inaction that allow cycles of destruction and atrocities to perpetrate unchallenged. In this light, the image of the cow, a direct criticism of the silence and inertia of witnesses of human violence.

In the decaying world of *The War Plays*, rats and mice no longer lurk beneath the surface, in sewers, in shadows or in hidden corners. Instead, they invade homes, public spaces, mass graves and mounds of debris. Their omnipresence becomes a chilling emblem of death, decomposition, and pervasive fear. These physical and psychological realities seem both inescapable and unrelenting. This atmosphere of squalor recalls Albert Camus's *The Plague* (2006*)*, written before and during the Second World War. In his novel, the philosophical narrative begins with rats emerging from the sewers and dying in the streets. The citizens of Oran dismiss this unsettling phenomenon. Their initial response is disbelief and denial, just as they later downplay the gravity of the plague itself. But as the dead rats pile up and contaminated human casualties follow, the inhabitants of Oran are forced to confront the truth they long refused to face- whether it be illness, morality, or moral corruption.

Much like the rhinoceroses in Ionesco's *Rhinoceros* (1960), the rats and the plague in Camus's novel serve as metaphors for the insidious spread of totalitarianism, collective alienation, and blindness. Similarly, in Bond's trilogy, the destructive rodents as well as the filthy and greedy pigs, symbolically embody oppressive military troops. Like soldiers in the battlefields, rats spread death, devastation and desolation. In "The Poems for *The War Plays*" (1994),

the Walking Woman caustically observes: "The world was grey with ash and the dust of cinders. At night and in storms- great darkness (…) She said the military are mice- their droppings are everywhere- you can tell the places they have infected" (371). In Bond's theatrical iconography, the portrayal of soldiers both as destruction agents and victims underlines the absurdity and cruelty of militarism. Young soldiers, in *The War Plays* as well as in his previous plays like *Lear* (1978) or *Narrow Road to the Deep North* (1978) are systematically compared to cattle led to slaughter and sacrificed for absurd political ends. They are raised, trained, reduced to numbers, units, and herded into trenches, camps or barracks like livestock into enclosures, ready for sacrifice at the will of their authorities.

Drawing on the established absurdist and existentialist literary traditions, Bond's *The War Plays* is a compelling reflective fable on human folly and destruction. The animals that inhabit his dramatic world embody the moral blindness, greed and irresponsibility that drive humanity into chaos and senseless suffering. Through the vices of the animals, the dramatist holds up a mirror to society and, in doing so, forces the audiences to confront humanity's dark nature and inclination to self-destruction. The tragic experiences of his characters are a persistent call for global justice and peace. The establishment of new world order Bond yearns for cannot happen without a radical transformation of the universal consciousness.

3. Reawakening of Human Consciousness

In *The War Plays*, Bond approaches the environment from multiple perspectives; as a mirror of psychological and socio-economic violence, and of human suffering and restlessness in a chaotic world. The physical settings of his plays become a life-size projection of contemporary anxieties and traumas. Yet, unlike the landscapes of the Theatre of the Absurd, which deliberately depict humanity trapped in futile existential cycles, Bond's environments function above all as indicators of the urgent societal transformation required the world more humane and habitable.

The dramatic structure of Bond's trilogy is deliberately incoherent, fragmented, and chaotic, highlighting the fractured lives of its characters. It unfolds as a disquieting mosaic of broken tableaux, fleeting snapshots, recollections, prophecies, songs, poetic fragments, and silences. Past and future perspectives intertwine to address a wide spectrum of moral, social and

political concerns; from military brutality against women and children, to youth unemployment, leadership crises, the devastation of biodiversity, and community collapse and renewal. These dominant themes are interlaced with surreal, fantastic imagery and striking proverbial utterances, all designed to leave a profound imprint on global consciousness and its ongoing journey. For Bond, the crises of our times stem from collective worldviews and social dynamics. His characters persistently exhort us to arm ourselves "with a bit of nous" (Bond, *Great Peace* 176) to reshape the foundation of a new world order.

In Bond's dramatic iconography, the earth and the humans who dwell on it have lost their vitality, consistency and normal state. "I've seen the world drip off at end of a spade, I've seen the sea turned t' stone!" laments Woman (Bond, *Great Peace* 234), depicting a planet warped by humanoids devoid of reason and moral substance, "skeletons with no bones" (Bond, *Great Peace* 142). These "Uman blobs squashed flat, like specimens" (Bond, *Great Peace* 171), as Soldiers 4 and 2 define themselves and the other aliens around them, reshape the planet in their own image, reducing it to a flattened, amorphous, and lifeless mass, which suffocates under mountains of refuse and from the stench from dead organisms scattered on the land and in watercourses. The heavy pollution restricts their well-being. In *The Tin Can People*, the citizens cannot walk, swim in or relax by the rivers because the waterways are so heavily polluted and full of hazardous detritus. They are "clogged with debris: bodies and doorways and bricks (…) as if a giant had flushed his toilet: this was the sewer" (57). The detritus that the river currents carry, the epidemics they spread, the ruined billboards, the dead malls and the "clouds of flies" in the ruins (87) announce both the end of consumer culture and the necessity to build new societal foundations, based on sustainable ecological and socioeconomic practices.

In Scene Sixteen of *Great Peace* (1994), Bond places his audience inside the very room of the New Community. This intimate space, where most collective decision are made, functions as a metaphor for the heart and mind of the rebuilders of the community. Yet, in their governance, they unwittingly replicate the same patterns of fear, exclusion, hatred, and violence that shaped the old world. Desperately seeking autarky, the New Community isolates itself not only from nature but also from the wider human sphere. Their enclosed life recalls the underground steel bunker in *The Tin Can People* or the king's wall in *Lear* (1978). They regard outsiders, be they visitors or new settlers, as

enemies. To produce food and defend themselves, they revive obsolete ways of living by unearthing and repairing buried machines, setting them back in motion.

Although frail and near the end of her dramatic journey, Woman ultimately distances herself from this community, much like Evans, the old hermit in Bond's early play, *The Sea* (1978). Seeing their inability or perhaps their unwillingness to heed the lessons of history, she withdraws from her clan. She chooses solitude amid the ruins where she dies shortly thereafter, bereft of human companionship. First Woman, equally disillusioned, voices a bitter regret that her fellow members cannot learn from humanity's bloody past and repeated failures: "We don't learn from other people's mistakes- not even from most of our own. But knowledge is collected and tools handed on." (Bond, *The Tin Can People* 96)

In *Great Peace* (1994), Bond denounces the systematic erasure and falsification of history, as well as the farcical construction of collective memory, employed as instruments of propaganda and domination. The museum, official speeches, and hollow peace celebrations emerge as dystopian emblems, grotesque theatrical rituals crafted to obscure reality, shape collective perception, and reinforce the chains in the head. The Peace Museum commemorates peace only by hollowing out its essence, deepening divisions and tensions, much like the wall in Bond's *Lear* (1978) Both the wall and the museum fail to secure harmony or protection; instead, they serve as political devices to instil fear within and beyond the territories where such infrastructures are imposed.

The disappearance of a fundamental text such the *Book of Manners*, together with the deliberate mutilation of reference works, exemplified by the tearing of dictionary pages, illustrate a calculated strategy of censorship. These acts are not isolated accidents but deliberate mechanisms orchestrated by "rulers with redness in their hands, blackness in their hearts, and ignorance in their minds" (Bond, *Red Black and Ignorant* 39). By depriving their citizens of access to knowledge and corrupting the very instruments of learning, the authorities weaken the foundations of critical thought and of a free culture. In doing so, they ensure the collective consciousness remains impoverished, malleable, and docile, locked into complacency and obedience through ignorance. The destruction of books thus becomes an assault on culture: it is symbolic violence aimed at erasing memory, narrowing imagination and

creativity and foreclosing the possibility of intellectual resistance.

In Bond's perspective, it is crucial to remember that morality is the responsibility of each individual. It becomes an instrument of oppression when it is imposed or administered by external authorities or institutions, be they called "Leviathan" or "Big Brother". When human conscience is subjected to institutional control and coercion, then it inevitably leads to alienation and reinforces tyranny and dictatorship. In Bond's modern tragedy, *The Worlds*, Bigdyke, a young rebel leader, whose convictions sometimes reflect those of the dramatist, dismisses the government's desperate attempt to end the prevailing political unrest through intellectual repression, and anti-terrorism legislation. To his insurgent comrades, Bond's hero explains unambiguously: "Morality is the responsibility of the individual. The government is not the keeper of your conscience. That would make it totalitarian. In the end the fate of a nation is decided not by its rulers but by those who are ruled" (67). The ultimate objective of the violent political resistance, led by Bigdyke and his companions, though incoherent in its approach, is to restore social justice, harmony and peace in their deeply fragmented world. The antagonistic realities of their social classes and their violent struggles for justice yield nothing but permanent chaos and collective trauma. Peace, in the context of *Great Peace* (1994), is a deceptive façade: the irony of the play's title hardly veils the pervasive violence that dominates the world of Bond's trilogy. Although nuclear warfare is temporarily suspended, social tensions and the economic rifts between North and South remain sharply intensified. As Bond explains, "A world divided into rich and poor cannot be at peace" (Bond, *Commentary on The War Plays* 362-63). He reminds us that the planet has enough resources to eradicate poverty and many diseases. In his view, humanity is still in its infancy development stage; our collective spiritual, moral and emotional growth is dependent on the establishment of social justice: "When society is unjust, it damages many things- ideas, feelings, emotions, relationships, work, law, the very ways we seen treat and relate to one another. All become corrupted. We cannot live without justice" (Bond, *Four Pieces: A Short Book for Troubled Times* XIX).

In Bond's view, the post-modern era, which is characterized by unprecedented technological advancement, the relentless pace of globalisation and intensification of tensions, compels us to redefine our collective understanding of what it means to be human. The solution to the current crisis

and survival of humanity depends on our collective worldview and our perception of humanness in a dynamic world. In other words, the accelerating fusion of cultures and economies not only transforms how individuals relate but also raises urgent ethical, social and existential questions about the nature of humanity in a highly interconnected but fractured world. Reiterating the teaching of Socrates, Monster, the central character in *Red Black and Ignorant* (1994), calls for a deep collective introspection:

> All that is needed is to define rightly what it is to be human
> If we define it wrongly we die
> If we define it and teach it rightly we shall live
> The first playwright said know yourself. (38)

The ancient Greek philosopher's exhortation recurs like a leitmotif throughout the dramatist's trilogy. In Bond's view, the self is the relationship to the social and natural worlds. Owing to the limitless scope of the mind and the inherently social character of human existence, humanity apprehends the physical world through imagination. Human consciousness is shaped by the physical and social environments. For the sake of human survival, it is, in Bond's perspective, both imperative and urgent to re-envision the fabric of social relations and our communion with the web of life of our planet, so as to restore meaning and purpose to the existential trajectory of humanity.

On both personal and global levels, Bond argues, the adoption of new ethical values rooted in knowledge, altruism and compassion is indispensable. The survival of our species depends not merely on technological progress or political arrangements but on a profound moral transformation. "We must be kind" (Bond, *Great Peace* 214) and "learn the art of peace" (Bond, *The Tin Can People* 86), proclaims the dramatist, emphasising the value of compassion and justice in human relationships. For the playwright, hatred is not simply an individual vice but a destructive social force that corrupts the natural order itself; it "dilutes the rivers; curdles the oceans" (Bond, *Great Peace* 194). Such metaphors reveal the inseparability of human ethics and ecological balance, suggesting that moral failures of society reverberate through the environment. In this sense, he positions compassion and equity not only as ethical imperatives but as sine qua non conditions for the regeneration of both humanity and the planet.

Through the disillusionment of his characters, Bond explicitly demonstrates that consumer culture itself is but ruin-in-progress. It

perpetrates an insatiable sense of longing and frustration in the individual, while fostering absurd rivalries and crime, and continuous environmental destruction:

Our social reality is a heap of luxury floating in space; the starving watch us eat; the wounded make us make weapons; it is an age of killing and consuming. We need a new relationship to the world, so that we may keep death out of it till its due time. (Bond, *Commentary on The War Plays* 298)

The War Plays trilogy stages the plight of distressed and disoriented humans struggling to survive in a post-nuclear world. Blinded by rage and despair, they confront the terrifying possibility of losing their identity, but they realise that they cannot "give up the name human" (28). Yet, beneath the abyss of suffering and alienation, persists a fragile impulse to rediscover their true nature, make a sense of their world and lead an authentic and fulfilling existence. His work dramatises the persistent tensions between dehumanization and the search for renewal, making his dramatic fresco not only a reflection on the aftermath of nuclear catastrophe but also a meditation on what it means to be human in the face of possible annihilation.

Conclusion

The ruined landscapes in Edward Bond's plays read like texts: they are maps of a turbulent history, traumatic consciousness, and fierce inner and external struggles. His trilogy, *The War Plays* (1994), confronts the fundamental dilemmas of modernity by charting the complex and dynamic relationships between human consciousness, social violence and the natural world, as well as the pathologies of consumerist culture. His characters inhabit moribund social and natural environments, marked by physical, mental and emotional desolation. Condemned to wandering and exile, they appear as a herd of mammals engaged in an absurd choreography across their wasteland, endlessly repeating the very mechanisms of their paralysing collective trauma. Their journey through their ruined or desert landscapes thus takes the form of collective odyssey, reflecting for a search for a possible way out of the ideological and existential impasse in which they remain trapped.

The dramatic narratives of *The War Plays* intertwine fables, poetry, songs and dreams. They are grounded in an aesthetic of rationality and inclusion, which mobilises imagination and creativity not only as instruments of socio-political critique but also as conceptual levers for ethical reflection.

By transcending the conventional boundaries of classic theatre and the legacies of the Theatre of the Absurd, his approach creates a space for critical reflexion and aesthetic experimentation, enabling the confrontation of dominant ideologies and the exploration of alternative societal models.

The ultimate objective of Bond's uncompromising, pioneering 'in-yer-face' theatrical production seeks to end socio-political violence. In the nuclear age and in the face of unprecedented environmental destruction, the author of *The War Plays* solemnly exhorts us, through the portrayal of the stark realities and miseries of his heroes, to reimagine human relations and restore sacredness and respect in our collective relations with the earth. In his perspective, the creation of a fair, peaceful and meaningful world is a sine qua non condition for a sound collective mental health, moral growth and well-being. The playwright envisions a free socialist system as a solution to the current global crises but he remains vague about the practical implementation of this societal change.

Works Cited

Barreau, Jean-Claude. *Quelle morale pour aujourd'hui ?* Plon, 1994.

Beckett, Samuel. *The Complete Dramatic Works*. Faber and Faber, 1986.

Bond, Edward. "Commentary on *The War Plays*." *Plays: 6*, Methuen, 1994, pp. 246–363.

---. *Early Morning*. *Plays: One*, Methuen, 1977.

---. *Four Pieces*. *Plays: Three*, Methuen, 1987.

---. *Great Peace*. *Plays: 6*, Methuen, 1994, pp. 99–244.

---. *La trame cachée*. L'Arche, 2000.

---. *Lear*. *Plays: Two*, Methuen, 1978.

---. *Narrow Road to the Deep North*. *Plays: Two*, Methuen, 1978.

---. "Poems for *The War Plays*." *Plays: 6*, Methuen, 1994, pp. 365–375.

---. *Red Black and Ignorant*. *Plays: 6*, Methuen, 1994, pp. 3–48.

---. *The Sea*. *Plays: Two*, Methuen, 1978.

---. *The Tin Can People*. *Plays: 6*, Methuen, 1994, pp. 49–97.

---. *The War Plays*. *Plays: 6*, Methuen, 1994.

---. *The Worlds*. *Plays: Four*, Methuen, 1992. First published 1980.

Burchett, Wilfred. *Hiroshima maintenant*. Messidor / Temps actuels, 1984.

Camus, Albert. *La peste*. Gallimard, 2006. First published 1947.

Dorst, Jean. *La nature dé-naturée*. Delachaux et Niestlé, 1965.

Dostaler, Gilles, and Bernard Maris. *Capitalisme et pulsion de mort*. Albin Michel, 2009.

Eliot, T. S. "The Waste Land." *Collected Poems 1909–1962*, Faber and Faber, 1963, pp. 61–85.

Esslin, Martin. *The Theatre of the Absurd*. Vintage, 2001. First published 1961.

Garaudy, Roger. *Appel aux vivants*. Seuil, 1979.

Hay, Malcolm, and Philip Roberts. *Edward Bond: A Companion to the Plays*. TQ Publications, 1978.

Hirst, David. *Edward Bond*. Macmillan, 1985.

Ionesco, Eugène. *Rhinoceros*. Grove Press, 1960. First published 1959.

Lappin, Lou. *The Art and Politics of Edward Bond*. Peter Lang Publishing, 1987.

Mangan, Michael. *Edward Bond*. Northcote House Publishers, 1998.

Roberts, Philip. *Bond on File*. Methuen, 1985.

Scharine, R. *The Plays of Edward Bond*. Associated University Presses, 1976.

Spencer, J. S. *Dramatic Strategies in the Plays of Edward Bond*. Cambridge University Press, 1992.

How to cite this article/Comment citer cet article:
MLA: Pame, Ousmane Aly. "Dystopian Topographies of the Mind and Nature in Edward Bond's *The War Plays*." *Uirtus*, vol. 5, no. 3, 2025, pp. 99-119, https://doi.org/10.59384/uirtus.dec2025n25.