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STULTIFYING IN STRAWS: THE EXISTENTIAL ETHICS OF A PSEUDO-ACTIVIST IN EDWARD BOND'S *SAVED*

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Abstract

Pseudo-activity as a mode of engagement devised by contemporary politics has become a proper channel through which the systems have enabled themselves to engage people all the time with complex local and global governmental issues, the resolving of which is beyond the ordinary individuals' sphere. Pseudo-activity on the one hand, ensures the systems that people's passivity is disrupted and on the other, this consistent preoccupation distances them from focusing on their existential priorities and ultimately leads to a form of self-forgetfulness and lack of responsibility towards their own existence. This study perceives the setting of Edward Bond's play *Saved* as a similar context where the leading outsider character Len has engrossed himself so intensely with the immoral and disturbing actions of people around him that he has almost lost sight of his own existential grounding. By adopting an Existential approach and bonding it to Žižek's understanding of pseudo-activity, the study will provide Len with a possible opportunity to escape pseudo-activity and to be saved.

Keywords: Bond; Existentialism; pseudo-activity; Systemic violence; Žižek.

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Introduction

This study argues that Len, the central figure in Edward Bond's *Saved*, inhabits a moral position fundamentally out of joint with the society around him. Within a community marked by ethical numbness, affective detachment, and systemic violence, Len's repeated attempts to intervene, to help, to care, and to restore meaning, ultimately devolve into gestures of futility. In line with this reading, the study aims to show that Len does not truly belong to the violent and emotionally desensitized social world he inhabits, and that he is frittering his moments away with the false hope and belief that he is "clutching at straws" (Bond 1966, 7). His continued efforts to assist those around him do not transform the situation; rather, they are absorbed by the very system they seek to counter, rendering his ethical struggles both ineffective and structurally co-opted.

To frame this contradiction, the article turns to Slavoj Žižek's concept of pseudo-activity, which describes the compulsive drive to "do something" (Žižek 2008, 217) in the face of systemic crises, not to resolve them, but to avoid confronting their structural causes. Žižek defines pseudo-activity as "the urge to be active, to participate, to mask the nothingness of what goes on" (Žižek 217), suggesting that such activity reinforces ideological stability under the guise of engagement. Within this framework, Len's interventions are not signs of moral triumph but of existential misrecognition: his actions serve only to perpetuate the futility he cannot name. Accordingly, the study begins by outlining the existentialist context in Britain at the time Bond was writing, in order to situate *Saved* within its broader philosophical and cultural moment. It then examines the nature and the dilemma of Len's existence within such a community, and interprets him as an embodiment of pseudo-activity, in which ethical subjectivity is slowly diminished into a series of inarticulate and ineffectual gestures. Rather than offering resolution, the play stages an ethical impasse, where the very impulse to do good is caught in a structure that renders such efforts meaningless. This reading does not presume that Bond consciously framed Len through Žižekian or existentialist theory, but argues that these frameworks help clarify the ethical contradictions embedded in the play. In this sense, the study remains attentive both to Bond's dramaturgical strategies and to the philosophical tensions they bring to the surface.

Contextualizing Saved: Existentialism, Postwar Britain, and Bond's Dramaturgy

Post-World War II Britain witnessed a complex confrontation of existentialism, marked by initial skepticism and hostility. British intellectuals such as H. R. Trevor-Roper famously dismissed existentialism as "an irrational philosophy of defeat" (Woessner 2012, 149). To him, it seemed inseparable from the mood of despair lingering in postwar France and Germany, nations struggling to make sense of their complicity, their losses, and their shattered ideologies.

Trevor-Roper went so far as to link existentialism's flirtation with nihilism to the ideological shadows of Nazism, viewing it as a threat to the cultural stability and moral clarity Britain sought in the aftermath of victory. His reaction mirrored a wider postwar mood of "British exceptionalism" (Woessner 149), a sense that Britain, unlike its continental neighbors, had resisted moral collapse and thus ought to chart a separate intellectual course, one wary of abstract theories that might look like surrender. However, despite such dismissals, existentialism began to find a foothold in British thought and culture through various channels.

Prominent figures like Iris Murdoch and Samuel Beckett were consequential in introducing existentialist themes into British thought. Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1953) unleashed a barrage of interest in portraying and interpreting the post-World War II existential void in literature, a condition later referred to as a ubiquitous "continental pathos" (154).

Murdoch, through her philosophical works and novels, actively engaged with existentialism, particularly Sartre's ideas. In *Sartre: Romantic Rationalist* (1953), she presented existentialism as a critical counterpoint to the linguistic analysis dominating British philosophy at the time. She argued that existentialism's focus on freedom, morality, and lived experience could revitalize the moral imagination and ethical inquiry, which she found lacking in the analytic tradition. Murdoch (1999) contends that considering Sartre, "The fundamental and attractive idea was freedom…that man was self-created. Sartre produced a fresh and apt picture of this self-chosen being…The heroic consciousness, the individual self, inalienably and ineluctably free, challengingly confronted the 'given,' in the form of existing society, history, tradition, [and] other people" (9).

By the mid-1950s, Colin Wilson's *The Outsider* (1956), became a bestseller which "sought to say something insightful about pressing existential matters" (Woessner 164). Wilson described the Outsider as "the one man who knows he is sick in a civilization that doesn't know it is sick" (167), who captures the existentialist search for meaning in an alienating world. *The Outsider* portrays the alienated individual as a vanguard of societal transformation.

While existentialism was often perceived as a "foreign contagion" (149), and never fully endorsed by the prevailing analytic philosophy of Oxford and Cambridge of the time, its critique of alienation and its emphasis on the individual's confrontation with freedom found continuing resonance in British thought. From Beckett's absurdist theatre to Murdoch's philosophical reflections and Wilson's popular texts, existentialism's reception in Britain reveals a dense and complex discourse between continental and British intellectual movements.

Bond's *Saved*, is a play that emerged during a period of intensified philosophical inquiry into moral agency, social determinism, and the limits of human commitments. While Bond may not have explicitly aligned himself with existentialist thinkers, *Saved* clearly engages with several of their preoccupations like the erosion of ethical language, the paralysis of moral action, and the question of what it means to act humanely in a dehumanizing society. This article does not claim that Bond constructed Len as a direct embodiment of existentialist

theory. Rather, it offers an interpretation of Len's character as one that resonates with existential and post-existential frameworks, particularly through the lens of Žižek's concept of pseudo-activity. The intent is not to reduce Len to a philosophical thought experiment, but to illuminate how Bond's dramaturgical strategies dramatize ethical contradictions that remain salient in contemporary theory. Žižek's work, though appeared in following decades, helps to frame the logic of ethical paralysis and unconsidered action that Bond had already begun to stage. Accordingly, the use of both existentialist framework and Žižekian critique offer a productive lens to study the logic of futile activity as dramatized in *Saved*, while remaining attentive to the play's ethical contradictions and its grounding in the structures of systemic violence.

A seminal figure in contemporary British theatre, Edward Bond is an outspoken playwright in portraying the brutality, violence, injustices, and failures embedded in British society. His characters-most notably in his original play *Saved*; are often coming from marginalized and working-class backgrounds, are deeply rooted in their social contexts whose actions and doings are central to the narrative. They are frequently driven by a need to survive and navigate brutal and oppressive circumstances. His narratives highlight the dehumanizing effects of economic inequality and social marginalization. Bond's play *Saved*, first staged in 1965, is a dark depiction of working-class life in London, including a contentious scene in which a baby is stoned to death. The play's reception and its implications for censorship were consequential. Critics responded to *Saved* with divided opinions. Some criticized the play's content as excessively violent and morally disturbing, focusing on the extreme violence particularly the notorious baby stoning scene which many considered disturbing and unfit for the stage, while others praised Bond for his raw and uncompromising portrayal of social issues, appreciating Bond's ability to target the harshness and brutality of contemporary life, considering it a necessary societal critique. The play sparked significant controversy over its content, contributing to broader debates about artistic censorship. This controversy played a key role in galvanizing opposition to censorship laws, leading to the eventual passage of the Theatres Act 1968, which abolished the Lord Chamberlain's authority to censor plays. Consequently, *Saved* became a turning point in British theatre history, both for its content and its role in advancing artistic freedom (Billingham 1992, 7-9).

Bond's influence on subsequent playwrights and theatrical movements is profound. The brutal realism and sociopolitical critique of the iconoclastic play *Saved*, inspired a wave of "in-yer-face theatre" (Sierz 2012, 233) in the 1990s, advocated by writers such as Sarah Kane and Mark Ravenhill, to whom Bond is described in many ways "a godfather figure" (178).

Additionally, Bond's commitment to addressing the failures of societal structures through theatre positioned him as a direct successor to Bertolt Brecht. In a letter to a friend Bond once said: "You know that I regard Brecht as an influence and of course I shall continue to be influenced by him. But it is an influence about which I have always felt - and stated - unease. He is a major playwright and about

this I have no unease" (Bond 2000, 171). Like Brecht, Bond uses the theatre as a means to engage with and critique society. They both explore public individuals and social situations, rejecting private or purely autobiographical narratives, representing "social situations and confront moral and political dilemmas vital to their society" (11). Though admittingly confirming to have inherited many traits from Brecht such as his adoption of alienation effect, Bond also emphasizes his differences in employing them in his drama and sometimes transforming them in British theatre as well. While Bond adapts Brecht's alienation effect, he applies it differently. Bond asserts "I take alienation from within the act—I do not apply it. From within the center of the drama, the alienation may be made to reveal itself as fact" (173). These conceptual distinctions manifest powerfully in *Saved*, where Bond not only challenged the traditional dramatic forms but also demonstrated the potential of drama to critique societal norms and sought to confront audiences with unsettling truths about violence, alienation, and systemic injustice.

Saved features the arrival of the outsider Len into a despicable community, the actions of which are most ignominious. Set in a working-class neighborhood in South London, the play portrays a bleak and violent world in which characters live in a state of social estrangement, moral erosion, and desultory existence which are deeply woven into the fabric of their lives. At the center of the narrative is the infamous scene of a baby-stoning, a brutal act that unquestionably reflects the moral depravity of the individuals and the ethical collapse of the society. Following this harrowing event, the family dynamics devolve further into chaos. Pam, the mother of the murdered child, displays a chilling emotional detachment, focusing instead on her obsessive infatuation with Fred, the baby's father and one of the perpetrators of the mentioned atrocity. Her inability to confront her grief or the reality of the situation reflects the broader emotional failure of the household. Meanwhile, Pam's parents, Harry and Mary, sink deeper into their entrenched patterns of hostility, engaging in petty arguments and escalating physical altercations. Their avoidance of any meaningful confrontation with the tragedy emphasizes their moral and emotional stagnation, while their quarrel creates a toxic environment steeped in inertia and decay. Amid this, Len becomes entangled with Pam, whose debilitated relationship with Fred, leads to further conflict and tragedy. Despite his efforts to care for others and foster connections, Len remains an outsider, enduring scorn and exploitation from those around him. To this society, he is so benign and public-spirited and, in Bond's own words, "optimistic" (Bond 1966, 1), that most of the time he is oblivious of the priority of his own existence. He even loses various jobs to take care of those half-strangers who are always mean to him. Len's uncertain and precarious arrival at the start of the play, foreshadowing his vulnerability and loss of direction, is ultimately redeemed by his decisive departure in the final scene, an act that suggests he is in some sense, saved from the futility of his own well-meaning but ineffective interventions. This dynamic of Len's encounters with others, defined

by ethical responsibility and relentless efforts to care despite rejection, resonates with Emmanuel Levinas' existential phenomenology.

"The face opens the primordial discourse whose first word is obligation" (Levinas 2007, 201). In Emmanuel Levinas' existential phenomenology, the face is not a thing-in-itself and a reified object in the worldly landscape that no metaphysical knowledge could be dragged out of it. For him, the face of the other is a "living presence" (66), a bearer of expressions which its recognition invites the self "to a relation" (198). The face-to-face encounter with the other is the originator of the inter-subjective relation that addresses the self to approach the other, it is an affinity which entails ethical obligation. This approximation necessitates movement from a precognitive phase to a recognition embodying responsibility, as Levinas declares "to recognize the Other is to recognize a hunger. To recognize the Other is to give... the face of the Other is destitute; it is the poor for whom I can do all and to whom I owe all" (75). In Edward Bond's play *Saved*, in like manner, the face of the other is consequential to determine how the characters connect each other. As the playwright himself asserts in the "Author's Note" about his "irresponsibly optimistic" (Bond *Saved,* 7) play, "the gesture of turning the other cheek is often a way of refusing to look facts in the face. This is not true of Len" (7). The outsider Len enters the play, looks the people in the face and senses the obligation to intervene in their pitiable lives. According to Bond, "he lives with people at their most hopeless (that is the point of the final scene) and does not turn away from them" (7).

Here the problem of Len is a part of his solution. For his own sake, he can try to break his gaze with the Levinasian Other(s). He comprises almost nothing like the other characters in the play, except that he is an impoverished young working-class boy. On the other hand, barbarism and immorality inundates the lives of the rest of the community surrounding him. They are not to be blamed, though. Poverty and immorality are not natural and self-engendered facts that one could claim that poor and immoral people were born so and this is what they truly are, but it is a direct "Subjective"[1] violence brought on the surface, the roots of which are inherent in the "Systemic"[2] violence that makes its presence possible. The phrase 'working-class' automatically signifies political and economic conditions. It is palpable how these people and specifically their relations have been reified by the political and economic systems. Reification, practically impregnates the play. Even the love relations have turned into merely sexual exchange, to produce a commodity (a baby) and then to consume it (to kill it). However, Len stands alone. He immediately falls in love with Pam after he has an affair with her in the beginning of the play. He "fiddles with the loose leg" (Bond *Saved,* 122) of the chair to fix it after it is broken when Pam's parents are having a violent altercation. Levinas (2007) describes "the Other who dominates me in his transcendence is thus the stranger, the widow, and the orphan, to whom I am obligated" (215). Len's super attention to Pam implies as if he is dominated by her who has been deserted like a widow by her nonchalant boyfriend and dominated by his own stranger self, absorbed in helping others, and also is left obliged as the only one

to take care of the orphan-like baby which its parents reject. Ultimately, the baby is cruelly tortured and killed by Fred's gang. For Levinas (1985) "the face is what forbids us to kill" (86). Being so, before murdering the baby, Pete suggests to "rub the little bastard's face in it" (Bond, *Saved* 68). Barry takes the baby's diapers and rubs the feces to its face. Evidently, these characters as human beings are incapable to encounter the Other. They are incapable of facing the Other and establishing an ethical relation.

Pseudo-activity as a mode of engagement devised by contemporary politics, has become a proper channel through which the systems have enabled themselves to engage people all the time with complex local and global governmental issues, the resolving of which is not at the discretion of ordinary individuals. Pseudo-activity on the one hand, ensures the systems that people's passivity is disrupted and on the other, this consistent preoccupation distances people from focusing on their existential priorities and ultimately leads to a form of self-forgetfulness and lack of responsibility towards their own existence. This study perceives the setting of Edward Bond's play *Saved* as a similar context where the leading outsider character Len has engrossed himself so intensely with the immoral and disturbing actions of people around him that he has almost forgotten himself as an existing self. By adopting an Existential approach and bonding it to Žižek's understanding of pseudo-activity, the study provides Len with a possible opportunity to be saved. However, as Bond contends, *Saved* is an optimistic play. Optimistic in the sense that Len's pessimism at the end of the play will help him to realize the abortive nature of his efforts in assisting others and will compel him to depart at the first light of morning.

Normal mundane sphere of social obligations

Len, the nineteen-year-old central character in Bond's play and a member of London's working-class society, enters the stage stripped of any explicit historical, religious, or familial context; neither the character himself nor the narrative offers the audience access to his personal background or lived experiences. In fact, none of the characters does so, except for Pete who proudly reminisces the story of how he once deliberately murdered a boy with his van for which he expects admiration. Len is the antithesis to all the other people surrounding him. He is so attentive and beneficent towards them, and in Bond's words "optimistic," that most of the time he forgets the priority of his own existence. He even loses various jobs to take care of those who are often mean to him. Len is a character who embodies existentialist principles, which are aligned closely with Simone de Beauvoir's (1948) statement that "to will oneself free is also to will others free" (73). Guided by this conviction, he consistently assumes responsibility for others, treating their concerns as if they were his own. Yet in doing so, he neglects a fundamental tenet of existentialism, that authentic responsibility must begin with oneself. In her introduction to Sartre's book *Existentialism is a Humanism*, Annie Cohen-Solal (2007) elaborates on existentialism's core ethos:

> Sartre went on to map out existentialism's territory, defining it as a kind of 'optimism' and a 'doctrine of action,' and man as someone who 'first exists: he materializes in the world, encounters himself, and only afterward defines himself… He will not be anything until later, and then he will be what he makes of himself… Man is nothing other than his own project. He exists only to the extent that he realizes himself, therefore he is nothing more than the sum of his actions… responsible for what he is… free… condemned to be free…commit[ing] himself to life' (10).

Sartre's existentialism, with its focus on action and the acceptance of personal responsibility, serves as a counterpoint to Len's pseudo-activity. This contrast deepens the argument concerning the pursuit of an authentic existence, highlighting the tension between collective responsibility and individual self-realization. It is but, until the end of the play, that he comes to full awareness that his clutching at straws to the last moment, was nothing more than stultifying in straws. He comes to the conclusion that all his struggles and sacrifices to help the people within the play, to cope with and ameliorate their adversities, to make them understand what compassion and humanity truly is, were actually ineffective. This realization is most explicit in Scene Eleven, when Len finally breaks down under the weight of his moral efforts: "I'm tryin' t' 'elp! 'Oo else'll 'elp? If I go will they come back? Will the baby come back? Will 'e come back? I'm the only one that's stayed an' yer wan'a get rid a me!" (Bond *Saved*, 113). The rhetorical desperation of these questions marks a turning point in Len's journey: he recognizes that his attempts to help have neither reversed nor redeemed the violence and emotional void around him. A similar moment appears earlier in Scene Five, where Len persistently tries to help Pam reconnect with the baby and take care of herself, only to be met with contempt: "Don't keep tellin' me what I ought a do" (44). Pam rejects his every gesture, dismissing him with hostility even when he gently encourages her: "Yer'd feel better" (44). These scenes illustrate the futility of Len's ethical commitment and underscore the existential void into which his efforts fall. His presence becomes a tragic emblem of moral tenacity in a space structurally resistant to transformation.

This emotional dissonance has earlier roots in Scene Two, when Len attempts to sympathize with Pam's dysfunctional upbringing by her parents. He exclaims, "They ought to be shot" (24), horrified by the conditions in which she was raised. But Pam simply shrugs off his concern: "Yer can't do nothin', yer know. No one'll thank yer" (24). Her response cuts to the heart of Len's dilemma, his sense of moral obligation is neither recognized nor desired. His care is surplus to a world anesthetized to compassion.

Finally, even small gestures, like fixing up the house or offering warmth, are rebuffed. In Scene Five, Len remarks, "Someone's got a stick up for yer. Yer treated me like dirt. But I ain't goin' a carry on like that" (44). His decision to stay, to "clutch at straws," becomes not a victory of integrity but a quiet exposure of ethical futility in a collapsed moral landscape.

What seems to be central to all these moments is that Len's commitment to help others, while sincere, is met with resistance, indifference, or sheer hostility.

His ethical determination becomes tragic not because it fails entirely, but because the world around him is basically incapable of welcoming it.

His demanding efforts, to his disappointment, proved incapable of diverting these violent characters, even slightly, away from the brutal and immoral trajectory they have adopted. A single sign of humanity from these figures would inspire Len to whisper to himself, "so shines a good deed in a weary world" (Shakespeare 2004, 5.1.16). But nothing like this ever happens and so he determines to leave at the end of the play. This awakening of Len is the optimistic part of the story, promising that at least one character in this play will be saved. He understands that he cannot be "wholly or easily good because then his goodness would be meaningless, at least for himself" (Bond *Saved,* 7). However, not all viewers may be in complete agreement with the statement that Len is a good-natured boy and an impeccable example of a good human situated in a malign society. Some may consider his sexual affinity with a girl in his first encounter without even knowing her name, as unethical. Or some may find his shunning from intervening to stop the gang from brutally murdering the baby, as irresponsible and cowardly.

Len's preoccupancy with Harry's household, and full engrossment of all his attention and time to stifle the obsessive attachment of Pam to Fred not only always become nullified, but on the contrary, always aggrandize the tensions and make him the scapegoat to be blamed. As Pam yells in the eleventh scene "'E's pullin' me t' pieces. Nothin' but trouble" (113), which means that Len is being blamed for almost everything, even for the baby's death. In the final scenes, after the violent melee between the family members comes to an end and Harry gets lambasted with a teapot Mary holds, Len is almost determined to leave the house. He tells Harry "I'd like t' get up t'morrow mornin' and clear right out. There's nothin' t keep me 'ere" (117). Harry tries to dissuade him from leaving and Len tells him that it "depends 'ow I feel in the mornin" (118). It depends on how he would "feel". Len's abiding in such a contemptible quagmire pretty much resembles the plight of the contemporary man. An example will clarify the ambiguity of this assertion.

In *Existentialism is a Humanism* (2007), Sartre tells the story of one of his students during the World War II who is wavering in making a correct decision. His lonely mother has been abandoned by her disloyal husband and her oldest son has been killed by the Germans in 1940. The young man is befuddled to solve the dichotomy of whether to stay with his ailing mother for whom he is the only hope for carrying on in life, or to dispatch towards his country which is calling upon him, to go England and join the Free French Forces. The question of whether to serve an individual or to serve the whole nation and even nations is at hand. As Sartre describes, the student is certain about two hypothesized situations. He knows that the conditions for serving his mother are absolute and immediate. He does not have to go anywhere since the mother is at home. And he is also certain that the ways in which he will serve his country, if he decides to dispatch, are uncertain and obscure. Because there are several responsibilities that can be delegated to him: staying in the camp, doing paper work, and doing other unheroic duties. So

he is vacillating between two moralities. A "morality motivated by sympathy and individual devotion, and another morality with a broader scope, but less likely to be fruitful" (31). To which cause he should commit himself is a delicate issue. Sartre first examines Christianity's doctrine which tells us to be "charitable, love our neighbor, sacrifice our lives for others" (31), and then the Kantian doctrine which instructs us to "never treat another as a means, but always as an end" (31). In the case of Christianity, who should we love? Our mothers or our countries? And in the case of Kantian morality, if I choose my mother as an end, those fighting on my behalf will be the means. And if I choose war as an end, the mother will be paying the price. This story ends by the instruction that advises us "to rely on our instincts" (32). The young man finally told Sartre "it is feelings that matter; I should choose what truly compels me to follow a certain path" (32). Like Len, this young man's decision-making ability depends on how he would "feel" when it comes to make an irreversible decision.

Instructions of Christianity and other religions would definitely instigate Len to love his neighbors and be charitable (based on the humanitarian nature of divine religions). Of course, relying on the supposition that he is a religious person and that he has read the Scriptures. Len is obviously fighting on both fronts. Subjectively, on the one hand, he puts his own life at stake as a means to help those who are socially and morally in utter despair, and on the other, collectively, he targets the solace and merriment of others as an end. However, the result of these both fronts directly affect his own individuality. Since caring about others preponderates over caring about his own existence, the viewer's anticipation is that he will be admired and appreciated by them at the end. But the unexpected outcome is that he is being dismissed and blamed for everything. It is only Harry, who begins begging Len not to leave their house. It is not clear though, if this request is for his own personal advantage or it is because of his sudden epiphany that human values and goodness are essential parts for coexistence. Bert Cardullo believes it is because Pam's parents have a kind of attachment to him, "Len is the family's savior. He occupies a curious position in their house. He is like a son to Harry and Mary, yet he is not their son" (Cardullo 1986, 63). Still, Len's over-fondness to help people around him does not possess an instinctual orientation or a feelings-based foundation. He does so, deliberately, as a mental practice which is carved in his existential understanding of life, that is, to be "responsible for all men" (Sartre 2007, 23). This ethic is most poignantly dramatized in Scene Twelve, when Len admits the full weight of his despair: "I'd like t' get up t'morrow mornin' and clear right out. There's nothin' t' keep me 'ere. What do I get out a it? Jack it in. Emigrate" (Bond *Saved*, 117). But despite voicing this desire, he does not leave. Instead, he quietly puts his suitcase under the bed, helps Harry settle, and stays in the household that has rejected him. This non-heroic but persistent refusal to abandon others, even when his presence is unacknowledged and his efforts futile, exemplifies an existential decision. Len accepts the burden of responsibility without hope of reward or recognition. His terse remark: "I can do without the key. I ain' goin' far", expresses this existential position: he chooses to remain, not

for the sake of comfort or obligation, but as an act of ethical defiance against hopelessness. In this sense, Len becomes a figure of radical endurance, not or hero, but one who insists on remaining human in a world that has ceased to be.

Len's impasse, however, will not be resolved with the question of should he be concerned about making sacrifices for others, or instead evade helping them and run for his own life. The real question would be, why has he to choose between the two? Slavoj Žižek brings forth an "obscene third way" (8) to Sartre's young student's dilemma. Žižek argues that "there are situations when the only truly practical thing to do is to resist the temptation to engage immediately and to wait and see by means of a patient, critical analysis" (7). Žižek's obscene third solution for Sartre's student would be to tell his mother that he is leaving her to serve his country, and to tell the French Forces that he is staying with his mother to take good care of her and then he would be "in reality, withdrawing to a secluded place and studying" (8) and learning what causes him to be located in such a context and contemplate the ethical and reasonable solutions, not instinctive motives. For Žižek, "the threat today is not passivity, but pseudo-activity, the urge to be active, to participate, to mask the nothingness of what goes on. People intervene all the time, "do something"; academics participate in meaningless debates, and so on. The truly difficult thing is to step back, to withdraw" (217).

Accordingly, Len's withdrawal would not be out of insouciant attitudes or apathetic stance he holds for his own kind, but would be a critical one. Instead of immediately and heedlessly sacrificing his youth and energy, he should step back and contemplate and question the contours of their misery and immorality. He should ask himself: Is he responsible for their poverty? Was it his fault that they are so immoral and dehumanized? Is he responsible for improving their emotional life? Does he really belong to this society? Is he really capable of helping them with their economic and social predicaments? Will he be successful in teaching them morality, humanity, and caring for each other by being incessantly beneficent? Will they understand the value of his efforts and be appreciative? Surely there are many other questions that can find a place in this queue but supposing that Len knows the answers to the questions above and that he is consciously engulfing himself in the inimical life of this community, then, either he should be having no other better place to go, or he is extremely benevolent and solely remains to help them with their misery. The second hypothesis in Len's case becomes more realizable. Len's relationship with the family and community can be understood through two competing ethical paradigms: Emmanuel Levinas's ethics of alterity and Slavoj Žižek's critique of pseudo-activity and advocacy of withdrawal. The two "Lens"-the first committed to unconditional responsibility and the second withdrawing for critical reflection-embody distinct responses to the moral and existential crises presented in the play.

Emmanuel Levinas centers ethics on the encounter with the *face of the Other*. For him, the Other's presence establishes an ethical demand that is immediate and inescapable. This responsibility transcends rational calculations or self-interest; As Levinas states in *Ethics and Infinity* (1985), "I am responsible for the

Other without waiting for reciprocity, were I to die for it. Reciprocity is his affair" (96). The ethical subject, therefore, cannot wait for clarity or certainty; instead, they are compelled to act out of their encounter with the Other's vulnerability and suffering. Len's role in the play, at least initially, mirrors this Levinasian notion of ethical responsibility. He voluntarily immerses himself in the chaotic, dysfunctional household of Pam and her parents, Harry and Mary, despite their emotional and moral decay. The family's neglect and alienation reflect a profound moral poverty, yet Len remains steadfast in his attempts to support them. This commitment does not arise out of self-interest, as Len receives no admiration, gratitude, or tangible reward. In fact, he becomes the object of scorn and dismissal. This Levinasian reading frames Len's persistence not as naivety or desperation but as an ethical response to the family's inescapable humanity, despite their immorality and dysfunction. He fulfills what Levinas (2007) identifies as "being for the Other" (261), placing their needs above his own survival or comfort. As Levinas asserts, "The Other faces me and puts me in question and obliges me... a goodness beyond being" (207). Len's actions—such as tolerating Pam's dismissiveness, helping Harry and Mary, and attempting to stabilize the fractured family are not rooted in hope for success or recognition. Rather, his ethical stance is one of "substitution" (Levinas 1997, 114), wherein he takes on responsibility for their misery as if it were his own.

While Levinas emphasizes the immediacy of ethical responsibility, Žižek critiques the contemporary urge to engage in pseudo-activity-an impulse to act immediately, without understanding the structural conditions underlying the situation. For Žižek, the danger lies in immediate, ineffective interventions that mask the nothingness at the core of social crises. True ethical engagement, he argues, often requires stepping back, withholding prompt action, and engaging in critical reflection.

Žižek's concept of withdrawal emerges as a response to Sartre's moral dilemma and Levinasian pseudo-heroic action. He proposes an obscene third way in which one refuses the binary choice and instead reflects on the systemic causes of the predicament. To requote Žižek, "The truly difficult thing is to step back, to withdraw" (217) and to think critically, to resist the temptation to engage immediately. In *Saved*, Len eventually withdraws from the family. This departure represents a Žižekian moment of refusal, a rejection of the compulsive, unfruitful pseudo-activity that defined his earlier engagement. Len's departure suggests a recognition that his sacrifices are not transforming the family or the broader social context. Žižek's critique resonates here: Len's efforts, however noble, do not address the systemic dehumanization and poverty that produce such moral decay. By leaving, Len might be implicitly asking himself that, is my presence truly helping the family, or merely masking their deeper problems? Am I enabling their immorality by perpetually acting as their "savior"? By leaving, Len might be implicitly asking himself: is my presence truly helping the family, or merely masking their deeper problems? Am I enabling their immorality by perpetually acting as their "savior"? While Len never articulates these questions

overtly, Bond stages his internal deliberation through dramatic form and physical gesture. One particularly revealing moment occurs when Len, standing with his suitcase packed, admits, "She's picked someone up. I couldn't get anywhere with me packin'" (Bond *Saved*, 114). The remark is deceptively casual, but its dramatic weight lies in what is left unsaid by Len. His aborted attempt to leave, to act decisively, reveals a critical hesitation. In Žižek's terms, this is not a failure to act, but the moment of thinking itself, a pause that suspends pseudo-activity and opens space for genuine ethical reckoning. Len's refusal to storm out, to plead, or to moralize, even after being emotionally displaced, is precisely such a moment. It resists reactive performance and instead embodies the third way: a silent, reflective withdrawal: neither participation in futile activity nor passive retreat, but the deliberate suspension of both.

This dramaturgy of suspension reaches its most vivid expression in Scene Thirteen, when Len silently attempts to fix a broken chair. The stage directions are precise: "He rests his left wrist high on the chair back and his right elbow on the chair seat. His right hand hangs in space... His head is sunk into his shoulders. He thinks for a moment" (122). Here, Len is not simply repairing furniture; he is physically embodying reflection. His body, slumped and tentative, becomes a visual metaphor for ethical strain. Later, as he leans into the chair, "His chest rests against the side edge of the seat. His head lies sideways on the seat" (123), the image evokes weariness, but not surrender. Len's quiet gestures, still, effortful, unresolved, reveal a deeper awareness of the systemic futility around him.

Finally, this mode of withdrawal culminates in the play's closing gesture. Len places the suitcase under the bed and sits down quietly. No final speech is offered. When Harry invites him to stay, Len simply replies, "Depends 'ow I feel in the mornin'." This understated reply now gains reinforcement from the suitcase gesture, combined with the silent act of pushing the suitcase away, signals a radical non-performance. Len's choice to remain without claiming certainty or purpose embodies Žižek's assertion that "sometimes, doing nothing is the most violent thing to do" (Žižek 2008, 217). Bond represents this not through monologue, but through a dramaturgy of restraint, where hesitation itself becomes an act of resistance. He enacts ethical hesitation as theatre. Len's existential endurance becomes a kind of interruption: not heroic salvation, but a quiet refusal to continue a cycle of violence masked as care.

Len's exit is not an abandonment of ethical responsibility but an attempt to reflect critically on the futility of his sacrifices. This refusal of pseudo-activity challenges the audience to confront the underlying social structures that produce the family's misery, rather than focusing solely on Len's personal responsibility.

The tension between the Žižekian Len and the Levinasian Len highlights the ethical intricacy of *Saved*. At first, Len foreshadows Levinas's infinite responsibility, responding to the Other's suffering with unwavering commitment. Nevertheless, Len's concluding withdrawal embodies Žižek's critique of pseudo-activity and his call for critical reflection. This duality raises crucial questions about ethical action in the dehumanized society the play demonstrates. Can individual responsibility,

as Levinas suggests, address systemic injustice? Is withdrawal, as Žižek argues, an essential step toward authentic transformation, or does it risk moral indifference?

While *Saved* resists resolution and places the burden of interpretation on the audience, this open-endedness must be read not only through an ethical lens but also through the legacy of Brecht's Marxist theatre. The play does not merely ask the audience to grapple with abstract moral perspectives; it also implicates them in a broader materialist inquiry into the socio-economic conditions that shape, constrain, and at times deform individual agency. The characters' apparent moral inertia or senselessness is not a rejection of meaning but a refusal of psychological naturalism, which Bond replaces with a dramaturgy of estrangement. In doing so, he encourages the audience to read the characters symptomatically, as expressions of systemic violence rather than autonomous moral agents. While Len's endurance may resonate with Levinasian ethics, and his interventions might seem to resist nihilism, Bond situates this ethical impulse within a social order that renders such gestures ultimately ineffectual. *Saved* knowingly leaves its internal tensions unresolved, it keeps them active, insisting on their persistence within the social fabric. The play resists offering moral coherence or emotional purge, instead immersing the audience in the unease of ambiguity. What may initially seem like a failure to provide narrative closure is, on closer inspection, a purposeful dramaturgical and strategy. Bond employs this withholding not as a weakness but as a critical gesture, one that unsettles both character and spectator by disrupting ideological assumptions and drawing attention to the ethical paralysis that results when structural change remains foreclosed.

Len, a Neighbor

Bert Cardullo views Len as "the fourth leg without which the other three cannot be secure" (64). But Len's struggle to fix the chair in the last scene, which is often perceived as a symbolic effort of trying to be the buttressing pillar of the family, is as futile and absurd as are the actions of Harry dallying with the tickets, Pam trying to adjust the TV or her sterile obsession with Fred, and Mary's mechanical and insensitive attempts to keep a shattered family on its feet. To put it in Žižekian terms, "underlying all this is a hypocritical sentiment of moral outrage" (Žižek 2008, 6). Underlying Len's abortive actions, is the "fake sense of urgency" (6) that keeps him busy with constructing dysfunctional relationships with people around him. Underlying all his actions is the "pseudo-activity, the urge to be active, to participate, to mask the nothingness of what goes on" (217).

Len's over-involvement in the lives of these senseless characters symbolizes today's well-meaning but gullible people who fall into the trap of the "fake sense of urgency" (Žižek 2008, 6) fostered by liberalist politics. This ideology urges individuals to constantly participate in charity events, donate to the poor, care for neighbors, send food to starving African countries, take part in presidential elections, and collect and recycle a few bottles from the oceans, among other activities. People are ceaselessly deluded and encouraged to stay busy by this

"Systemic" violence "to make sure [their] ominous passivity is broken" (217). In the same fashion, Len is always involved in helping Pam, Fred, Harry, and other morally ambiguous characters in this play who not only fail to appreciate him but treat him as a "Neighbor" in the Žižekian sense.

Žižek conceptualizes the notion of the "politics of fear" (40) to develop the idea of what it means to be a 'Neighbor' in the multiculturalist era. For Žižek, contemporary politics is a mixture of "post-political bio-politics" (40). Post-political refers to a "politics which claims to leave behind old ideological struggles and instead focuses on expert management and administration," while bio-politics "designates the regulation of the security and welfare of human lives as its primary goal" (40). This approach results in fear being the primary driving force behind social relations.

This fear manifests in various ways, one of which is "political correctness," a process Žižek calls "culturalisation of politics" (140). Here, individuals must carefully observe speech and behavior to avoid offending others who may adhere to different norms and values. For example, calling a Black person "Black" might be seen as politically incorrect due to the historical connotations of inferiority. Critics argue that Black people are not inherently inferior but are instead "inferiorized" by the violence of racist discourse (73). The politically correct term "African American" reflects this liberal effort to avoid offense, but it also reinforces the notion that the Other must be held at a distance. As Žižek argues, "today's liberal tolerance towards others, the respect of otherness and openness towards it, is counterpointed by an obsessive fear of harassment. In short, the Other is just fine, but only insofar as his presence is not intrusive" (41). This paradox of liberal tolerance mirrors the way the family in *Saved* responds to Len's well-meaning efforts.

For Žižek, a Neighbor embodies Freud's notion of an unsettling, traumatic presence, "a thing, a traumatic intruder, someone whose different way of life disturbs us, throws the balance of our way of life off the rails" (59). This perspective provides insight into how the household in *Saved* perceives Len. Despite his persistent attempts to help, Len's proximity disrupts the family's dysfunctional but stable equilibrium. His acts of kindness are interpreted not as care but as unwanted intrusions. The family's hostility toward Len reflects the Žižekian notion that "the Other is just fine, but only insofar as his presence is not intrusive" (41).

Žižek's critique of "understanding each other" further clarifies Len's predicament. According to Žižek, it is futile to try to understand the Other when individuals cannot fully understand themselves. He agrees with Peter Sloterdijk that "more communication means at first above all more conflict" (59). Consequently, the liberal attitude of "understanding each other" must be supplemented by "getting-out-of-each-other›s-way" (59). This insight aligns with Len's ultimate realization that his presence in the family is untenable. Recognizing that he cannot change them or integrate himself as the "fourth wobbling leg" of the family's moral chair, he adopts a strategy of withdrawal. At the end of *Saved*,

Len's decision to leave the household signifies a Žižekian recognition of the futility of his efforts. Initially embodying the liberal ideal of engagement, Len tirelessly participates in acts of care, hoping to heal the emotional and moral fractures of Pam's family. But his presence, rather than being met with gratitude, is met with scorn, reflecting Žižek's theory of the Neighbor as a "traumatic intruder" (59). For the family, Len's ethical persistence serves as a silent accusation of their apathy and immorality. In response, they reject him, embodying the liberal paradox that "the Other is just fine, but only insofar as his presence is not intrusive" (41).

Len's departure can be seen as a Žižekian moment of clarity, a realization that sometimes, "a dose of alienation is indispensable for peaceful coexistence" (59). Žižek critiques the liberal obsession with participation and engagement, arguing that it creates a "pseudo-activity," a false sense of immediate action, whether donating to causes, recycling, or participating in elections (6). Len's over-involvement in the household reflects this pseudo-activity. He initially believes that persistence can bring about change, but his experiences reveal the deeper inability to confront the structural roots of dysfunction. As Žižek notes, "The urge to be active, to participate, to mask the nothingness of what goes on" is itself a form of systemic violence (217). By leaving, Len rejects the pseudo-activity that drives his earlier actions. His departure is not an act of defeat but of liberation. It indicates Len's growing realization that his role as the family's "fourth wobbling leg" has become unattainable. Len's transformation reflects Žižek's critique of head-on participation. It reveals the limits of consistent involvement and the ethical value of stepping back to achieve and preserve one's own sense of self.

Ultimately, Len's transition from an overextended caregiver to a Žižekian figure of critical detachment highlights the paradox of coexistence in a fragmented, post-political society. Sometimes, peace may not be forged through intervention but through retreat. In walking away, Len reclaims a form of ethical agency that the family's dysfunction had long since rendered impossible. His decision to "get out of each other's way" exemplifies Žižek's assertion that alienation can sometimes be a solution rather than a problem.

Conclusion

In the *Author's Note* to his play, Bond writes, "the play ends in silent social stalemate, but if audiences think this is pessimistic that is because they have not learned to clutch at straws. Clutching at straws is the only realistic thing to do" (Bond *Saved,* 7). This remark captures Bond's distinctive form of irresponsible optimism, rooted not in naive hope but in a recognition of the potential for change amidst systemic violence. Such optimism does not float free of context or consequence. It necessitates critical thinking and a refusal to participate recklessly in pseudo-activity, those seemingly well-meaning but ultimately hollow actions that obscure the original sources of suffering while keeping the cycle of violence on the move. This study has argued that Len's presence in the play critiques such pseudo-activity, even as he initially embodies it. His eventual decision to

withdraw signals not defeat but a Žižekian act of resistance: a refusal to mask "the nothingness of what goes on" (Žižek 2008, 217) with futile engagement.

Len's story captures the paradox of ethical action within a world marked by systemic violence. At first, he reflects Levinas's concept of *being for the Other*, responding to the family's dysfunction with self-sacrificial concern. However, his persistent commitment, from fixing broken chairs, enduring scorn, to insisting on kindness, gradually exposed the limits of individual commitment when systemic forces render moral transformation impossible. Levinas (2007) argues, "To recognize the Other is to give... the face of the Other is destitute; it is the poor for whom I can do all and to whom I owe all" (75). Yet, Len's sacrifices become an ethical burden that isolates him and neutralizes his own existence. His ceaseless involvement, though noble, mirrors Žižek's critique of pseudo-activity, wherein the urge to "do something" obscures the need for critical reflection.

By choosing to leave, Len enacts what Žižek calls the "difficult thing... to step back, to withdraw" (217). His withdrawal is not an abdication of responsibility but a deliberate refusal to participate in a system that exploits his ethical impulse while offering no reciprocal transformation. In rejecting his role as the family's "fourth wobbling leg," Len exposes the futility of attempting to salvage a morally bankrupt society through individual effort alone. His departure underscores Žižek's claim that "sometimes doing nothing is the most violent thing to do" (217), as it challenges the illusion of progress and demands a confrontation with the deeper systemic conditions at play. At the same time, Len's final act also embodies a form of Bondian optimism. Bond's assertion that the "gesture of turning the other cheek" can refuse to "look facts in the face" (Bond *Saved,* 7) is subverted in Len's case. His refusal to strike back, whether through immediate retaliation or thoughtless confrontation, reflects not passivity but critical thought. Turning the other cheek, in this sense, becomes an act of resistance, a rejection of the cyclical violence and a withholding to keep pseudo-activity on the move. By leaving the toxic confines of the family, Len maintains his capacity for critical thinking and action, ensuring that he does not become complicit in their dismal mentality.

In conclusion, this study has argued that *Saved* is ultimately a play of contradictions: a portrayal of systemic violence and moral collapse that nevertheless holds space for optimism through individual awakening. Len's trajectory, from ceaseless pseudo-activity to critical withdrawal, offers a powerful critique of contemporary society's demands for relentless participation. By stepping back, Len resists the inertia of systemic violence, embodying Žižek's call for patience and reflection. Simultaneously, his decision resonates with Bond's vision of optimism: an acknowledgment that change begins not with blind action but with a refusal to accept things at face value. Len's withdrawal, therefore, is not an abandonment of hope but the first step toward a more meaningful understanding of the self and the world, a decision that ultimately "saves" him.

Notes

1. In *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (2008) Slavoj Žižek describes subjective violence as the "violence performed by a clearly identifiable agent" (1). It is observed in the media as the "acts of crime and terror, civil unrest, international conflict" (1).
2. Systemic violence or the "catastrophic consequences of the smooth functioning of our economic and political systems" (2). Along with "symbolic" violence, the violence "embodied in language and its forms" (1), systemic violence forms the "objective" violence which is invisible. It is the counterpart to an all-too visible subjective violence.

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