



Ideal or Burden: The War of the Irish in *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme*

Ülkü ya da Zorunluluk: *Ulster'in Oğullarının Somme'a Doğru İlerlemesini Görün*¹
Oyununda İrlandalıların Savaşı

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Abstract

Frank McGuinness' *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme* (1985) presents the struggle of the eight Ulstermen, the Unionists and Protestants, at the Battle of the Somme in 1916 during the First World War. The aim of this paper is to demonstrate that McGuinness, an Irish nationalist, makes the audience/reader see the issues of war and heroism from the Unionist perspective. The Ulstermen who enlist in the military to support Britain in the war and honour both Britain and Ireland abandon their ideals as they witness the horrors of war and recognise the possibility of losing their comrades. The characters in pairs depend on each other, and have a strong sense of brotherhood during their march to death at the Somme. In a sense, fighting for Britain and Ireland is no longer an act of heroism, which becomes illusionary, but they show heroism as they risk their lives to save each other and support one another in difficult circumstances. Hence, it will be argued that McGuinness uses the 'illusion of heroism' to deconstruct the military, and show that the national, political, religious and cultural differences lose meaning in the face death, which is a reference to the separation between Unionist Protestants and Nationalist Catholics with regard to political and religious affiliation. In this respect, the historical and political background information on the conflicts within Ireland which lead the Southern part to become the Republic of Ireland and the Northern part to remain as a part of Britain will be given as McGuinness questions not only the recruitment of Irish soldiers to fight in the First World War but also the Ulstermen's devotion to Britain.

Keywords: Unionist, nationalist, Ulster, the Somme, Protestant, Catholic, Illusionary Heroism.

Öz

Frank McGuinness'in *Ulster'in Oğullarının Somme'a Doğru İlerlemesini Görün* (1985) adlı oyunu Birinci Dünya Savaşı sırasında 1916 yılında gerçekleşen Somme Savaşı'nda Birlikçi ve Protestan olan Ulsterli sekiz askerin verdiği mücadeleyi anlatmaktadır. Bu makalenin amacı, İrlandalı Milliyetçi McGuinness'in, savaş ve kahramanlık konularında seyirciyi/okuyucuyu Birlikçi bakış açısıyla bakmaya teşvik ettiğini göstermektir. Britanya'yı desteklemek ve hem Britanya'yı hem İrlanda'yı onurlandırmak savaşa giren Ulsterli askerler, savaşın dehşetine tanık olduktan ve arkadaşlarını kaybetme ihtimalini gördükten sonra ülkülerinden vazgeçerler. Çiftler halinde sunulan karakterler birbirlerine güvenirlir ve Somme'da ölüme kardeşlik duygusuyla yürürler. Britanya ve İrlanda için savaşmak kahramanlık göstergesi olmaktan çıkar, aldatıcı olur; askerler, birbirlerini kurtarmak için kendi canlarını tehlikeye

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atarak ve birbirlerini zor durumlarda destekleyerek kahramanlık gösterirler. Bu bağlamda, McGuinness'in 'aldatıcı kahramanlık' olgusunu askeriye'nin yapısını bozmak için kullandığı ve aynı zamanda Birlikçi Protestanlar ve Milliyetçi Katolikler arasında politik ve dini kimlikleri üzerinden yapılan ayrıma da gönderme olarak, ölüm karşısında ulusal, politik, dini ve kültürel farklılıkların anlamını yitirdiği savunulacaktır. McGuinness, sadece İrlandalı askerlerin Birinci Dünya Savaşı'na katılmasını değil aynı zamanda Ulsterlı askerlerin Britanya'ya olan bağlılığını da sorgular, bu nedenle, bu makalede Güney İrlanda'nın İrlanda Cumhuriyeti'ni kurmasına, Kuzey İrlanda'nın ise Britanya'nın parçası olarak kalmasına sebep olan İrlanda içinde yaşanan anlaşmazlıklar konusunda tarihi ve politik art alan bilgisi verilecektir.

Anahtar sözcükler: Birlikçi, milliyetçi, Ulster, Somme, Protestan, Katolik, Aldatıcı Kahramanlık.

Introduction

Frank McGuinness' *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme* (1985), which was first staged at the Abbey Theatre in Dublin in 1985 is the story of the relationship and death of eight Protestant and Unionist soldiers from Northern Ireland, the Ulstermen, who volunteer to fight in the 36th Ulster Division of the British army against Germany at the Battle of the Somme in 1916 in the First World War. The play depicts the union of eight men who are first presented as pairs, or turn into pairs in the course of the play, and eventually have a fellowship in solidarity before they march to death. McGuinness does not glorify heroism in war; it is vividly presented in the play that war brings merely death and destruction regardless of what political, religious, or cultural ideals the man is committed to. Therefore, for the Ulstermen, fighting to support Britain, in fact, becomes meaningless in the end because they suffer from the atrocities of war and die without knowing whether their comrades have been saved, or the noble cause they have fought for has been achieved. Although the soldiers are reluctant to face the truth at first, each finally recognises that it is almost impossible to come out of war alive; if a soldier gets out alive, he turns into a living dead with the memories. In this respect, the major aim of this paper is to demonstrate that McGuinness presents the idea of brotherhood through the relationships of eight soldiers, and displays the emotional bond which leads them to have a strong sense of unity despite the conflicts which arise from the differences in their perception of war and religious beliefs. Accordingly, the issue of heroism as an illusion, which ruins the image of military as a place where one honours his country and McGuinness uses to deconstruct the military, will be presented through the transformation of eight sons of Ulster who come to the barracks with the belief that they fight for Ulster, so Britain, and they will survive, yet after the horrors they witness in the trenches for five months, on the day they will march to the Somme they recognise that death and devastation await them. Also, McGuinness presents that the eight soldiers rely on each other on the day of fight at the Somme as if they are not a part of a military division but on their own having no one to save them but only each other. It will be also demonstrated that McGuinness, as a writer who grew up as an Irish nationalist, evaluates the lasting struggle between Ireland and England for the independence of Ireland, which splits the Irish people as 'Separatists' and 'Unionists', from the Unionist point of view, and hence becomes the voice of the other. In this respect, the historical and political background information on the play and the reasons why McGuinness reflects the situation of the Unionists will be presented. This will be followed by McGuinness' dealing with the idea of pairing, the conflicts among the soldiers along with the clashes between Protestantism and Catholicism, so Unionism and Republicanism, the illusion of heroism, and the sense of being a community in the face of death.

Historical and Political Background

Observe is the fictional account of a historical event that is the slaughter of the Protestant Unionist Irish soldiers in the British army at the Battle of the Somme in 1916 during the First World War. As Jacqueline Hill points out, "all action in the play is set in the period from the men's first enlisting to its climax at the Somme" (2009, p. 1). Britain claimed that the reason why she fought in the First World War was to guarantee that Belgium would remain neutral, yet, in reality, she aimed to control Germany which was rival to Britain in commerce and maritime interests in that period (Middlebrook, 1971, p. xv). The most significant incident which caused the Battle of the Somme was the weakening of the French at Verdun due

to the German attack, and “[s]o hard did the Germans press their attacks that it was feared the French would not be able to hold on at Verdun” (Middlebrook, 1971, p. xviii). Apart from her allies, Britain called the Irish people for help. The Republicans from the Irish Volunteers and the Unionists from the Ulster Volunteer Force enlisted to fight, and the 10th and 16th Irish divisions were formed along with the 36th Ulster division. Although these divisions were distinct from one another in terms of religious and political respects, there were Protestants, Anglo-Irish officers and Northern Ireland nationalists within the 10th and 16th divisions (Boyce, 1994, p. 49). As Hill notes, the claim that the majority of the Irish participants were Protestants was wrong as although almost half of the enlisted soldiers were Protestants, the number of the Catholic Nationalist recruits was high (2009, p. 5). However, still, in John Keegan’s words, “the most unusual was the 36th (Ulster) Division, a wholesale embodiment in khaki of the Ulster Volunteer Force of Irish Protestants opposed the Irish Home Rule who, on the outbreak of war, had collectively volunteered,” and these men were inexperienced in war without enough training (2000, p. 290). As also Tyler Crummie suggests, Ireland’s Home Rule Act underlies the political conflicts among the Irish people before the Great War, and it is fundamental to understand the characters’ attitudes towards each other and the Catholics in the play (2014, para. 1) Accordingly, McGuinness represents the soldiers in the play as ‘Loyalist, Unionist and Protestant’ because these characteristics refer to the Irish people who want to remain a part of the United Kingdom as opposed to the Republicans, Nationalists and Catholics who support the necessity of separation (Boyce, 1991, p. 19). In other words, the Unionists maintain that Northern Ireland has to remain “a legitimate entity, historically, culturally and politically part of Britain” (Tonge, 1998, p. 49). The clash between the Unionists and the Nationalists increased when the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF), which consisted of an army raised by Sir Edward Carson and Sir James Craig in 1912 to oppose the Home Rule Bill that was introduced by Britain, was first established (Bruce, 1994, p. 2). The third Home Rule Bill which became law in 1914 and was supported by the Nationalists concerned the Unionists with the possibility of a powerful Catholic government and restrictions on Protestants’ religious freedoms. However, on the start of the Great War, the law was not implemented, and the Nationalists lost their hope of establishing an independent republic while the Unionists showed their commitment to Britain by forming the 36th Division which fought in the Western Front at the Battle of the Somme. The Division had more than five thousand casualties, and the Unionists, in view of their sacrifice for Britain, expected that the Home Rule Act would come into force on behalf of the Unionist cause after the war ended. However, the Irish Independence War, which started in 1919 and lasted until 1921, prevented the law from being brought into force (Crummie, 2014, para. 3). Claire Gleitman describes the sufferings of the Ulster Unionists after the war as follows: “For their troubles a generation marched headlong into German machine-gun fire, gaining a minuscule amount of ground which was promptly lost again” (2004, p. 219). Hence, until 1920 when twenty-six counties became the Irish Free State while six counties of Ulster became ‘Northern Ireland’ (Bruce, 1994, p. 3), in Crummie’s words, “[t]he Somme became a representation of a blood sacrifice made by Ulster on behalf of the British Empire and their Protestant beliefs” (2014, para.7). Therefore, it may be argued that when the Home Rule Act did not come into force with the outbreak of the First World War, both the Unionists and Nationalists got disappointed, and despite the sectarian clashes and political dissidence, as George Boyce asserts, “Britain wanted Ireland – all Ireland – to see the war from her perspective,” (1994, p. 50) and even if it was for the sake of the Home Rule, the Irish people leagued together against the enemy of Britain in the Great War. And in the play McGuinness aims to use the fight “as a symbol of a whole community [the Ulstermen], united by that tragedy, reaffirming its identity through that historical experience” (Boyce, 1994, p. 53), which is, in fact, valid for all the Irish men, without distinction as Unionist and Nationalist, fought in the war. Furthermore, in the light of the background information presenting the troubled relationship among the Irish people and between Ireland and England, the following questions, which are also asked by McGuinness in the play, and will be touched upon in this essay, are posed. In Hill’s words, “[t]hese include the question of who enlisted and why; why, despite growing evidence of casualties on an unprecedented scale, the combatants were prepared to stay and fight” (2009, pp. 1-2). And Boyce asks, “Whose liberty? What country?” (1994, p. 53).

In *Observe* McGuinness, as a nationalist and Catholic Irishman, presents the plight of the Unionist Ulstermen who fight for Britain and sacrifice their lives in the First World War. Through these eight

Ulstermen, McGuinness questions and challenges the political division among the Irish as the Unionists and Nationalists, and even the religious division as Protestants and Catholics. Helen Heusner Lojek supports the argument that McGuinness regards various political, religious and cultural issues through the eyes of the Unionists in *Observe* as she says that “Dublin reviews routinely mentioned the fact that a Catholic nationalist had created an understanding portrait of Protestant unionists” (2006, p. 338). McGuinness’ display of the situation of the Unionist volunteers of the 36th Ulster Division who were brutally killed at the Battle of the Somme on 1 July 1916 may be regarded as an attempt to influence the Southern Irish audience who are committed to the Easter Rising that happened in 1916 just three months before the Somme (Greene, 2002, p. 250), and in Boyce’s words, “signalled the beginning also of the ‘Irish revolution’ which ended the union between Great Britain and Ireland and established two Irish states in its place” (1991, p. 295). Hence, the play aims to remind the audience that the Ulster Protestants were killed in one of the most terrible wars in history, and while ‘1916’ implies the Rising for the Nationalists, that same year means the Somme for the Unionists (Greene, 2002, p. 250). Boyce, in this sense, asserts that “[f]or Nationalist Ireland, the story was very different. 1916 was a sacrifice, but the sacrifice was made in Dublin, not in France” (1994, p. 51). According to Declan Kiberd, the Easter rebels wanted the Nationalists to leave the Great War, which was England’s war, and focus on the independence war of the Irish nation (2005, p. 284). Therefore, both parties were ‘the other’ for each other because although both fought for their ideals in 1916, while the Nationalists who did not fight in the Great War sought freedom from the British rule, the Unionists sacrificed themselves for the sake of Britain. Thus, in Eamonn Jordan’s words, “[a]s the play is set in 1916 it chimes with nationalist commemorations of the Easter Rising in the same year, which was for many the beginning of the end to British rule” (2010, p. 238). In this respect, McGuinness shows the martyrdom of the Unionists in *Observe* to put forward the fact that both sides of the Irish nation maintained objectives, struggled to preserve their ideals, suffered and became victimised if that meant to follow their political and religious beliefs. In Tom Herron’s words, “[I]atching on to McGuinness’s upbringing in County Donegal, the critics tend to see the play as an imaginative act of reaching out across various kinds of borderlines, as an attempt to understand the sectarian and political Other” (2004, p. 140). McGuinness used to travel to Derry, one of the counties of Northern Ireland, and crossing the border frequently taught him about the reasons for and the consequences of the partition (Jordan, 2010, p. 234). Then, he lived in the Protestant community while he was teaching at the New University of Ulster between 1977 and 1979, which led him to experience a different side of the Irish culture (Lojek, 2004, p. 58). Hence, in the play McGuinness, calling himself “both a Northern Irish and a Catholic writer” (Jordan, 2010, p. 234), aims to become the voice of the other, and describes the sense of unity and solidarity, yet at the same time loneliness and despair in the face of death the Ulstermen feel, but cannot change. Emilie Pine asserts that “difficult exploration and other is the foundational ground for the play; the process that McGuinness went through in writing the play is thus the same process that the characters go through within the play” (2010, p. 59). Moreover, the bombing campaign of the Irish Republican Army became so violent in the 1970s and the 1980s that many Irish nationalists decided to reconsider their dedication to Irish nationalism. They were afraid of the fact that their reputation would be stained. In this respect, they supported to terminate the constitutional claim on the six counties of Northern Ireland, and they inclined to discover the Unionist tradition. Hence, McGuinness became one of these Nationalists who intend to include the other rather than a prejudiced exclusion, and *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching towards the Somme* adopted this new approach (Kiberd, 2005, p. 279). In his interview published in *Studies* McGuinness asserts that

[i]t has been easy for both them and us to define them in solely in relation to what they are not, in which that they are not Catholic. Similarly, it’s been very easy for the Protestants to define Catholicism in terms of what it is not, namely that they are not Protestant. (1998, p. 272)

Therefore, it may be argued that according to McGuinness, it is unnecessary to label people based on what they lack, and what they cannot be. In another interview that McGuinness has made with Kevin Jackson, he frankly professes that his perception about the Protestant Unionists has changed as he came to challenge his own bigotry while he was writing *Observe* (as cited in Roche, 1995, p. 265). Hence, McGuinness not only

overcomes his own prejudices as a Nationalist Irishman and playwright but also achieves to change the perspective of the Southern Irish audience along with the contemporary audience on the goals and struggle of the Irish Protestant Unionists that ended with agony and death in 1916 through the fictionalisation of the Battle of the Somme in *Observe*.

Pairs

In terms of characterisation, McGuinness provides the reader with a diversity of characters coming from different counties of Ulster and with distinct occupational backgrounds in *Observe*. In Part Two “Initiation” George Anderson refers to the variety of soldiers enlisted in the military as he says, “I know they’re taking on all types” (McGuinness, 1996, p. 133). William Moore and John Miller come from Coleraine while David Craig is from Enniskillen, Fermanagh. Martin Crawford is from Derry Town, and Christopher Roulston comes from Tyrone. Except Kenneth Pyper, who is a sculptor and an upper-class character, yet prefers to fight as a soldier though he has an opportunity to become an officer, the other seven men are from working class. Moore is a dyer, Millen is a miller, Craig is a blacksmith, and Crawford wants to be a professional footballer while Roulston is a Presbyterian preacher. As Christopher Murray asserts, “[n]o extraneous characters are admitted; no representatives of church, state, or even officer class. All is concentrated on the intimate relations between eight volunteers” (1997, p. 204). As regards the theme of pairing in *Observe*, clues on who is paired with whom are given even at the very beginning of the play. In Part One “Remembrance” Elder Pyper, who is the only survivor of the Somme and calls the ghosts of his dead friends, remembers the scene where his comrades have been killed at the Somme, and refers to the pairs who have been parted from each other by death:

You look angry, David. Have I hurt you by speaking? I can’t understand your silence. Can you, Roulston, you, Crawford? I envy your happiness together. But you must call as and when you wish. This place is yours when you wish it to be. I want you here. I want you to stay with me. Where are the others? Is Moore still searching for John Millen? Will he never believe Millen cannot be found? If he were found, would he not return here? Moore must stop searching. It is time to rest. I would rest, but when he frees you from his darkness, he asks questions, as if he wishes to remember. Where is Anderson? Still attending McIlwaine? I saw that, you know. Cut in two. Anderson falling on him as if his body could hold McIlwaine’s body together. (...) You were right, David. The last battle. I died that day with you. (McGuinness, 1996, p. 99)

Thus, as clearly indicated above, Pyper is paired with Graig to whom he directly addresses and asks whether he has disturbed him in death, and wants Craig to maintain contact with him. Roulston and Crawford are presented as pairs as Elder Pyper indicates that they have been content together. Moore is related to Millen as he still looks for his dead partner. Last, Anderson is presented as accompanying McIlwaine who has been slaughtered just like Millen during the march. Therefore, it may be argued that by referring to the past through Elder Pyper’s memories McGuinness manifests at the very beginning of the play that the men have been identified as pairs, and they do not want to leave each other even in death as they still search for the other halves lost in the war. In other words, the strong sense of brotherhood in pairs continues after the soldiers die, which is vividly presented in Elder Pyper’s asking about his friends in “Remembrance”. The fellowship of the soldiers does not remain in war but even the spirits in the pairs are looking for their partners to protect them and to unite with them in death. It is also ironical that the beginning of the play is, in fact, the very end of the events that happen throughout the play and all the painful experiences that the Ulstermen go through. Therefore, introducing the characters in pairs in the opening scene of the play McGuinness presents the timeless bonds of brotherhood among the soldiers. Furthermore, the entrance of the soldiers to the barracks at the beginning of the play is fundamental to see how McGuinness introduces the theme of pairing to the reader. In “Initiation” Pyper is first seen on the stage peeling an apple and cutting his thumb, and Craig enters the scene, which vividly indicates that they will function as one of the pairs of the play.

Their relationship starts with Craig's unwelcoming question, "Who the hell are you?" (McGuinness, 1996, p. 104); however, as will be presented, it turns into an intimate and enduring relationship. Also, in "Rememberance" Elder Pyper wants Craig, who has saved his life during the war, to help him and save him from the desperate struggle of surviving the Somme and existing with the traumatic memories of war: "Ulster lies in rubble at our feet. Save it. Save me. Take me out of this war alive" (McGuinness, 1996, p. 100). Moore and Millen come to the unit as a pair as the stage direction on their entrance to the scene vividly indicates: "*William Moore and John Millen enter, Moore punching Millen forward playfully*" (McGuinness, 1996, p. 107). Roulston comes to the barracks alone without a partner, yet he is already known by Pyper, who is Roulston's schoolmate, and Craig, who has once listened to one of his sermons. However, Roulston becomes a pair with Crawford who stands by him after Moore insults the Bible Roulston holds, which is followed by a discussion. As McGuinness clearly presents in the stage direction, "*Crawford goes and picks up Roulston's Bible,*" (1996, p. 130) and gives it back to Roulston, which leads to their introduction. Last, Anderson and McIlwaine come to the barracks as a pair shouting, and "*tossing their kit bags to each other*" (p. 132). The stage direction at the end of Part Two explicitly displays the pairs: "*Millen lies on his makeshift bed, as does Moore. Roulston goes to his bed and again reads the Bible. Crawford goes over to read it with him. McIlwaine looks after Anderson. (...) They watch as Craig bandages Pyper's bleeding hand*" (McGuinness, 1996, p. 137). Therefore, McGuinness sets up the structure regarding the development of characters even at the very beginning of the play. And it may be argued that by presenting the soldiers as pairs rather than sole individuals McGuinness paves the way for the sense of community which will be the marking feature of these soldiers especially at the end of the play.

The third part of *Observe*, "Pairing", where the eight men are on leave from the Front after five months of service and are situated in pairs at distinctive places in the Northern landscape, is particularly significant to see how the interdependence of the partners in each pair increases, the bond between them develops while the characters change after their experiences in the military, and how each man supports the other one who is in crisis. Thus, in Michael Etherton's words, "in each pair there is an act of friendship which is both a physical act and an act of speaking about it: one man asks the other man through to safety" (1989, p. 50). Craig takes Pyper to Boa Island where is his home, and he feels himself secure and totally free of the horrors and duties of war. As it is vividly indicated in the following lines, Craig takes Pyper to the island on purpose to inspire him to sculpt again so that he can pursue his interest in art and practise his skill as he has done before enlisting:

Craig Signs? Could you sculpt here again?

Pyper What makes you ask that?

Craig Just wondered.

Pyper That's why you brought me here?

Craig I just wanted to show it to you. That's all. I'm not putting any pressure on you.

Pyper laughs.

Why the laugh?

Pyper Because I'm happy. (McGuinness, 1996, p. 139)

Thus, it may be argued that Craig aims to make Pyper happy and distract their attention away from the atrocities of war they have witnessed for five months in the Front and have been constantly preoccupying them. In other words, their travel to Boa Island as a pair functions as a sigh of relief where Pyper can go back to his profession and sculpture by rediscovering his creativity, and Craig can feel himself safe and peaceful again. In this respect, it may be argued that McGuinness uses Boa Island as one of the locations in the play deliberately because it is not only close to County Fermanagh, Northern Ireland but it also has a stone statue which is Boa Island figure and dates back to 400-800 AD (Crumrine, 2014, para. 8), therefore, it is a place popular with the sculptors. Moreover, it is also indicated in "Pairing" that Craig has saved Pyper's life during the war, and this act has increased their attachment to each other. When they arrive at the island, Pyper wants to thank Craig for his heroic act and remembers Craig's self-sacrifice to save his life, yet Craig does not want

to talk about that memory as he firmly believes that Pyper would do the same thing if it were Craig who was in danger:

Pyper Thanks.

Craig What for?

Silence.

What for?

Pyper You know.

Craig No.

Pyper Saving my life. I want –

Craig Kenneth, I don't want that brought up ever. Hear me? I only did what you would have done if it had been me. Not just me. Any of us. We need to forget. (McGuinness, 1996, p.

139)

Hence, not only is the bond between Craig and Pyper presented as a strong connection but the relationships among all the soldiers are intimate and enduring as they can risk their own lives for each other. Similarly, Roulston and Crawford are presented in a church where Roulston prays and Crawford accompanies him. However, Roulston is presented as a weak partner in this scene, and he cannot find enough strength and courage to leave the church as he does not want to go back to the Front, to the terrible experiences they have had in the war. However, Crawford acts as the more powerful and supporting half of the pair, and urges him to leave the church and gain freedom as he asserts that Roulston has already proved his strength and faith in their company, and his belief in church will not save him from the horrors he has already witnessed and will witness in the future. In this respect, their dialogue is as follows:

Crawford I think we should leave this church.

Roulston I can't leave this church.

Crawford It's not helping you in here.

Roulston I'm not asking for help. I'm asking for strength.

Crawford You proved your strength beside me.

Roulston No. (McGuinness, 1996, p. 140)

As stated in the quotation, in Roulston and Crawford's pairing, Roulston is the one who is in crisis and needs to be supported, and Crawford attempts to save him from this predicament. Furthermore, in "Pairing" Crawford provokes Roulston to fight in the church because he wants to show him that he is not a divine being but an ordinary man and a soldier like the rest of the crew, a "[b]lasphemer, brawling in the church" (McGuinness, 1996, p. 162). Referring to the other comrades Crawford says: "They're all one, aren't they? And now you're one with them. You're one with us" (McGuinness, 1996, p. 162). Therefore, Crawford becomes the source of power that Roulston needs to rely on. In Moore and Millen's pairing on a suspended ropebridge in "Pairing" Moore is stuck in a difficult situation that is similar to that of Roulston's. He cannot cross the bridge, and Millen encourages him to achieve the task by assuring him that he will always support him as he has done until that moment: "Moore: I can't cross it, Johnny, I can't. I want to but I'm not able. / Millen: You have to try. / Moore: Tomorrow. / Millen: No, you have to do it now. / Moore: I'll fall. / Millen: You won't. (McGuinness, 1996, p. 142). Hence, Millen promises that under no circumstances will he leave Moore alone, and that he will not be injured when he crosses the bridge. In this sense, Millen reaches out his hand and wants Moore to feel the power of his existence, trust him, and says: "Just feel it. Feel around it. Can you touch the fingers? Can you get the feel of the palm? Do you find its strength?" (McGuinness, 1996, p. 155). Therefore, by promising "that hand's holding [him] up" (McGuinness, 1996, p. 155), Millen, alone, becomes the reinforcements Moore desperately needs. Michael Cadden relates the places the characters are situated in Ulster and the sense of fraternity they have as follows:

As they play out their relationships, respectively, on a rope bridge (perhaps the one near Coleraine), on Boa Island (Lough Erne), on the Orange Field at Finnaghy (“the holiest spot in Ulster”), and in a Protestant Church, male bonding becomes indistinguishable from the Northern Ireland landscape. (...) Two by two, the love they have for one another constitutes Ulster itself. (2007, p. 562)

Therefore, the Ulstermen who are scattered all over Northern Ireland become integrated with the landscape, and the bonds among the soldiers represent the unity in Northern Ireland. In a sense, ‘Ulster’ represents their dependence on each other, and their dependence on each other represents ‘Ulster’.

Conflicts

Before the sons of Ulster gain full sensibility to become a community and create a brotherhood, and despite their existence as pairs, they go through various conflicts in the play. The major conflicts are their clashes over the issue of death and religion. In Part Two “Initiation” Pyper constantly tells his comrades that they will all die at the end of the war, and he has enlisted to achieve death as he says, “I enlisted, before I was conscripted, because I’d nothing better to do. (...) I enlisted because I’m dying anyway. I want it over quickly” (McGuinness, 1996, p. 111). However, Millen’s fierce response to Pyper’s foresight of their death vividly displays that the comrades have faith that they will survive the war and return to their homes as brave Unionists. In this sense, Millen addresses Pyper: “I’ve only met you. And I don’t like you already. Now I don’t care what you’re going on about, but no more chat about dying. It’ll be looking at us straight in the face soon enough” (McGuinness, 1996, p. 111). Thus, as the soldiers are aware of the fact that they are obliged to face the horrors of war soon, it is no use to talk about death and destroy their hopes. The other issue the soldiers clash is religion as McGuinness, as a Catholic, on the one hand, presents Protestant Unionists who insult and attack Catholicism in *Observe*. After Anderson and McIlwaine enter the barracks, they make jokes on Catholicism and suddenly attack Crawford accusing him of being a Catholic. Thus, Catholics, through Crawford, are subjected to first verbal attacks by Anderson’s statements, “I spy a Taig,” and “Have I not trained you to smell a Catholic within a mile of you?” (McGuinness, 1996, p. 132), then physical attack as it is indicated in the following stage direction, “*McIlwaine flings back his head, howls, rushes for Crawford,*” and “*McIlwaine on to the bed, snarling and snapping*” (p. 132). On the other hand, McGuinness’ conciliatory attitude towards the conflict between Protestants and Catholics is obviously presented in Millen’s defence of Crawford after the attack. He protects Crawford by saying, “Let that young lad go,” and “[h]e is one of ours” (McGuinness, 1996, pp. 132-133). Therefore, McGuinness displays the meaninglessness of religious discrimination and labelling people as ‘the other’ through Millen’s comments supporting that they have to unite against their enemy on the battlefield rather than losing time by internal conflicts. It may be argued that McGuinness aims to give a very clear message to all the Irish people, regardless of categories such as Unionists and Nationalists, displaying that despite all the religious and political divisions, they maintain similar ideals glorifying the national identity and unity, and suffer from similar repressions and violence in a time of crisis. In this scene Moore’s asking Crawford whether he is Catholic and on Crawford’s answer Millen’s and Craig’s backing Crawford saying respectively, “Let him go. Do you hear?” and “He said, do you hear?” (McGuinness, 1996, p. 133) clearly shows that the division among them as Catholic and Protestant does not have importance at that moment because they are the members of the same division enlisted to fight in war, which may be read as a historical reference to recruitment of both Nationalists and Unionists to fight in the Great War. In another scene where Anderson associates *Titanic* and the Pope, which represents the Catholic Church, a harsh criticism on Catholicism is presented. Anderson indicates that the reason why *Titanic* has sunk is the curses made on the name of the Pope during the construction of the ship. Thus, Anderson asserts that the curses, which have been sufficient to sink a ship that has been known as unsinkable, will bring the doom of the Irish nation: “Anderson: Every nail they hammered into the *Titanic*, they cursed the Pope. That’s what they say. / McIlwaine: There was a lot of nails in the *Titanic*. / Anderson: And he still wasn’t cursed enough” (McGuinness, 1996, p. 154). Therefore, as indicated in the above lines, Anderson voices his hatred not only for the Pope, but also for the

Catholic people in the name of the Pope. However, the scene where Moore and the Presbyterian preacher Roulston discuss Moore's definition of the content of the Bible as "dirty pictures" (McGuinness, 1996, p. 130) vividly demonstrates that McGuinness endeavours to find common ground on the conflict between Protestantism and Catholicism as he also presents the clash between two Protestant Unionists on religion in *Observe*. Roulston assumes that Moore not only insults the Bible, but also the God and all the Protestant ideals he follows as can be seen in the following dialogue:

Roulston Is there a particular book which interests you?

Moore No.

Roulston I could recommend some of the psalms.

Moore Don't bother. I wasn't reading it. I was only looking for the dirty pictures.

Roulston snatches the Bible violently. He roars.

Roulston Do you dare defile the word of God? Do you dare blaspheme against my Father?

After Roulston's outburst there is a sharp silence. Roulston sits on his bed, buries his head in his hands. The Bible falls to the floor. (McGuinness, 1996, p. 130)

These lines clearly display that Roulston approaches Moore and recommends him some psalms because he wants to guide him on religious matters. However, Moore's scorning statements about the Bible lead to a severe crisis between the two Protestants, which may be interpreted as McGuinness' attempt to display that religious or political conflicts may occur not only between different parties but also within the same party. Hence, it is possible to say that throughout the play McGuinness presents scenes where the tension between the Protestants and Catholics rises; however, he shows his impartiality by easing the tension, and displaying that such rivalry is not peculiar to two different sects but can grow within the same sect. Therefore, as presented in the following dialogue between Moore and Millen: "Moore: Pay no heed to fights like that. / Millen: We have them all the time. / Moore: Over in a minute. / Millen: All forgotten then," (McGuinness, 1996, p. 114) the conflicts among the Protestants and Catholics, or between the Unionists and Nationalists should not arouse hostility, and should be settled because the Unionists and Nationalists are the members of the same nation while the Protestants and Catholics are the sects of the same religion.

The Sense of Brotherhood

The strong sense of unity in the relationships of the characters in pairs is fully felt in the last section, "Bonding" where the comrades make preparations for the march at the Somme. In Etherton's words, "[w]hat the war does is suddenly to deepen their camaraderie into intense and specific male friendships" (1989, p. 48). Their interdependence created in the course of the play peaks in "Bonding" as Anderson offers a badge of honour to Pyper by common consent of the rest of the crew, which indicates that all the mischievous behaviours of Pyper, which have disturbed the soldiers earlier, along with all the clashes among the soldiers have been forgotten, and what they only regard is their march whose end is bleak. In other words, the badge of honour given to Pyper demonstrates that they are the parts of the same unit with the same cause no matter how it will end:

Anderson We've noticed something missing from your uniform. Something important. We think you should do something about it. It might get you into trouble.

Pyper What's the missing?

Anderson Your badge of honour

Anderson hands out an Orange sash to Pyper.

Well?

Pyper It's not mine.

Anderson It is now. It's a gift. From us. Am I right McIlwaine? (McGuinness, 1996, p. 193)

In these lines, although Pyper is surprised by Anderson's offer of the badge, he accepts it as a token of their brotherhood. The following exchange of the sashes among the soldiers that is indicated in the stage direction is also fundamental to comprehend how all the personal and religious conflicts, which have differentiated them as Catholic and Protestant previously, have come to an end on the verge of war, and how the sons of Ulster have been united:

With the exception of Pyper, they each begin to put on their Orange sashes. Craig watches Pyper, then takes his sash off, goes to Moore, hands it to him. Moore hesitates, then exchanges his sash for Craig's. At this there is an exchange of sashes, Crawford's for Anderson's, Millen's for McIlwaine's. Roulston goes to Pyper, who takes Roulston's and gives him his own. (McGuinness, 1996, p. 195)

Hence, by the exchange of badges mentioned in the quotation, the soldiers accept to carry each other's badges and die with those badges on their uniforms. In a sense, their identities merge and it becomes impossible to see particular individuals but members of a community who exist in fraternity. In Nicholas Grene's words, "In the exchange of orange sashes (...) it is the group as a group which is the system of support for all of them" (2002, p. 250). What is significant in this scene is that the soldiers do not give their badges to their partners in the pairs, yet give randomly, which demonstrates that they have maintained a full sense of fellowship. In Murray's words, "in the final scene when they exchange Orange sashes (...) before the battle quite a different structure of feeling is created, a fellowship reminiscent of St Crispin's Day" (1997, pp. 204-205). St.Crispian's Day, the feast day of Christian brothers and martyrs Crispin and Crispinian, is celebrated on 25 October (Guiley, 2001, p. 83; Illes, 2011, p. 529), which is also the day when the Battle of Agincourt (1415) was fought between England and France (Curry, 2015, p. 33). In Murray's comment there is a reference to William Shakespeare's history play *Henry V* where King Henry V delivers a patriotic speech emphasising the strong association of the soldiers by saying, "We few, we happy few, we band of brothers" (IV.iii.60), which evokes the brotherhood of the Ulstermen in *Observe*.

The Illusion of Heroism

The illusion of heroism which cannot shatter the unity among the soldiers who march to the Somme, so to death, together reveals the bitter disappointment at the military as an institution. The soldiers have transformed in the last part of *Observe*, "Bonding", and have lost their faith in the sense of heroism as they have fully recognised that death awaits them at the Somme. In other words, they have been deeply affected by the atrocities of war they have witnessed in the Front for five months before they are sent to the Somme, and have awoken to the reality of violence, destruction and death embedded in war. Pyper's reference to his days in France while he is starving may be considered as a foreshadowing to death awaiting the soldiers at the Somme as he says, "I thought I was dying. Not just in the way we're all dying, but suddenly and unprepared" (McGuinness, 1996, p. 110). If it is considered that the sons of Ulster have been sent to the Somme without sufficient training, which is indicated in "Initiation" as Craig asks, "How will they train us all?" and Pyper answers, "They won't" (McGuinness, 1996, p. 103), it may be argued that Pyper's state of being unready to die in France is associated with the soldiers' physically and emotionally unprepared state to face death. The horrors of war, and the fear of death disturbing the soldiers are presented in various scenes throughout the play. The scene where Pyper cuts his thumb and Craig encourages him to endure the sight of blood is significant to demonstrate the concern of the soldiers on the issues of death and destruction they will witness during the war:

Craig Get away home out of that.

Pyper I can't go home. I've signed up. The army has me. Once you're in, there's no getting out.

Craig Well, you'll see a lot more than a bleeding thumb before you're out.
(McGuinness, 1996, p. 103)

Therefore, in these lines, Craig manifests that the military brings out violence, both physical and emotional injury and total destruction in the end, and it is almost inevitable to escape that reality. Similarly, Moore's rejection to kill a horse is criticised by the other soldiers as he is reminded that he will be obliged to kill a man during the war, hence he has to get accustomed to the fact that enlisting in the army means destroying and being destroyed, as well. When Moore says, "Could never kill a horse," Craig's response, "You might soon kill a man" (McGuinness, 1996, p. 117) is vital to see their level of consciousness on the reality of military life and joining a war as a soldier. In this regard, the sense of heroism loses its impact on the sons of Ulster as the war progresses and they take in charge in the Front. In "Remembrance" Elder Pyper reveals the consequences of war which do not reflect the sense of heroism after he has lost his comrades at the Somme. He sees the ghosts of his friends, which makes him angry because the apparitions force him to remember while as an old man and the only survivor of the war he struggles to forget the war. However, his rage is not only at his dead friends but also at human beings who justify war and become the main reason for massive destruction. Elder Pyper says: "I have seen horror. There is nothing to tell you. (...) I will not talk, I will not listen to you. Invention gives that slaughter shape. The scale of horror has no shape" (McGuinness, 1996, p. 97). Therefore, for Elder Pyper, apart from the memories of his comrades, there is nothing to glorify in war. In this regard, the difference between Young Pyper's prayer before they march to the Somme and Elder Pyper's lament on the death of his friends clearly demonstrates how the soldiers have been transformed, and realised the senselessness of war as no matter what national and religious ideals one maintains at the beginning, they are brutally killed on the battlefield. Thus, even if the dead soldiers are on the winning side, the victory partly becomes meaningless due to the horrors and the deep sense of loss they experience in the course of the war. Just before the march, Young Pyper says:

God in heaven, if you hear the words of man, I speak to you this day. I do it now to ask we be spared. I do it to ask for strength. Strength for these men around me, strength for myself. If you are a just and merciful God, show your mercy this day. Save us. Save our country. Destroy our enemies at home and on this field of battle. Let this day at the Somme be as glorious in the memory of Ulster as that day at the Boyne, when you scattered our enemies. Lead us back from this exile. To Derry, to the Foyle. To Belfast and the Lagan. To Armagh. To Tyrone. To the Bann and its banks. To Erne and its islands. (McGuinness, 1996, p. 196)

In these lines, Young Pyper voices his belief in God to defeat their enemies along with the possibility of survival for all of his friends. In this sense, he prays not only for his own welfare and essence, but also for the salvation of his comrades. He begs for homecoming after they defeat the enemy of Britain. However, his opinions on the reality of war have drastically changed as an old man. He rebukes his friends as they have died, and questions why they have sacrificed their lives and whether it is worth to it in the wake of an illusionary heroism which brings only calamity and destruction. Moreover, the fact that the Ulstermen have led each other to march to the Somme disturbs Elder Pyper because what they have gained is not a victory but slaughter. In Elder Pyper's comment on the illusion of heroism, McGuinness also gives the message that all wars are meaningless, and no matter how many young men and innocent civilians sacrifice their lives in wars, the crises that lead to the outbreak of wars everlastingly continue regardless of time and place:

Answer me why we did it? Why we let ourselves be led to extermination? In the end, we were not led, we led ourselves. We claimed we marched into the battle that killed us all. That is not loyalty. That is not love. That is hate. Deepest hate. For the one's self. We wished ourselves to die and in doing so we let others die to satisfy our blood lust. That lust we inherited. The true curse of Adam. I was born knowing there was something rotting in humanity. I tried to preserve that knowlegde, David. (McGuinness, 1996, p. 100)

Hence, McGuinness considers being human as the major cause of any war destroying the lives of many no matter what political and religious notions they support, or which social class they belong to; therefore,

without classifying and labelling, the primitive and violent urges that humankind cannot suppress are the main reasons for bloody wars. What is inherent in humanity is the urge to destroy, and the sons of Ulster have been the victims of the same desire to kill. Elder Pyper complains that he has realised this truth at a very old age after horrible experiences on the battlefield and loss of his friends at the Somme. In addition, in Part Three “Bonding” where McIlwaine gives Anderson the position of grand master of Orange and wants him to deliver a speech, Anderson first presents a patriotic and proud depiction of the Battle of the Boyne, Ulster and the Unionists’ heroic struggle against the Republicans; however, then he admits that the war “is all lies. (...) [They’re] going to die for nothing” (McGuinness, 1996, p. 167). This sudden change in the tone and content of Anderson’s speech leads the audience/reader to question who is responsible for the division among the Irish; the Irish themselves or England which is referred to by the Ulstermen as the ‘King’ and the ‘Empire’ in the play. In a sense, it may be argued that McGuinness questions whether the long-lasting struggle in Ireland can be an artificial fight which was started by England deliberately or it has valid historical and political grounds for the Irish people. The dialogue between Pyper and Roulston in “Bonding” vividly shows McGuinness’ attitude towards the idea of war as when Pyper asks, “The good fight?”, Roulston’s answer, “The everlasting fight,” (McGuinness, 1996, p. 195) presents the fact that the war of the human beings with the enemy will last. In addition, Roulston’s answer, “And outside us” on Pyper’s question, “Inside us?” (McGuinness, 1996, p. 195), reveals that there is reference to both the World War and the Irish War between the Unionists and Nationalists. In a sense, McGuinness relates the innate drive of human beings to be in an unending fight and England’s provocative role in the division within Ireland. Chuck Moellenberg asks the following questions regarding the First World War: “Why was there a war? Were we fighting for a cause, or was it merely related to royal families engaged in a bloody squabble? What did we accomplish after years of devastating warfare?” (2014, para.1). McGuinness answers these questions in the play by displaying the plight of human beings and the suffering of the Irish people at the hands of England. Accordingly, the mock representation of the Battle of the Boyne at Scarva is also used to emphasise the illusion of heroism in the play. The day, 1 July, when the Battle of the Somme took place is the celebration of the Battle of the Boyne that was fought between the Catholic King James II and Protestant King William across the River Boyne, and ended with the triumph of King William. The fact that both the Battle of the Boyne, which ended in victory for the Protestant side, and the Battle of the Somme, where the Unionist Protestants were defeated, were fought on the same day, though in different centuries, is ironically used in the play as the Protestants are massacred on the day they have once won a great victory against the Catholics. McIlwaine and Anderson remember their distant victorious days as McIlwaine plays the drum of the Orangemen and Anderson depicts the Boyne not only as “a river of water. It is a river of blood. The Blood that flows through [their] veins” (McGuinness, 1996, p. 167). Therefore, the two soldiers remember the previous conquests to encourage themselves on the battlefield and maintain the belief that they will survive at the end of the war. Through the memory of the glorious days, they aim to escape the feeling of loneliness on the battlefield where previously the Orangemen emerged victorious from their struggle against the Catholics under the leadership of King William. In “Bonding” the soldiers perform a mock battle at Scarva to have their spirits lifted while they are waiting in the trenches for the command which will start their march. When Anderson is unable to understand how such a great war can be re-enacted, McIlwaine refers to Scarva which is a village in County Down, Northern Ireland, and the location of “Sham Fight Pageant” annually as a group of Orange Order, a Northern Irish body that asserts the superiority of Protestantism, march through Scarva and the Battle of the Boyne is re-enacted (Crumrine, 2014, para.14). In this respect, Crawford acts the part of King William while Pyper plays the part of his horse. On the losing side, Millen plays the part of King James’ horse while Moore acts the part of King James. McIlwaine also wants all the actors to “keep to the result” (McGuinness, 1996, p. 182) which is the defeat of King James. However, McIlwaine’s comment, “Because somebody has to be King James” (McGuinness, 1996, p. 182) on Millen’s complaints about playing the part of the defeated king, foreshadows the tragic end of the soldiers as all of them are forced to metaphorically act the part of King James at the end of the Battle of the Somme. And in the reenactment, as Herron has stated, “[n]earing the climatic moment in the struggle between James and William everything goes wrong. Pyper, playing the part of King Billy’s horse, trips, causing the half-Catholic Crawford (King Billy) to fall to the ground” (2004, p. 150). While Anderson narrates James’ helplessness against William’s heroism, Pyper, suddenly, trips and

causes Crawford to fall, which is described by Millen as “[n]ot the best of signs” (McGuinness, 1996, p. 184). In other words, although McIlwaine says that “[i]t was only a game,” (McGuinness, 1996, p. 184) Pyper’s fall in the reenactment may be interpreted as another foreshadowing regarding the end of the Somme as the Protestants’ war, this time, will not end in victory just as William cannot defeat James at the Battle of Scarva, in Joan FitzPatrick Dean’s words, “[t]heir triumphalism will end in their death at the Battle of the Somme” (1999, p. 104).

Conclusion

McGuinness’ *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme* is the story of eight Unionist, Loyalist and Protestant Ulstermen who come to the Front as pairs, or become pairs in the course of the play, and establish a deep sense of brotherhood resolving their differences at the end of the play as they march to the Somme to sacrifice their lives. McGuinness’ characters enlist in the military to fight for the British King and represent Ulster, and they believe that they will survive at the end of the war. However, as they witness the horrors of war in the Front, they realise that the sense of heroism is an illusion as death is the inevitable ending for them, and as they suffer from the fear of death, they lose their belief in the cause they fight for and they depend on their fellowship. In this sense, McGuinness aims to demonstrate that war brings destruction and casualties, and the religious, political, social and cultural differences among the parties which fight in the war are all settled. Hence, as a Catholic Unionist, McGuinness voices the sufferings of the other, and demonstrates that the distinctions between the Irish Protestants and the Irish Catholics, or the Unionists and the Nationalists, respectively, are meaningless as each party fights for particular ideals which they are devoted to, yet both parties are eventually victimised by violence. What is celebrated in *Observe* as a heroic act is the solidarity of the soldiers who start the play as pairs, then create a community as they depend on each other, and take the risk of death shoulder to shoulder. In this regard, what is significant and unique in McGuinness’ characters in *Observe* is that they go through personal and religious conflicts throughout the play, yet still achieve to march to death at the Somme as a community of committed men, particularly, to each other, rather than the nation they represent at the end of the play.

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