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'THE TROUBLES' AND THE PEACE PROCESS IN NORTHERN IRELAND IN SEAMUS HEANEY'S *THE CURE AT TROY*

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ABSTRACT. *Based on* Philoctetes*, the tragic play by Sophocles, the poet Seamus Heaney creates his own version in* The Cure at Troy *to present the political and social problems in Northern Ireland during the period that became known euphemistically as 'the Troubles'. This paper aims to highlight the significance of Heaney's play in the final years of the conflict. Heaney uses the classical Greek play to bring to light the plight and suffering of the Northern Irish people as a consequence of the atavistic and sectarian violence between the unionist and nationalist communities. Nevertheless, Heaney also provides possible answers that allow readers to harbour a certain degree of hope towards peace and the future in Northern Ireland.*

Keywords: Seamus Heaney, *The Cure at Troy*, Northern Ireland, Troubles, violence, hope.

'LOS TROUBLES' Y EL PROCESO DE PAZ EN IRLANDA DEL NORTE EN *THE CURE AT TROY* DE SEAMUS HEANEY

RESUMEN. *A partir de la obra trágica de* Filoctetes *de Sófocles, el poeta Seamus Heaney crea su propia versión en* The Cure at Troy *para reflejar los problemas políticos y sociales en Irlanda del Norte durante el periodo conocido eufemísticamente como 'los Troubles'. El objetivo de este trabajo es resaltar la importancia de la obra de Heaney en los últimos años del conflicto. Heaney se sirve de la obra clásica griega para establecer un marco en el que poner de manifiesto el sufrimiento de la población norirlandesa fruto de la violencia atávica y sectaria existente entre las comunidades unionista y nacionalista. No obstante, Heaney también aporta ciertas claves que permiten albergar un atisbo de esperanza en la paz y en el futuro en Irlanda del Norte.*

Palabras clave: Seamus Heaney, *The Cure at Troy*, Irlanda del Norte, 'Troubles', violencia, esperanza.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Classical Greek literature provides a framework in which Seamus Heaney presents certain aspects of the political and social situation in Northern Ireland. Heaney, like the poets from Greek antiquity who adapted different stories to accommodate a specific situation, did likewise with his version of Sophocles' *Philoctetes*.[1] This prompted Michael Vickers to state, "Seamus Heaney reshaped Sophocles' play in order to make it fit the contemporary political picture (he identifies Philoctetes with Unionism, Neoptolemus with the Southern Irish, and Odysseus with the Provisional IRA)" (2008: 59).

Subsequent to its publication, the first theatrical performance of *The Cure at Troy* was held by the *Field Day Theatre Company* at the Guildhall, Derry, on 1 October 1990. The subtitle of Heaney's play, 'A version of Sophocles' *Philoctetes*', accentuates the influence of Sophocles' play, performed in Athens in 409 BC, on Heaney's adaptation from the great Greek author.

Heaney's translation is quite similar in length to Sophocles' play; however, besides adapting his text to his artistic objectives,[2] he added new content. A great

1 Although Heaney employed three texts in English, he based his work mainly on David Grene's translation to create his *version*. The adaptation is very close to Sophocles' original work, to which he adds the verses of the Choruses and some other short paragraphs in prose to agree with the tone of the discourse.
2 *The Cure at Troy* is both a political allegory on the Troubles in Northern Ireland and a work of art; Heaney has described the play as "'commentary'-type drama ('Troubles art')" (2002: 178).

part of the new information is related to the political violence that was persistent in Northern Ireland at the time. Heaney's version both justifies and ratifies the relationship he establishes between the Sophoclean tragedy of *Philoctetes* and *The Cure at Troy*; that is to say, the suffering, the sorrow and the injustices in Ireland, and more specifically in Northern Ireland. There are also the universal values of personal integrity and loyalty, seen in Neoptolemus' behaviour, as well as the utterly reprehensible practices of treason in Odysseus' attitude toward Philoctetes, and revenge demonstrated by Philoctetes' way of thinking and feeling.

His *version* is rooted in the ancient mythical past of Northern Ireland along with the introspective attitude and insight of the period euphemistically known as 'the Troubles': the sectarian political violence which broke out in 1969 and was mitigated with the signing of the Belfast Agreement in 1998.[3]

Although *Philoctetes* is not among the most popular works by Sophocles in Western culture nowadays,[4] I do not think it is a coincidence that Heaney paid attention to it, since Philoctetes, one of the heroes of Greek mythology, tells a story of exile and dispossession. Heaney's version responds to the sensitivity conveyed by Sophocles with regard to the connection between individual morality, which is attributable to intrinsic and personal loyalty, and public morality, which has to do with political justifications: Odysseus shows no scruples in deceiving Philoctetes (with the assistance of Neoptolomeus at the beginning) to proceed to Troy and win the war for Greece.

For Heaney, any act of violence, whether committed by a group or an individual, is totally reprehensible; worse still if it originates from official institutions, in which case we may even talk of *apartheid* when the target of discrimination is a whole community as was the case of the nationalist Catholic community in Northern Ireland to which Heaney belonged. The victims who suffer from such sectarian practices are all human beings, regardless of ideology, whether Catholic nationalists or Protestant unionists.

In Heaney's translations, especially in the Choruses, there are direct allusions to suffering and affliction – extremely recurrent themes in Heaney's oeuvre – which affect the entire Northern Irish population (1990: 77). The way Sophocles uses the myth of Philoctetes was probably influenced by a passage of the *Iliad,* the epic poem by the ancient Greek poet Homer (1991). The reference to the myth of Philoctetes in Homer is very short. It occurs in the second book of the poem when Homer describes the Greek armies and leaders who have come to fight at Troy:

3 "The same term [Troubles] is also used to refer to the period of conflict between nationalists and unionists in the early 1920s at the time of partition" (Gillespie 2017: 296).

4 *Antigone* (Sophocles 1984a) and *Oedipus The King* (Sophocles 1984b) are the most famous and most translated Sophoclean plays in Ireland (McDonald 2002: 42), but Heaney obviously made a deliberate choice in picking *Philoctetes*.

> Philoctetes the master archer had led them on
>
> in seven ships with fifty oarsmen aboard each,
>
> superbly skilled with the bow in lethal combat.
>
> But their captain lay on an island, racked with pain,
>
> on Lemnos' holy shores where the armies had marooned him,
>
> agonized by his wound, the bite of a deadly water-viper.
>
> There he writhed in pain but soon, encamped by the ships,
>
> the Argives would recall Philoctetes, their great king. (Homer 1991: 122)

Despite the brevity of the extract, the last line in particular provides Sophocles with the necessary material for his tragic play. This line refers to a story about the final phase of the ten-year-long Trojan War. The Greeks had heard of a prophecy claiming they would be unable to capture Troy without the assistance of Philoctetes and his famous bow, a weapon he had inherited from Heracles. However, the Greeks had abandoned Philoctetes ten years earlier en route to Troy. They left him marooned on the island of Lemnos with an agonizing wound induced by a snake-bite (Heaney 1990: 17). To make things worse, this injury would not heal and it produced such an obnoxious, foul-smelling odour that his fellow Greeks (especially Odysseus, Agamemnon and Menelaus) later abandoned him on the deserted island; his only possession was the bow which he used both for hunting and as a means of defence.

Ten years later, when they learnt of the prophecy, they sent a delegation – headed by Odysseus and Neoptolemus (son of the celebrated Achilles) – to Lemnos to bring Philoctetes and his bow back to Troy. This episode involving the emissaries was what Sophocles wrote about in his play.

Heaney's version of the myth closely follows Sophocles' original. He does not change or omit any episode. He uses the same chronology to arrange the events, from the initial dialogue between Odysseus and Neoptolemus and the latter's use of deceit in order to gain the confidence of Philoctetes, right through to the reversal of Neoptolemus' methods and the influence of Heracles – as a *deus ex machina* – in the conclusion. This is not surprising since Heaney is, after all, offering a version of Sophocles' play.[5] The difference between the plays lies in the incidents to which Heaney gives greater or lesser emphasis, and also by the

5 I use the words "translation" and "version" interchangeably, as synonyms. I believe Heaney's work is both: he translates and interprets to create the desired text (his version) to meet his political and artistic objectives.

introduction of some lines – through the Choruses – directly related to the political conflict in Northern Ireland.

Heaney's particular adaptation is a logical consequence of the influence exerted by the Irish audience. Sophocles' public was acquainted with this myth. The other two great Greek tragic poets, Aeschylus and Euripides,[6] had also written about this very same myth before Sophocles, therefore the Greek audience was well aware of this theme and would have been able to interpret the religious implication of the prophecy; however, this religious context has little or no relevance for Heaney's audience.

Both writers share the same main theme, the connection between private and public morality. Heaney's central concern evolves around the characters' attitudes to themselves, which he clearly believes reflect the attitudes between the Catholic nationalists and Protestant unionists in Northern Ireland; I believe that both communities have a *moral responsibility* to accept each other on equal terms and put the bigotry aside in order to reach a plausible solution to the quandary stemming from the atavistic fear and violence of the Troubles.

An enlightening stanza by the Chorus near the end of the play focuses our attention on contemporary issues. Four lines in particular highlight the reference to the political and social conflict in Northern Ireland, the so-called Troubles: "A hunger-striker's father / Stands in the graveyard dumb. / The police widow in veils / Faints at the funeral home" (77). It is these lines which reveal Heaney's intention in using the myth of Philoctetes, but before considering this point, some discussion of Heaney's attitude to Northern Ireland in his work is necessary.

Seamus Heaney was born at the family farmhouse of Mossbawn, close to Castledawson, a small rural village located in County Derry whose main city witnessed the tragic events known as *Bloody Sunday* which occurred in 1972, three years after the start of the Troubles in Northern Ireland.[7] Heaney explains the origin of the name of the farm and the political connotation it has for him:

> Our farm was called Mossbawn. *Moss*, a Scots word probably carried to Ulster by the Planters, and *bawn*, the name the English colonists gave to their fortified farmhouses. Mossbawn, the planter's house on the bog. Yet in spite of this Ordnance Survey spelling, we pronounced it Moss bann, and *bán* is the Gaelic word for white. So might not the thing mean the white moss, the moss of bog-cotton? In the syllables of my home I see a metaphor of the split culture of Ulster. (1980: 35)

6 "Dion of Prusa (ca. AD 100) acquaints us with earlier treatments of the story by Aeschylus and Euripides" (Storey and Allan 2014: 270).

7 The British, including the Northern Irish Protestants, refer to this county and the city as Londonderry. The foundation of the historic city of Derry goes back to AD 546, and it is the second largest city in Northern Ireland after Belfast.

While Mossbawn supplied Heaney with much inspiration for his poetry[8], the Northern Irish Troubles seemed to have received little explicit treatment from him and, consequently, he was subjected to disapproving comments from the nationalist community in Northern Ireland. However, Heaney's seemingly tacit response to the political and social conflict along with his poetry about Mossbawn do provide us with enough material to gauge his view on the Troubles. This in turn presents us with an enlightening reason as to why Heaney uses the myth of Philoctetes and to the central theme of *The Cure at Troy*.

Mossbawn bestows Heaney with a sense of place in the world, the certainty of belonging to a community. As Declan Kiberd points out, "The south Derry farm on which Seamus Heaney grew to young manhood offered a wholly secure world, in which everyone knew their place and in which every tree or flower had a meaning in the scheme of things" (2018: 129). Heaney reflects upon his own character in his early poetry but he also celebrates this community, where Catholics, like his family, and Protestants coexist side by side in good terms. Needless to say, Castledawson,[9] like any other town in Northern Ireland, has its divisions: Protestant and Catholic, unionist and nationalist. These divisions are real but the mixed community must live alongside each other on a personal and agricultural level. Although people differ strongly in political and religious beliefs, they maintain a prudent silence in conversation on these controversial issues and talk about simple everyday topics like the weather and rural concerns.

Heaney has often received criticism from Northern Catholics who contend that he avoids the issues of violence and repression, which can be detected in Heaney's reaction to a republican recriminating him on a train in "The Flight Path," included in *The Spirit Level*: "'When, for fuck's sake, are you going to write / Something for us?' 'If I do write something, / Whatever it is, I'll be writing for myself" (1996: 25). This criticism could not be further from the truth. A great part of his poetry addresses the sectarianism which has arisen from the Troubles.[10] He specifically deals with the victims of the violence, the victims on both sides. Blake Morrison states that "Heaney has written poems directly about the Troubles as well as elegies for friends

8 Some of these poems include: "Digging"; "Death of a Naturalist"; "An Advancement of Learning"; "Churning Day"; "The Early Purges" and "Follower" (*Death of a Naturalist*).

9 On Census Day (27 March 2011), Castledawson had a population of 2,253 people: 48.32% of whom belonged to or were brought up in the Catholic religion "and 47.97% […] in a 'Protestant and Other Christian (including Christian related)' religion" (Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency). The next census (2021) is expected to be published in 2022.

10 Among the poems which contain the most political connotations and direct allusions to the Troubles are: "For the Commander of the *Eliza*" and "Docker" (*Death of a Naturalist*); "The Tollund Man" (*Wintering Out*); "Punishment", "Act of Union", "Whatever You Say Nothing", "The Ministry of Fear", "A Constable Calls" and "Summer 1969" (*North*); "The Strand at Lough Beg", "Casualty" and "Ugolino" (*Field Work*).

and acquaintances who have died in them; he has tried to discover a historical framework in which to interpret the current unrest; and he has taken on the mantle of public spokesman, someone looked for to comment and guidance" (1993: 15). Some Irish nationalists feel aggrieved that Heaney has not heralded their cause. This is true since he wants to move forward and abstain from perpetuating the divisions that have already been created by the savageness of terrorism.

As Heaney wrote: "And whatever you say, you say nothing" (1975: 59);[11] this *prudent silence* is one which he adopted in his poetry because he knew his work could incite bitter reaction from either side ('the other side').[12] As a matter of fact, the verse "'One side's as bad as the other,' never worse" (1975: 59) is very important in the condemnation of sectarian violence coming from both *sides* since it shows Heaney makes no distinction regarding the origin of the violent political disturbances and equally criticizes both factions. Hence, Heaney chooses his language carefully. He does not refrain from addressing the Troubles, but he does approach them in an ingenious and subtle manner.

Heaney has a very clear sense of identity, of his Irishness. In 1983 he wrote a pamphlet entitled "An Open Letter" in reaction to his inclusion in an anthology of contemporary 'British' poetry. He wrote to the editors Andrew Motion and Blake Morrison asking them not to refer to him as British:

> A British one, is characterized
>
> As British. But don't be surprised
>
> If I demur, for, be advised
>
> My passport's green.
>
> No glass of ours was ever raised
>
> To toast *The Queen*.
>
> No harm to her nor you who deign
>
> To *God Bless* her as sovereign,
>
> Except that from the start her reign

11 The line, "And whatever you say, you say nothing" belongs to a poem whose title is very similar: "Whatever You Say Say Nothing", included in *North*.

12 "The Other Side" is the title of a poem in *Wintering Out* (24-26); the expression is used both by Catholics and Protestants to identify and refer to the people who do not belong to their group; they, besides being seen as different, can also pose a threat.

Of crown and rose

Defied, displaced, would not combine

What I'd espouse. (1983: 9-10)

Heaney perceives Northern Ireland as a country that is neither wholly British nor wholly Irish. He is equally agreeable to this cultural duality: "There is nothing extraordinary about the challenge to be in two minds"; his origins are Irish but he was born in a part of the island that is controlled politically and socially by the British: "My identity was emphasized rather than eroded by being maintained in such circumstances" (1995: 202). It is my understanding that any solution to the problem must come from within the province, but this will necessitate a radical change in attitude from both traditions in the North. It is the possibility of change of attitude that Heaney has written about in *The Cure at Troy*.

2. *THE CURE AT TROY*

The cultural context of the play is of paramount importance in Heaney's version, which includes, by way of an epigraph, two stanzas of W. H. Auden's poem, "As I Walked Out One Evening" (1964: 85), and which help, in part, to set the ambience of *The Cure at Troy*:

'O look, look in the mirror,

O look in your distress;

Life remains a blessing

Although you cannot bless.

O stand, stand at the window

As the tears scald and start;

You shall love your crooked neighbour

With your crooked heart.' (Heaney 1990: vii)

The words refer to the Christian virtue of love for your neighbour, in this case loving one's neighbour as yourself. However, the last two verses indicate that this love is ambiguous. Nothing good can be expected from a "crooked neighbour", so one has to be vigilant and correspond with a "crooked heart". Something similar

happens with Odysseus and the Greeks when they accept and receive Philoctetes, since they believe that deception is the only way to convince Philoctetes to go to Troy (6-7). Fortunately, this tragedy does not result in death, and, although a complete reconciliation does not take place, we can say that there was a mutual acceptance by both parties to welcome the new situation. In my view, this is similar to what Heaney is looking for in connection with the situation of mistrust and violence in Northern Ireland.

Heaney's most relevant original contributions are those provided by the Chorus both at the beginning and at the end of the play, and which are also closely related to the political and social problems in Northern Ireland. At the start of the text, Heaney introduces the theme of his version through the voice of the Chorus:

> Philoctetes.
>
> Hercules.
>
> Odysseus.
>
> Heroes. Victims. Gods and human beings.
>
> All throwing shapes, every one of them
>
> Convinced he's in the right, all of them glad
>
> To repeat themselves and their every last mistake,
>
> No matter what.
>
> People so deep into
>
> Their own self-pity self-pity buoys them up.
>
> People so staunch and true, they're fixated,
>
> Shining with self-regard like polished stones.
>
> And their whole life spent admiring themselves
>
> For their own long-suffering.
>
> Licking their wounds
>
> And flashing them around like decorations. (1-2)

Heaney establishes the theme of the play within the sphere of human suffering and the state of anxiety of all people in Northern Irish society whom he identifies as his compatriots. He describes the profound wound in both communities

(Philoctetes') and the possible and hypothetical cure (which would take place in Troy).

For Sophocles the main problem is honour, or the lack of it, embodied in Philoctetes and Odysseus, respectively. Philoctetes is an upright member of the Greek community who is unwilling to make concessions which go against honour, while Odysseus is very willing to place political interests before his own personal morality even if it brings dishonour. Neoptolemus, induced by Odysseus, exercised the most abominable deceit on Philoctetes and is halfway to redeeming himself when he experiences a moment of sudden and great revelation: the epiphany helps him realize that his behaviour is indecorous and he must regain his dignity. For Heaney, honour is also important, but it is curtailed by the many obstacles encountered and by the bloody wound of memory. Heaney is favourably inclined to a cure, or at least, a healing of the wound that has caused so much affliction in Ireland.

Despite the spatial and temporal distance of the Greek tragedy (409 BC) in relation to the political problems in Northern Ireland, Heaney uses Philoctetes' grievance and suffering to establish a symbolic parallelism between the story of the Trojan War and the history of Ireland; Philoctetes' situation is a mirror on which the Irish problems are reflected, and that reality allows Heaney to draw certain similarities between what Sophocles describes and by what Heaney observes and relates in his adaptation.

The Cure at Troy is a political discourse against injustice and violence – especially in the voice of the Chorus at the beginning of the play – which the population of Ireland has had to endure for long decades. Heaney wants to prepare the audience, and the reader for the political allusions and the sectarian violence which they will encounter later on in the play; however, he also wishes to leave a door open to hope. In the end, the words uttered by the main speaker of the Chorus are an invitation to optimism.

The first stanza divides the suffering on both sides, and cannot be justified in either case. The three first lines remind us of an image[13] of "Easter, 1916" by W. B. Yeats: "Too long a sacrifice / Can make a stone of the heart. / O when may it suffice?" (1989: 204):

> Human beings suffer,
>
> They torture one another,
>
> They get hurt and get hard.

13 The same image also appears in Heaney's poem "Kinship" (1975: 45).

No poem or play or song

Can fully right a wrong

Inflicted and endured. (77)[14]

The following four lines from the second stanza focus our attention on the Troubles in Northern Ireland:

A hunger-striker's father

Stands in the graveyard dumb.

The police widow in veils

Faints at the funeral home. (77)

Suffering is equally shared in both deaths: the republican prisoner who dies as a consequence of a hunger strike in a British prison, and the policeman's widow who weeps for her dead husband who supported the Unionist regime in power.

The first two lines remind us of the time in the early 1980s, when ten republican prisoners died while on hunger strike (Gillespie 2017: 146).[15] They were protesting against their incarceration which classified them as common criminals rather than political prisoners, as they called themselves. The third and fourth lines suggest the murder of a member of the RUC (Royal Ulster Constabulary, Northern Ireland's police force at the time),[16] an act regularly perpetuated by republican terrorists. Heaney does not focus our attention entirely on the two dead people and what they have suffered. He expands the picture showing the other victims in the community; in this case a father and a wife who weep for their loved ones. We are meant to understand and share their indignation; the movement from bewilderment at the failure to truly comprehend the problem, to dejection at

14 The lines "No poem or play or song / Can fully right a wrong / Inflicted and endured" also bring to mind those written by Yeats as well: "[I THINK it better that in times like these] / A poet's mouth be silent, for in truth / We have no gift to set a statesman right", which belong to the poem "On Being Asked For A War Poem" (175).

15 Seven prisoners were members of the Irish Republican Army and the other three belonged to the Irish National Liberation Army. The latter was the military wing of a Trotskyist group, the Irish Republican Socialist Party, a splinter group of the Official IRA.

"In 2005, Richard O'Rawe, a former prisoner, alleged in his book, *Blanketmen*, that a deal that could have saved at least six of the strikers was turned down by the IRA leadership outside the prison, in order to maximize the political advantage for Sinn Féin" (Hanley 2015: 193).

16 Among the different provisions established in the Belfast Agreement in 1998, the RUC changed its name to *Police Service of Northern Ireland* (PSNI) on 4 November 2001. The first members trained by the PSNI began their service in April 2002.

the incessant series of murders. It is at this point near the end of the play, when Heaney clarifies the context of his version, and his use of the myth of Philoctetes falls into place.

In the third stanza, despite the long-lasting pessimism at the beginning, we can finally see the much-coveted justice that may start to set the balance in the right direction:

> History says, *Don't hope*
>
> *On this side of the grave.*
>
> But then, once in a lifetime
>
> The longed-for tidal wave
>
> Of justice can rise up,
>
> And hope and history rhyme. (77)

Obviously, this part of the Chorus is not to be found in Sophocles' tragedy. It is worth remembering that Heaney endured the political and social problems – before and during the Troubles – in his homeland, and he personally experienced both police abuse and the arbitrary attitude of the RUC. He also witnessed, first-hand, the social and economic injustices that other Catholics like him had to tolerate. However, in the previous stanzas his attitude to the Troubles is objective and devoid of sectarianism.

At the beginning of the introduction I mention Vickers' allocation of the roles of the three main characters of *The Cure at Troy*: he identifies Philoctetes with the unionists,[17] Neoptolemus with the Irish of the Republic, and Odysseus with the IRA (Irish Republican Army). The psychology of the characters is quite complex, as Storey and Allan suggest: "In no other extant Greek play does character count for so much. […] here we again encounter the issue of "version," for Sophokles makes considerable changes to the myth, including the presence of Neoptolemos on the mission and the fact that Lemnos is a deserted island" (2014: 270).

I must disagree with Vickers' assessment, I believe that no such correspondence can be established whatsoever since that identification is

17 It is possible that Vickers may have related the unionists' intransigence and rejection of the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1987 with Philoctetes' obstinate resistance to abandon the island of Lemnos, and whose attitude is reflected in the lines uttered by Neoptolemus and directed towards Philoctetes: "Things are different now. I ask again: / Are you going to stay here saying no for ever / Or do you come in with us?" (Heaney 1990: 69).

not as clear as he claims. Besides, there are some instances where, as we shall soon see, the very same character can alternate roles and represent two different groups or factions within the community depending on the context and temporal framework, as is clearly the case in the evolution of Philoctetes and Neoptolemus.

In relation to Philoctetes, Heaney himself asserted the following: "[…] Philoctetes is not meant to be understood as a trimly allegorical representation of hard-line Unionism". Besides, the character of Philoctetes is ambivalent: he could represent the intransigence of both unionist and nationalist communities, in the same way that the two factions have rejoiced in the name of victimization; Heaney has said that the attitude adopted by these two opposing sides has always been that of keeping the discourse of: "[…] victimhood, the righteous refusal, the wounded one whose identity has become dependent upon the wound, the betrayed one whose energy and pride is a morbid symptom" (2002: 175).

For ten years Philoctetes bore his solitude consumed by hate and bitterness. On account of his victimization, he represents the nationalist community, which has indeed been discriminated against, harassed, and treated unfairly, but Philoctetes' problem is that he is overwhelmed by inertia. His deep-seated resistance to change has gone too far, and he finds himself defending premises which are as extreme as the ones defended by those whom he detests, that is, the unionist community. He must relinquish that particular attitude and his bitter feelings, and leave them in the past. Although taking that step is not easy for him, he persists in his resistance:

> I've been in the afterlife
>
> For ten years now, ten years of being gone
>
> And being forgotten. Even you, my son,
>
> Won't bring me back. The past is bearable,
>
> The past's only a scar, but the future –
>
> Never. Never again can I see myself
>
> Eye to eye with the sons of Atreus.[18] (73)

18 Agamemnon and Menelaus were the sons of king Atreus: Agamemnon, king of Mycenae, was commander-in-chief of the Greek expeditionary force in Troy; and his brother Menelaus, king of Sparta and husband of the outstandingly beautiful Helen, whose escape with Paris provoked the Trojan War.

On the other hand, Neoptolemus tries to convince Philoctetes to join the Greeks and leave the island behind as a bad dream, not only to help them put an end to the war against the Trojans, but also because Neoptolemus thinks it is the right thing to do. This way, besides accepting Philoctetes for his prodigious bow, he also submits to the latter's wound.

Finally, in the face of so much resistance, Neoptolemus (who has been subjected to tremendous tension due to his personal sense of ethics and the political demands of his country) is well prepared to ask Philoctetes to decide for once and for all: "Stop just licking your wounds. Start seeing things"[19] (74). He has important wounds that cannot be ignored and neither can the injustice, the pain and the suffering he has endured; thus, Neoptolemus is not simply telling him to forget about them. Nonetheless, in my view, it is also true that Philoctetes can do more than just indulge himself in his wounds. He should see things with deeper insight and a future perspective since it is not wise to indefinitely obsess over his physical and moral injuries and affronts.

I think that the key word in those two sentences is to be found in the appropriate use that Heaney makes of the adverb "just"; Neoptolemus (Heaney) asks Philoctetes (that is, his own nationalist community) not only to contemplate the past, but also to see reality as it is and focus on the future… Heaney believes that Philoctetes is ready to see other realities, to "start seeing things", not *only* his grievances; in other words, it is time to expand his horizon beyond his own personal problems so as to encompass a possible global *visionary* solution that includes the general interests of everyone. He must accept the *cure* – both physical and moral – that awaits him in Troy.

Philoctetes symbolizes the nationalist community in so far as he mirrors the injustice and suffering they underwent in Northern Ireland. Yet, Heaney uses him to unequivocally condemn the republican terrorists when Philoctetes agrees to go to Troy with his fellow Greek countrymen, that is to say, he finally abandons his victimization and immobilism. This decision leads to participation in the political institutions, something inconceivable in previous decades for both the members of the IRA and for Sinn Féin, its political wing.

Philoctetes is also a character to whom the audience initially responds with great sympathy and compassion. He has been abandoned by his comrades for ten years and left in complete isolation. This desertion and the pain from his wounded foot have caused great distress. Yet when Odysseus and Neoptolemus return they

19 "Licking their wounds" appears at the beginning of the play with the Chorus, and refers to all the people (2). In Grene's translation of *Philoctetes*, Neoptolemus' line reads as follows: "Sir, learn not to be defiant in misfortune" (Sophocles 2013: 273).

regard him with anxious suspicion. Philoctetes has been wronged and deserves our sympathy. However, when Neoptolemus changes his attitude to the victim, Philoctetes is unwilling to respond appropriately. He refuses to go to Troy under any circumstances. He has clearly been wronged but his steadfast rejection of Neoptolemus' entreaties renders our sympathy for him ambivalent, especially since we have witnessed Neoptolemus' moral deliberations. The victim of injustice has become devoted to himself; to a contemplation of his wounds and his oppressors which prevent him effecting any possible compromise and progress when the opportunity presented itself. Heaney's point is, that if nationalists continuously dwell on past injustices and refuse to work for a peaceful settlement, the violence and injustice will never end.

Odysseus represents a section of the Northern Irish community as well as the politicians of Northern Ireland, particularly the demagogues of the Unionist political parties, who are the ruling class, and, to a lesser extent, the nationalist parties, especially Sinn Féin. Once again, an appreciation of Sophocles' play is essential in understanding this symbol. Odysseus is indicative of a fifth century BC Athenian politician who has been influenced by the Sophists. He is totally unscrupulous and willing to use anybody to gain personal goal. He persuades Neoptolemus to his view with his rhetoric. Zimmermann makes the following moral description of Odysseus: "[…] Odysseus, a power politician for whom only the facts count and who does not shrink from employing deceit if he thinks that there is an advantage to be gained by it, for whom there are no absolute norms and values, and for whom oracles are a welcome means of justifying morally dubious conduct and of supporting morally dubious arguments" (1993: 82).

By the end of the play Odysseus is exposed as being worthy of contempt. Heaney seeks to illustrate how many Northern Irish politicians perpetuate the injustices in their society, because they refuse to deal with the whole community. Their shallow championing of only one side ensures the continued misery of both communities while safeguarding their comfortable, prominent lifestyles.

Finally, Neoptolemus, as in Sophocles' play, is the one character that can provide the audience with any hope. We witness his reluctant acceptance of Odysseus' methods of trying to persuade and ultimately to pit Neoptolemus against Philoctetes, and the consequent moral struggle with himself until he rejects them. Neoptolemus drops the use of deception since it will only prolong or even increase the injustices. His moral struggle dramatizes the conflict between personal integrity and political expediency. He wants to bolster his reputable distinction of honesty yet achieve the goal he shares with Odysseus. This point is constantly highlighted by the background presence of the Greek army at Troy. How are

they to reach that goal on behalf of their army? Neoptolemus wants to achieve it in a way that will preserve his personal integrity. Accordingly, he must reject the politically expedient use of deceit.

Neoptolemus is not successful in his honest attempt to persuade Philoctetes to go to Troy. His initial false pretence has proven costly and he realizes that if he is to maintain his strong personal moral principles, he must take Philoctetes back to Greece. Neoptolemus is prepared to do so; however, though all humanely possible solutions seem diminished, his moral decision is ultimately rewarded in *The Cure at Troy* when Hercules,[20] who is performed by the Chorus, appears at the end of the play as *deus ex machina* to settle the dispute – to avoid Philoctetes and Neoptolemus from going home – and to order them to go to Troy, where their presence is required to put an end to the war:

> I have opened the closed road
>
> Between the living and the dead
>
> To make the right road clear to you.
>
> I am the voice of Hercules now. (78)

Heaney acknowledges the importance of being able to transmit the voice of the poet through the Chorus: "I even wrote in a couple of extra choruses, because the Greek chorus allows you to lay down the law, to speak with a public voice. Things you might not get away with in your own voice, *in propria persona*, become definite and allowable pronouncements on the lips of the chorus" (Heaney and Hass 2000: 22-23).

Besides receiving his physical and moral cure from Asclepius,[21] Philoctetes will finally secure the longed-for military victory with his Greek compatriots; but Hercules bids him to act honourably in the theatre of war by fighting a *fair combat* and avoiding injustices when Troy falls. He also urges Philoctetes to go and to leave behind his bitter past: "Then take just spoils and sail at last / Out of the bad dream of your past" (79).

Hercules finishes his address by asking for respect (when the looting of Troy begins) for what the holy places represent. This last petition refers to

20 Sophocles uses the name of Heracles following the Greek tradition, but in Heaney's play he appears under the name of Hercules, which belongs to the Latin tradition and is much more familiar to a contemporary audience. Nevertheless, in his version, Heaney keeps the name of Odysseus, and not that of Ulysses.

21 Asclepius (Aesculapius in the Roman tradition), son of Apollo, was the god of medicine and healing.

the deference with which Protestant churches, which proliferated on the Irish landscape, were treated during the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1921, and later on with the creation of the Republic of Ireland in 1949. The Irish, most of whom are Catholic, allowed the presence of the churches which belonged to the Protestant faith. It should be remembered that the Irish constitution of 1937 establishes Catholicism as the religious creed of Ireland although it allows for the existence of other religious beliefs.[22] This is important since, unfortunately, Catholics in Ireland were ill-treated for a very long time, and Heaney wants to implicitly highlight this fact:

> But when the city's being sacked
>
> Preserve the shrines. Show gods respect.
>
> Reverence for the gods survives
>
> Our individual mortal lives. (79)

In Sophocles' play, respect towards the holy places in Troy is referred to as follows:

> But remember this,
>
> when you come to sack that town, revere the gods.
>
> All else our father Zeus thinks of less importance.
>
> Holiness does not die with the men that die.
>
> Whether they die or live, it cannot perish. (Sophocles 276)

In connection with Heracles' words, Heaney wrote, "Hercules' speech at the end (which I transpose to the Chorus) is an expression of recognition which Philoctetes has repressed: in other words, the Chorus is the voice of his unconscious" (2002: 173).

Having concluded Hercules' intervention, Philoctetes shows his satisfaction with what has been said and agrees to fulfil the command:

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22 The Constitution of Ireland, in its preamble states: "In the Name of the Most Holy Trinity, from Whom is all authority and to Whom, as our final end, all actions both of men and States must be referred […]" (Constitution of Ireland / Bunreacht na hÉireann 2).
Article 44.1. 2º declares: "The State recognises the special position of the Holy Catholic Apostolic and Roman Church as the guardian of the Faith professed by the great majority of the citizens". In section 3, in connection with other religions, it says that: "The State also recognises the Church of Ireland, the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, the Methodist Church in Ireland, the Religious Society of Friends in Ireland, as well as the Jewish Congregations and the other religious denominations existing in Ireland at the date of the coming into operation of this Constitution" (144).

> Something told me this was going to happen.
>
> Something told me the channels were going to open.
>
> It's as if a thing I knew and had forgotten
>
> Came back completely clear.
>
> All that you say
>
> Is like a dream to me and I obey. (79)

Similarly, Neoptolemus also agrees and complies with: "And so will I." The Chorus hurries them to start the journey: "Then go, immediately. / The winds are blowing and the tides are high." At the end of the play, Philoctetes utters his last words when he is about to bid farewell to Lemnos:

> But I can't believe I'm going. My head's light at the
>
> thought of a different ground and a different sky. I'll
>
> never get over Lemnos; this island's going to be the
>
> kneel under me and the ballast inside me. I'm like a
>
> fossil that's being carried away, I'm nothing but cave
>
> stones and damp walls and an old mush of dead
>
> leaves. (80)

Philoctetes epitomizes the suffering of Ireland throughout history, but in Heaney's version he also symbolizes hope for the future, particularly that of Northern Ireland: "Philoctetes is part of the past and the future: he is what Ireland should be, one that can incorporate its past and sail into the future with a secure ballast, rather than a festering wound that hinders progress" (McDonald 1996: 136).

To conclude, Heaney designates the Chorus (Hercules) to mediate between God and the mortals, and express a legitimate wish to perform a change that can make peace possible. The wounds inflicted in the past, although impossible to forget, give way to a relatively promising future of confidence and progress. The last verses of *The Cure at Troy* ooze with the optimism that Heaney wants to convey:

> Suspect too much sweet talk
>
> But never close your mind.

It was a fortunate wind

That blew me here. I leave

Half-ready to believe

That a crippled trust might walk

And the half-true rhyme is love. (81)

3. *THE CURE AT TROY* IN THE NORTHERN IRELAND PEACE PROCESS

The Downing Street Declaration of December 1993 led to significant changes in political alliances in Northern Ireland.[23] The document was, in part, the result of conversations between John Hume and Gerry Adams:

> The discussion between Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) leader John Hume and Gerry Adams, president of Sinn Fein (SF), led to a document in September 1993 that they said could lead to peace in Ireland. The Hume-Adams Document, in turn, influenced the Downing Street Declaration of December 1993, although Hume-Adams was significantly modified by the declaration in key areas, such as the need for the consent of the people of Northern Ireland before a United Ireland could come about. (Gillespie 2017: 242)

There was still a very long and tortuous road full of obstacles to reach the long-awaited peace. Yet the Declaration and, especially, the more frequent contacts and new political relationship between the different parties, led to the Belfast Agreement of 1998, popularly known as the Good Friday Agreement.[24] Although the violence was still quite prevalent for a long time, it started to decrease in intensity.

On 9 November 1989, after twenty-five years dividing the city of Berlin, a truly historic fact occurred: the fall of the famous and despicable wall. This event had immediate consequences in the following decade since it triggered many other transcendental changes in world politics such as the collapse of the totalitarian regimes in the Eastern bloc. By the summer of 1990, all communist leaders had

23 "On 15 December 1993, in Downing Street in London, Prime Minister John Major and Taoiseach Albert Reynolds issued the Joint Declaration on Northern Ireland. The Downing Street Declaration proved to be one of the central documents of the peace process" (Gillespie 2017: 98).

24 The Good Friday Agreement: "Settlement reached by all the major Northern Ireland parties, including Sinn Féin and excepting the DUP, in 1998. Reinforced the right of Northern Ireland to remain in the union with Britain until voted otherwise in a referendum. Set up institutional linkages between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, and between all parts of the British Isles. Also set police and equality reform in motion. Positively received by most nationalists at the time, whilst unionists were, and remain, bitterly divided. Also known as the Belfast Agreement" (Mitchell 2016: 146).

lost power, free elections were held, and the reunification of Germany took place. Finally, by the end of 1991, the Soviet Union ceased to exist.[25]

In February 1990 the release of Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela marked another historic event. Seamus Heaney, like many others around the world, was no stranger to the political situation in South Africa. In an interview during a visit to that country Heaney said: "I had a particular interest in South Africa in that I was involved with the anti-apartheid movement in Dublin for a number of years". Heaney describes Mandela's release from prison as "a memory-marking moment for anybody. The world was entranced with South Africa." When Mandela was freed Heaney was teaching at the University of Harvard (he alternated semesters between Harvard and Oxford), and at that particular time was totally absorbed with *The Cure at Troy*; Heaney himself describes that moment:

> I was translating a play called Philoctetes, about how a marooned man comes back and helps the Greeks to win the city of Troy. The play is really about someone who has been wounded and betrayed, and whether he can reintegrate with the betrayers or not. Human sympathy says yes, maybe political vengefulness says no, but the marooned man in Sophocles' play helps the Greeks who betrayed him to win Troy. It seemed to me to mesh beautifully with Mandela's return. The act of betrayal, and then the generosity of his coming back and helping with the city – helping the polis to get together again. (Johnson 2002)

In that same interview, Heaney, who had met Mandela in Dublin, said about him: "Of all the heroes, he's the great one. There's a great transmission of grace there – and, of course, great stamina to go with it".

It is pertinent to know Heaney's opinion regarding someone who symbolised suffering, and, more specifically, denoted freedom for millions of people. I firmly believe that there are numerous similarities and parallelisms between what happened in South Africa and Northern Ireland. It would obviously be necessary to spell out and contextualise the differences in the origin and the causes of the situations in both cases, but the consequences can be summarised in just a few words: the fundamental absence of civil rights. Hence, it is plausible to conclude that the Irish Catholics or nationalists, in a way, also suffered their own *apartheid* in Northern Ireland.

During the Northern Irish peace process there are a number of allusions by prominent political personalities to lines from Seamus Heaney's *The Cure at Troy* (77). Among them, it is worth mentioning the words uttered by the then president of the United States of America, Bill Clinton, whose role was

25 The dissolution of the Soviet Union officially took place on 26 December 1991. Mikhail Gorbachev, its last president, resigned and transferred all his powers to Boris Yeltsin, the first president of Russia.

decisive in the accomplishment of the Belfast Agreement of 1998, and who quoted them in a speech to the community in the Northern Irish city of Derry during his visit in 1995:

> History says, *Don't hope*
>
> *On this side of the grave.*
>
> But then, once in a lifetime
>
> The longed-for tidal wave
>
> Of justice can rise up,
>
> And hope and history rhyme.

Immediately after quoting those lines, Bill Clinton continued his discourse by saying: "Well, my friends, I believe. I believe we live in a time of hope and history rhyming. Standing here in front of the Guildhall, looking out over these historic walls, I see a peaceful city, a safe city, a hopeful city, full of young people that should have a peaceful and prosperous future […]" (1995). The American head of state placed emphasis on the word "hope" linking the past ("history, historic walls") with the time which is to arrive, as well as in the right of the citizens to be able to enjoy a future not only of peace but also of success.

The fact that Gerry Adams, the Sinn Féin party leader, chose the celebrated words *Hope and History: Making Peace in Ireland* as the title of one of his books, and after Bill Clinton himself had opted for *Between Hope and History: Meeting America's Challenges for the 21st Century,* for his book (1996), and, finally, Nadine Gordimer called hers *Living in Hope and History* (2000), show the extent to which those verses of *The Cure at Troy* "permeated the consciousness of public life" (O'Driscoll 2009: 62).

Another well-known political figure, Mary Robinson, quoted four words of Heaney's play at the end of her speech when she took office as president of the Republic of Ireland:

> May God direct me so that my Presidency is one of justice, peace and love. May I have the fortune to preside over an Ireland at a time of exciting transformation when we enter a new Europe where old wounds can be healed, a time when, in the words of Seamus Heaney, "hope and history rhyme". (1990)[26]

26 Inaugural speech by Mary Robinson as president of the Republic of Ireland in Dublin Castle on 3 December 1990. In her address she also quoted two other great Irish writers: James Joyce and W.B. Yeats.

Seamus Heaney dedicated this play retrospectively to the victims of the Omagh bombing, which took place on 15 August 1998 killing 29 people, two of whom were Spanish citizens, and left a trail of blood with hundreds of wounded people (McKittrick and McVea 2012: 261-262). "The Omagh bomb caused the largest number of deaths of any single event in the Troubles" (Gillespie 2017: 225). This massacre was perpetrated by the RIRA (*Real* IRA), a splinter group of the PIRA (*Provisional* IRA).

O'Brien's words summarize the feeling of the time: "It was no accident that, during the peace process negotiations, Heaney's words from *The Cure at Troy* became almost a catch-phrase: 'And hope and history rhyme'" (2005: 3).

4. CONCLUSION

I think the most outstanding feature of *The Cure at Troy* is that the play provides the framework in which Heaney presents and recreates the political and social problems in Northern Ireland for their visualization and analysis, while simultaneously proposing a solution, or at least, a possible and desirable hope to resolve those problems. In Heaney's words:

> […] while there are parallels, and wonderfully suggestive ones, between the psychology and predicaments of certain characters in the play and certain parties and conditions in Northern Ireland, the play does not exist in order to exploit them. The parallels are richly incidental rather than essential to the version. The essential travail is change; the essential conflict the one that Neoptolemus exhibits, between truth of institution and the demands of solidarity, between personal integrity and political expedience. But still, of course, all that is very complicated: Philoctetes is 'cured' but cured into the very loyalty and solidarity which Neoptolemus had to flout in order to bring the cure about. The play, in fact, could be described in words that Yeats uses about his book *A Vision*: it is 'a stylistic arrangement of experience', an attempt 'to hold in a single thought reality and justice'. (2002: 175)

Solidarity and loyalty are recurrent topics, which are closely related in Heaney's poetry; these universal values are also present in his modern version of Sophocles' classical tragedy, and are epitomized by the characters of Neoptolemus and Odysseus: loyalty towards oneself in opposition to that of public loyalty; in other words, fidelity towards personal moral beliefs versus commitment to political or religious leanings of a given group, in this case the unionist and nationalist communities. Consistent with this view, and in relation to the political events derived from the Troubles, in an interview with Robert Hass, Heaney said:

> The whole deception strategy goes against Neoptolemus' nature, but, for the sake of the Greek cause, he cooperates. He lies to Philoctetes, but in the end he cannot sustain the lie.... Anyhow, the moral crunch of the play connects up with E.M. Forster's famous declaration that if it came to a choice between betraying his country and betraying his friend, he hoped he would not betray his friend. But that is not a Greek position. Nor an Ulster one, indeed. In the Northern Ireland situation, you feel stress constantly, a tension between your habitual solidarity with your group and a command to be true to your individual, confused and solitary self. But in crisis situations, as Odysseus knows, there is little room for the tender conscience. If your side wants to win politically, you all have to bond together. And that bonding can strangle truth-to-self. So it was the overall situation of the play that I translated. (Heaney and Hass 2000: 22)

Fortunately, the values of personal loyalty towards oneself prevail in *The Cure at Troy*. In addition to its intrinsic artistic value, it has become a quintessential symbol and a hymn of hope for the two opposing communities and it has contributed – in as much as a literary work can change the world[27] – by forestalling decades of violence, and mitigating the fanaticism, bigotry, sectarianism and hatred in Northern Irish society. Heaney's version possesses a high degree of political content which acknowledges the pain and suffering of both communities. During the performance of *The Cure at Troy*, Heaney said in an interview that he was not a political writer and he did not believe that literature was a means to solve political problems (O'Driscoll 2008: 382).

Nevertheless, for Heaney the written word has a fundamental responsibility: it serves the purpose of informing and forging people's beliefs: "When I was young, the spiritual directors used to talk about the necessity of an 'informed conscience' – as opposed to culpable ignorance. […] The detached, disinterested quality of poetry is what's informative of both understanding and stand-off". To clarify these words Heaney resorts to the following analogy: "[…] poetry is like the line Christ drew in the sand, it creates a pause in the action, a freeze-frame moment of concentration, a focus where our power to concentrate is concentrated back upon ourselves" (382-383). I believe that Heaney's standpoint is plausible; based on the knowledge of certain facts, each individual is responsible for interpreting the situation and for acting conscientiously.

Finally, Heracles' intervention was essential for Sophocles' play since, by virtue of Zeus' decree, it put an end to the impasse and therefore preserves the traditional myth regarding the end of the Trojan War. Had Philoctetes not gone to Troy, the

27 "Shelley made the idea of poetic afterlife the climax of his *Defence of Poetry*. Poets are 'the unacknowledged legislators of the world' [...] If 'unacknowledged' means 'unconscious', then even while their writers are alive poems are doing their work outside and beyond the scope of their authors" (Morton 2006: 35).

war would not have ended. Hercules' intervention is essential for Heaney too, as it is fitting to his theme concerning Northern Ireland. The characters, especially Neoptolemus, battle with themselves regarding their prejudices towards each other. Similarly, the people in both communities hold the solution to the Northern problem. If they have the strength to face the struggle of identity and integrity, progress can be achieved.

This note of hope is, in my view, the corollary of *The Cure at Troy*, which not only manifests an undeniably ecumenical spirit but exemplifies Heaney's desire to foster peace, while accentuating a conciliatory and harmonious message to the two communities: unionist and nationalist.

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