

ABSTRACT

This paper presents the findings of a one-year (2002-2003) action research project conducted in a representative number of post-primary schools across the sectarian divide in Belfast. The research investigated the responses of sixth-form students to a number of carefully chosen texts focused on “The Troubles”. In analysing the pupils’ responses, it was discovered that, although inherited sectarian tensions persist, it is possible in many cases to encourage pupils to critically examine their attitudes and even abandon some prejudices. The key elements are the choice of texts and the need to provide ample and skilfully directed opportunity for dialogue and reflection. These findings are particularly relevant in the current climate of curriculum change, with the new emphasis on “diversity” as well as “local and global citizenship”.

**SIXTH-FORMERS READING “THE TROUBLES”:
A CROSS-COMMUNITY INVESTIGATION**

AUTHORS

Dr Brian Hanratty
St Mary’s University College
191 Falls Road
Belfast
BT12 6FE
e-mail: b.hanratty@stmarys-belfast.ac.uk

Ms Dymphna Taggart

SIXTH-FORMERS READING “THE TROUBLES”: A CROSS-COMMUNITY INVESTIGATION

Introduction

The question, as ever, is “How with this rage shall beauty hold a plea?” And my answer is, by offering “befitting emblems of adversity”.

(Heaney, 2002, p.24)

As well as reflecting Heaney’s own concern to prevent poetry from becoming merely a handmaiden to politics, the richly ambiguous (Yeatian) phrase, “befitting emblems of adversity”, can suggest also his awareness of the creative and political tensions inherent in worthwhile writings about “The Troubles”. However, while Heaney’s artistic response to “the rage” of “The Troubles” is undoubtedly prodigious and complex, he is clearly not alone in his concern with creating antiphonic works of “beauty” or “emblems of adversity”. Indeed as Kennedy-Andrews (2003, p.7) has pointed out in his critical study of the literature of “The Troubles”, “Since 1969 and the most recent outbreak of the Northern Irish Troubles (as the political violence has euphemistically come to be called) there has been a remarkable literary production emanating from the North about the Northern ‘situation’”. In recent years, furthermore, that literature and its politico-cultural contexts have attracted an ever-growing body of criticism mainly written by, and directed at, an academic audience (as the extensive bibliography in Kennedy-Andrews’ book can testify). Unsurprisingly, just as the literature has mirrored a community at war, some of the criticism, too, has reflected the fault-lines in the community – one thinks, for example, of Seamus Deane’s (1984, p.10) scathing phrase, “the pathology of literary unionism” or of Edna Longley’s thinly veiled polemic in *Poetry in the Wars* (1986)

against Seamus Heaney's supposed nationalist agenda in *North* (1975). That critical debate, with its binary oppositions, continues. There is, however, another potential audience for some of this "Troubles" Literature – namely, schoolchildren, and specifically for this investigation, sixth-formers – whose attitudes and opinions have not, to date, been formally recorded. It is intended, in this cross-community investigation, to explore the responses of nine groups of sixth-formers who are, it is possible to contend, a small but representative section of that audience.

Issues

It was hoped that an examination of the students' responses would not only provide some means of evaluating the intrinsic value for such an audience in reading some of that literature, but would also begin to address a number of important underlying issues. These, at times overlapping, issues are: the extent to which the reading of this literature might help pupils to empathise with "the other side"; the related question of whether such reading can help to transcend, or at least assuage, political hurt and division, as well as the more negative possibility that reading some "Troubles" literature could in fact reinforce or even harden existing attitudes and opinions; the significance (if any) of the school context and the perceived socio-political environment from which the pupils come; the possible impact of gender considerations; and last, but perhaps critically, the importance of the specific choice of text and the particular pedagogical approach employed. Additionally, it is possible to contend that, in critically investigating the range of attitudes to this literature, it may be possible, by extension, to shed some light on the ways in which educated young people in Northern Ireland engage with controversial religious and political issues generally. In monitoring pupil responses to "Troubles" literature, arguably, an

empirical basis is provided from which it may be possible to determine whether the views of these young people challenge or indeed simply reflect the divisions in the community at large.

Academic and Educational Context

It needs to be pointed out at this juncture that at least one study has investigated younger pupils reading some children's literature related to "The Troubles" (Marriott, 1985) and another has hinted at the possibility of positively modifying inherited attitudes (Marriott, 1998). However, the idea of investigating the impact of more sophisticated "Troubles" literature, which was not specifically written for young people, is quite different. Likewise, previous studies have not specifically evaluated the views of sixth-formers, as opposed to those of pupils somewhat further down the educational ladder.

It could be argued that this investigation is timely, if not, indeed, overdue, given the extent to which government directives, based on intensive consultation, have highlighted the potential for the study of literature to enhance and inform cultural, political and broader sociological perceptions. In 1995, for example, the inclusion in the Northern Ireland Curriculum of cross-curricular themes such as Education for Mutual Understanding (EMU) and Cultural Heritage (CH) represented government attempts in Northern Ireland to encourage schools to address the issues of societal division and conflict. It was obviously hoped that, together with other curricular materials, the use of some "Troubles" literature within the EMU and Cultural Heritage themes might help to narrow the divisions between schools as well as in the community at large. The Northern Ireland Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) defined EMU as being "about developing

self-respect and respect for others and the improvement of relationships between people of different cultural traditions” (1997, p.5). Likewise, Cultural Heritage was defined as being “about developing understanding of our own way of life and that of others. It is concerned with affirming the richness of diversity and the potential to live within a pluralist society in a spirit of mutual acceptance and respect” (1997, p.7). In the same year, the University of Ulster’s *Speak your Piece* project was “founded on the principle that educators have a positive contribution to make in helping young people engage with controversial social, cultural and religious and political issues by: enabling dialogue which is forthright and inclusive and providing alternatives to violence and avoidance as a means of resolving conflict” (1997, p.3).

Such initiatives, however, have not been without their critics. Smith and Robinson (1996, pp.7-8) pointed out that “some teachers felt that an over emphasis on cross community contact was a blunt and unsophisticated way of bringing about an improvement in community relations”. McCully, Smyth and O’Doherty (1999, p.59) noted, “The dilemma for the practitioner is to find ways of introducing potentially divisive material in a secure environment prior, or alongside, the development of social and personal relationships”. However, the latter consideration has been addressed, to some extent, in the recent CCEA document, entitled *Proposals for Curriculum and Assessment at Key Stage 3, Part I: Background Rationale and Detail* which provides a range of suggestions aimed at “helping each young person develop as a contributor to society” (2003, p.27). The document adds that pupils should be encouraged to “Investigate some of the challenges of living in Northern Ireland including: responding to sectarianism, ethnic division and multiculturalism” (2003, p.47). In order to give teachers back more control of the curriculum, the Proposals stop short of recommending specific literary texts, whether these originated from

Northern Ireland or elsewhere. Nevertheless, they suggest that pupils can learn, through literature, to “explore emotions such as anger, empathy” and “they can use literature, drama, poetry to explore others’ needs and rights” (2003, p.61). The proposed curriculum also focuses on the concepts of “Local and Global Citizenship” (2003, p.7) and invites teachers and pupils to consider situations in which different groups may express their particular culture in ways that are non-threatening and mutually respectful. Against that background, there is obviously an aspiration that, by reading imaginative accounts of our troubled history, pupils should be better able to empathise with their counterparts on the other side of the political and religious divide. Exploring the responses of a significant sample of intelligent sixth-formers provides a fascinating starting point for beginning the process of evaluating the contribution made by the study of selected literary texts to students’ developing capacity for mutual understanding and acceptance.

Methodology

The research reported and evaluated here is based on video-recorded discussion seminars conducted in 2002/03 over two school terms with sixth-form students in a representative sample of schools in the Greater Belfast area. It is important to emphasise, therefore, that this is essentially a qualitative study and the presentation of findings will take the form of an interpretative analysis of video recordings as distinct from a quantitative or statistical presentation. The nine schools involved (See Appendix One) constituted an interesting combination of grammar, comprehensive and secondary, Catholic and Protestant schools, single-sex and co-educational institutions, and a single integrated school. Such a selection was felt to be reasonably representative of the variety of sixth-form provision in the targeted area. All the

students were studying English as a main “A” level subject and each seminar lasted approximately one hour and a half, the equivalent of a double class in most of the schools. Each session was recorded on videotape in order to facilitate subsequent analysis of oral responses, with the additional advantage of recording facial expressions and body language indicators.

Each student was provided with a mini-anthology compiled by the researcher – it contained poems by Heaney, Simmons, Longley and Fiacca, as well as a selection of Irish short stories and excerpts from novels (See Appendix Two). In practice, however, because of restrictions of time, only six texts were in fact discussed – that is, Heaney’s “The Toome Road”, Simmons’ “Claudy” and “Lament for a Dead Policeman”, Fiacca’s “The Ditch of Dawn”, Eugene Stranney’s story “Sudden”, David Park’s “Killing a Brit”, and a short opening excerpt from Maurice Leitch’s novel *Silver’s City*. (To avoid the risk of repetition, I will focus in my “Findings” on the discussion generated by just four of these texts). This selection was intended to reflect a range of political, cultural and religious perspectives. Care was also taken to include texts which provided a variety of aesthetic qualities and to ensure a balance between those which were quite direct in focus and others which were comparatively oblique. Where significant differences of opinion emerged, either within or between groups, an attempt was made to relate these, as far as possible, to the perceived cultural and religious background of the students concerned. Nothing was pre-empted in the analysis, however; the starting point at all times was the young people’s responses to and opinions on the text in front of them.

The first session in each school began with an exploration of the pupils’ views of “The Troubles” and their general awareness of the relevant literature. Each text

was then considered for approximately thirty minutes; in the case of poems, the researcher read the poem aloud at least twice, providing pupils with adequate time to reflect on the poem's resonance and implications. In each case, Heaney's "The Toome Road" (1979) was the first poem to be focussed on and the questions typically covered the following points of interest. Is this poem written from a Catholic/nationalist perspective? Is the narrator justified in talking about "my roads" – are they not also the soldiers' roads? What does the speaker mean when he says, "I had rights-of-way, fields, cattle in my keeping"? (1979, p.15). If Heaney had been writing from a Protestant/unionist perspective, would he have written a very different kind of poem? Does some of the poem's imagery convey a subtle political sub-text?

Simmons' "Claudy" (1986) was the second poem considered and the questions reflected its obviously different content and tone. Why does the poet tell his tragic story using a lyrical framework? Does the lyricism accentuate the horror of what is described? Is this a political poem written from a specific political and historical perspective? Do the last two lines (1986, p.125)

Meanwhile to Dungiven the killers have gone,
And they're finding it hard to get through on the phone.

deliberately target the bombers as psychopathic liars? Are there implications for the nationalist community from which they came?

One of the key points being teased out through all the questions was the relationship between politics and aesthetics – or, as Heaney (1988, p.xii) would have it, between "Art and Life, Song and Suffering". Through the questions to the poems – as well as, subsequently, the stories and prose excerpts – pupils were encouraged to reflect not only on the savagery and pain of "The Troubles", but on the different

artistic ways of mediating that experience. For many, the medium became at least as interesting and worthy of comment as the message.

Restrictions

Before presenting an analysis of the research findings, exploring the implications, and drawing some conclusions, it is necessary to point out some unavoidable restrictions, both empirical and methodological. Five important considerations need to be borne in mind. Firstly, it rapidly became clear that most pupils had no previous experience of reading these texts, and as each group was targeted for a maximum of two sessions, the research could not evaluate the possibility of radical shifts in opinion through long-term exposure to the literature in question (though the signs are positive). Secondly, as the schools visited were all in the Greater Belfast area, any significant urban/rural differentiation must (for the time being) remain on open question. Thirdly, while the interviewer made some attempt to standardise questions the nature of the material under focus – both human and literary – precluded overly rigid or artificial standardisation (arguably, of course, a good thing in a piece of qualitative research such as this). Fourthly, since all the pupils in the project were sixth-formers studying English, it is arguable that, from the beginning, they would have a more considered and open-ended attitude than some of their less academic peers or, even indeed, pupils focused on scientific disciplines. Fifthly, while it was obviously very important to include one integrated school in the survey, it would be interesting (depending on access) to target others, considering, for example, the Nuffield Foundation report on *Integrated Education in Northern Ireland: Integration in Practice* which seems to stress “the contribution of integrated education to societal harmony” (2003, p.13). For all of these reasons, therefore, it would be unwise to attempt to generalise too widely from the investigation. Nevertheless, certain

fascinating and recurring findings emerged and these are explored, as thoroughly as possible, in the subsequent presentation.

Findings

One of the most surprising and unanticipated findings of the investigation was the discovery – arising mainly, but not always, out of the opening exchange of views between researcher and class – that many pupils initially articulated a view of “The Troubles” as being of primarily historical interest. Many felt, also, that their parents’ response to the same literary material might have been more impassioned and immediate. It might not be unreasonable to conclude, therefore, that young people, in the aftermath of the Good Friday agreement, believe that they have begun to move forward, to distance themselves from the wars of the older generation. Nevertheless, while à propos of that, a majority of students avowed generally moderate stances in response to the political situation, in many cases, unsurprisingly perhaps, their on-going interpretation of the texts demonstrated the existence of a fairly deep-seated cultural and political legacy. For example, in discussing the role of the soldiers in Heaney’s “The Toome Road”, the overwhelming majority of students in a controlled (that is, mainly Protestant) secondary school, situated close to a sectarian interface, responded, for the most part, in a narrowly one-sided manner, emphasising the “protective” role of the soldiers, and the need to hunt down “terrorists”. It is possible to speculate also that, as this was a secondary school, the pupils generally came from families which were more working-class than their more middle-class counterparts in grammar schools and had, as a consequence, been more directly exposed to sectarian strife and tension. Interestingly, only one male pupil articulated an alternative viewpoint in suggesting an analogy with Coalition forces in Iraq, whereby the (nationalist) speaker in the poem may have felt intimidated and even “violated” by the

large military presence. His was a brave lone voice, however; the on-going sectarian troubles in the vicinity of the school were undoubtedly significant in determining the response of the rest of the pupils to the poem. In the Catholic school sector generally, predictably nationalist reactions, initially at least, were apparent in phrases such as “an army of occupation”, while in the single integrated school in the study, the discussion divided fairly clearly along the Protestant/Catholic fault line. In this small group of pupils in the integrated school, while the Protestant pupils saw the soldiers as “protectors” and found Heaney “biased”, the Catholic pupils focussed on the intimidation of the nationalist community implicit in Heaney’s imagery.

However, while the observation of such stereotypical and culturally engrained perceptions must be noted, what was most encouraging to observe, in parallel, was the developing capacity in a significant majority of pupils, as the discussion continued, to appreciate and respect alternative viewpoints and to acknowledge that the poem had prompted a new way of evaluating previously entrenched political perspectives. It also quickly became clear, moreover, that as more discussion took place, and as students were encouraged to consider more deeply the implications of the poem, their responses became more thoughtful and less sectarian. Thus, while initially, as stated, the pupils in the Catholic boys’ grammar schools articulated some predictably nationalist responses, as the discussion continued, a significant number of pupils suggested that, to Protestant or unionist ears, Heaney’s term “my roads” might sound offensive, and one pupil opined that a Protestant farmer in Fermanagh, for example, might find the presence of the soldiers reassuring. Another pupil even went so far as to argue that the poem was “one-sided” because of the implied link between soldiers and “trouble”. A similarity mixed but evolving response was evident in the two Catholic girls’ schools visited. One girl suggested that the soldiers needed to

patrol in the early morning in “a sneaky and camouflaged way”, and another referred to the implicit sense in the poem of “invasion”. But others argued that the confrontation in the poem was more relevant to their parents’ generation than to their own. As one girl observed, eloquently: “Everything’s not so bleak now, nor as black and white”.

In the Protestant grammar schools, too, both boys’ and girls’, the reaction to the poem was also mixed, though the girls generally tended to adopt a more moderate stance. In all the seminars, indeed, an interesting, if predictably stereotypical gender distinction emerged; the vast majority of girls, whether in co-educational or single-sex schools, tended to focus more readily on the humanitarian aspects of the literature, the exposure of suffering. Most boys, by contrast, were much more concentrated on the more obviously political aspects of the literature. They tended to adopt more hard-line positions, initially, and to position themselves, more obviously, in a “them and us” camp. In both boys’ and girls’ Protestant grammar schools, however, there were, initially at any rate, references to Heaney’s “bias” and to the “fact” that British soldiers were in Ireland to keep the peace. Many felt that only “terrorists” would have any reason to be suspicious of the soldiers and, as one girl put it, “there’s obviously something going on”. However, on continued reflection, a significant majority of pupils conceded that the poem’s authorial perspective encouraged a degree of empathy with “the other side” – Heaney was writing about a community which had a deep-seated resentment of the British army and, as one boy expressed it, he could empathise with that viewpoint “to an extent”.

This gradual shift in perspective, however, or the developing capacity for empathy, was not, it seems clear, related only to the time spent discussing the poem.

A key factor, which was also very clearly defined in the course of the investigation, is the undoubted merit in basing discussion of potentially contentious issues around carefully selected literary texts. Consciously or sub-consciously, students seemed aware that the need in the English literature classroom to analyse complex texts in a critically evaluative and balanced manner was also true of the interpretation of expressed societal views and opinions. However, a crucial factor in encouraging pupils to be more open-minded and questioning about received political attitudes is the sheer aesthetic power of the text under consideration. Heaney's "The Toome Road" proved very effective in this regard because of its subtlety and imaginative complexity. As one girl, in a Protestant grammar school observed: "Having read the poem, I would feel sympathy for the farmer in a way I mightn't have felt before ... Heaney's way of writing has won me over". Another agreed, suggesting that, while her attitude wouldn't change, she could "see it more from somebody else's point of view".

From all the evidence marshalled above then, it is clear that, in the vast majority of schools targeted, Heaney's "The Toome Road" proved very valuable in encouraging most students to at least begin to empathise with alternative political perspectives. Simmons' "Claudy" proved a more contentious choice, however, and brought clearly into focus another key consideration arising out of the investigation, namely, the possibility that the reading of certain texts could, in some cases, result in the polarisation of attitudes, and the hardening of received political attitudes. Are there potential dangers when the writer is seen to be engaging in the culture of blame?

Certainly, what exercised the great majority of Catholic male pupils in responding to "Claudy" was the perception of authorial bias and the extent to which,

in their view, polemic was dominating aesthetic considerations. As might have been anticipated, a lot of energy was expended debating the potentially polemical implications of the last two lines of the poem. The majority of the Catholic male pupils criticised the perceived lack of neutrality in the poem (“Simmons was pointing the finger at nationalists”) and felt that its “propagandist, one-sided” tendencies rendered it less subtle and therefore less successful than “The Toome Road”. As one boy observed: “He didn’t necessarily need to mention that they’re from Dungiven ... he doesn’t need these two lines to have the same impact”.

Conversely, a similarly depressing one-sided response to the poem, however, again came from the pupils in the Protestant secondary school. The vast majority of the pupils – reflecting, it must be assumed, their own innate political allegiance – saw the poem as being more “neutral” and “unbiased” than Heaney’s. There were no questions about the potentially heavy-handed irony of the last two lines – nearly all were sympathetic to (what was seen to be) Simmons’ implicit suggestion that the bombers were totally uninterested in getting a prior warning through on the phone. One pupil – perhaps taking Simmons’ polemical irony a step further – even suggested that perhaps the bomber was trying to phone his wife, to go out for a drink! In the Protestant boys’ grammar school, too, (in stark contrast to the majority response in the Catholic boys’ grammar schools) most of the pupils saw the poem as being more “neutral” than Heaney’s. Taking an overtly political stance, they argued that Simmons’ main point was that the bombers were “not freedom fighters but just killers”. One pupil did disagree, however, and suggested that while he preferred Simmons’ politics, he acknowledged Heaney’s artistic superiority. He felt that “Claudy” wasn’t as subtle as “The Toome Road” and “it was a bit clichéd”.

In the integrated school, once again a very interesting, if also somewhat depressing, Catholic/Protestant divide opened up in response to the poem. One Catholic pupil, in particular, articulated a fairly extreme response, implying that the bombing of Claudy had to be seen in the context of “them against us” and on-going discrimination against Catholics. Introducing the topic of the alleged role of a Catholic priest in the bombing, he argued that some priests who might have been “community active”, while they would not necessarily agree with the Provisional IRA, would see their point of view. He stopped just short of suggesting that a sense of injustice would legitimise killing. The Protestant pupils in the group rejected the above statements, however, one of them simply saying “I don’t agree”.

In general, the responses of female pupils to this poem – in both Catholic and Protestant schools – were more complex and much more focussed on the perceived negative interrelationship between its aesthetic and politics, rather than on its overt or implied politics only. However, some significant differences of opinion did emerge, both within and between schools. A small minority of girls in one of the Protestant girls’ grammar school felt that the poem’s “starkness” would certainly generate sympathy for the victims and perhaps help to ensure that such tragedies would not occur in the future. The vast majority, however, felt that the same “starkness” could generate bitterness towards the bombers, and possibly towards the Catholic community from which they came. And the same girl who argued that Heaney’s artistic power in “The Toome Road” had positively altered her political perspective, felt that Simmons’ directness “could increase feelings of bitterness”.

By way of (in a sense) unpredictable contrast, a consensus response in the two Catholic girls’ schools was abhorrence at the loss of innocent life and an

acknowledgment of Simmons' literary skill in conveying the horror of the bomb. One girl expressed the view that "even if Simmons was bitter, he had a right to be". A significant majority of female pupils, however, were keen to detach themselves from the culture of blame (while acknowledging that such a response might have been prevalent at the time the poem was written). Once again, a strong sense was communicated of the need to move on from the past, and to forego the wars of their parents. While acknowledging that the reference to Dungiven was a way of pointing the finger of blame at republican terrorists, they felt that it was fundamentally irrelevant which "side" was guilty of the atrocity. The key point was the way in which the poem articulated the suffering of innocent people.

Questions of "sides" and "blame" again came to the fore when the text under discussion was David Park's (1991) short story, "Killing a Brit". And, although those responses were not by any means predictable, once again, a noticeably softer or more humanitarian approach was in evidence among girls, irrespective of their religious background. As with Heaney's "The Toome Road", moreover, there was again evidence of the power of carefully selected literary material to influence and modify political perceptions. In a Catholic secondary school, for example, one girl memorably observed: "I have read lots of newspaper reports but, for some reason, when I read that story, I felt Oh my God, we're horrible; that story was really disturbing". Another girl in the same school, also testifying to the story's aesthetic power, confessed that the description of the death of the soldier had forced her to re-evaluate her attitude. Previously, she explained the news report of the killing of a soldier would not have registered with her. Others agreed, suggesting that if, like their parents, they had lived through the era described in the story, it would have been only too easy to have become desensitised to violence. There was a general consensus

about the moral benefits of having, as it were, a literary mirror held up to one's prejudices and preconceptions. A similar endorsement of Park's aesthetic ability, leading to increased empathy, was in evidence in a Protestant girls' grammar school. Reference was made to the author's "even-handedness" in showing the priest ministering to the dying soldier (the soldier had been killed by a Republican gunman), and to Park's empathetic reference to the old woman with her rosary beads. Acknowledging the lack of bias in the story, one girl referred to the author's "creative ambiguity".

By contrast – and predictably by now – the response in both Catholic and Protestant boys' schools, at any rate, to begin with, were generally more political and more identified with a "them and us" mentality. In one Catholic boys' grammar school, a few pupils initially suggested that the Protestant author of "Killing a Brit" must be biased against the Catholic community, and a dark moment occurred when young Kevin's remark, "Go on, die, ya bastard," (1990, p.22) was quoted, and then followed by general laughter. In the Protestant boys' grammar school, the discussion also initially moved in a tendentiously politicised direction. It was stated that, while Catholics had no longer any reason to kill soldiers, the same was not true of loyalists vis à vis IRA gunmen. Reference was made to a policy of "ethnic cleansing" of Protestants in certain areas, and to the on-going polarisation between the communities. The impression was gained that the vast majority of young male pupils, despite their insistence elsewhere that "The Troubles" were more relevant to their parents' generation, remained firmly entrenched in the polarised camps inhabited by many of the older generation. It was also clear, nonetheless, that with "Killing a Brit" as with "The Toome Road", the more discussion that took place, and the more students were encouraged to consider the implications of the story, the more

thoughtful and less polarised were their responses. In the Protestant boys' grammar school, for example, one pupil was anxious to argue that the behaviour described in the story could only happen in, what he called "pretty extreme" nationalist areas. Likewise, the majority of pupils in one of the Catholic boys' grammar schools eventually conceded that Park was not biased in his portrayal of the Catholic community. It was agreed that Kevin, not surprisingly, had been brutalised by the violence, and the story was seen as an accurate reflection of the time and the circumstances.

However, some of the obvious tensions which surfaced in the discussions of "Killing a Brit" were at least partially resolved in the consideration of the excerpt from Maurice Leitch's (1981) novel, *Silver's City* – the opening passage involving the assassination of a Catholic doctor by a loyalist paramilitary gang. An interesting political debate was initially generated in one of the Catholic boys' grammar schools. One pupil, who had previously identified himself as having republican sympathies, argued that, whereas IRA gunmen had killed in pursuance of a political ideology, loyalist gunmen killed for purely sectarian reasons. This point was, somewhat surprisingly, conceded by at least a substantial majority of pupils in the Protestant boys' grammar school, where one pupil expressed the view that "at least the IRA had some goal in mind" and that republicans "never had anything like the Shankill butchers". Another pupil in the same class, however, argued that the central character, the psychopathic killer, Galloway, could have been motivated by the loyalist argument that all Catholics are part of a pan-nationalist conspiracy, and implicit supporters of the IRA. However, as the discussion continued, the consensus of opinion in all schools was that, in the face of violent death, sectarian distinctions were irrelevant. As one boy quite eloquently observed: "It's no comfort to the family

if someone says he was killed for an ideal, as opposed to just for pleasure. The result is still somebody's dead, whether that's a doctor or soldier".

Implications

It is abundantly clear, even from this relatively small-scale investigation, that there is much about which to be positive in respect of attitudes and values espoused and articulated by the vast majority of sixth-form students in connection with the on-going political divisions in Northern Ireland. If we are to accept Reynolds' understanding that the principle aim of move towards any form of citizenship education is "to highlight the role which schools have in developing morally aware and responsible pupils" (1999, p.129), then there is indeed much reason to be optimistic. Given the right kind of literary stimulus and the opportunity for structured debate, the vast majority of the pupils involved in this study – perhaps girls even more than boys – had a strong sense of the need to look outwards, to think from a humanitarian perspective, to seek new understandings. While they were inevitably drawn to the cultural context in which they had been placed by what can only be termed the accident of birth, there was much to suggest their capacity to rise to the challenge of moving beyond this. Their (for the most part) rejection of the culture of blame as being essentially futile, and their abhorrence of the way people in Northern Ireland have become, to a degree, desensitised by the violence and atrocity which abounded here, strongly suggest that most young people are willing to move beyond inherited prejudice. The reading and exploration of carefully chosen literary texts can help to push forward that process and enable pupils to discover what Heaney (2002, p.57) calls "the boundlessness of our sympathies".

The research throws some light, too, on the often fraught issue of segregated education in the Northern of Ireland. It has often been suggested that the segregated system of education is a significant contributory factor in the on-going political division. In April 1997, for example, Professor Neuberger, then Chancellor of the University of Ulster, argued in a speech made at the opening of a new integrated school that “denominational education – and specifically Catholic education – is divisive and contributes towards the conflict in this region, and, therefore, should not be financially supported by public funding” (Donaldson, 1999, p.42). This study, small in scale though it is, suggests precisely the opposite. In all sectors – Catholic, Protestant and integrated – there was clear evidence that the vast majority of pupils had absorbed positive values of tolerance and mutual understanding. In the integrated sector, certainly, preconceived notions about students’ willingness to respect alternative perspectives were confirmed. What was not noted to any significant degree (and, again, the limited nature of the study must be emphasised) was any *shift* in personal perspective as a result of engaging in dialogue. Acceptance, not alteration. By contrast, while students in schools in the Protestant and Catholic sectors did initially articulate some biased responses, among a sizeable majority of the pupils there was a sense of willingness to modify attitudes and to engage empathetically with alternative responses. Evidence of such willingness seems particularly important given the outcome of recent research by Connolly and Healy (2003) which reported that children’s perception of difference can begin as early as three or four years of age.

Conclusion

The results of this investigation, however limited in its scope and timescale, provide definite reasons to be optimistic. Given the enthusiastic and articulate responses generated in the school-based seminars which formed the basis for this investigation, it would seem imperative that as many pupils in Northern Ireland as possible have the chance to study some carefully chosen “Troubles” literature. While the comparative sophistication of some of this literature makes it more accessible for sixth-formers, similar attempts should be made with younger pupils, deploying texts which are appropriate to their stage of intellectual and emotional development. While the study of such literature cannot obviously be seen as an instant solution for the deep-seated cross-community divisions within Northern Ireland, this research suggests that a significant number of pupils would be encouraged to modify sectarian attitudes and to engage sympathetically with alternative perspectives. The research also indicated that, even when pupils seem to remain entrenched in their opinions, talking through the issues can at least raise consciousness of alternative perspectives.

In pedagogical terms, too, there is much to be drawn from this tentative study. As Donaldson (1999) has pointed out, educationalists such as Paulo Freire, Joao da Veiga Coutinho and Ann Berthoff have exposed the fallacy of value-free schooling or neutrality in education; Freire, especially, in drawing a distinction between dialogical and anti-dialogical education, argues that, whereas the latter is often practised as an instrument of oppression in cultural and political terms, the dialogical model, by contrast, recognises that genuine education teaches one to develop patterns of thinking which are genuinely emancipatory. It is certainly possible to contend that the discussion of selected “Troubles” literary texts, in the way that has been outlined, fosters a dialogical model of education and provides an ideal forum for a consideration of problematic social and political issues. Pupils are encouraged to

respond in a considered, socially aware manner, and are provided with the space to cultivate a genuine sense of openness and tolerance. As Heaney (2002, pp. 68-69) has observed: “The paradox of the arts is that they are all made up and yet they allow us to get at truths about who and what we are or might be”. He contends that literature has the potential to be “the stepping stone [which] invites you to change the terms and the termann of your understanding” (2002, p.58).

John Wilson Foster (2003, p.77) similarly, in reviewing Professor Brian Cosgrove’s memoir, *The Yew-Tree at the Head of the Strand*, claims that it “makes a strong case for the reading, remembering and study of English literature as a potentially reconciliatory force in a divided society like Northern Ireland”. The challenge for the artist, to quote Heaney (2002, p.23) yet again, has “moved from being simply a matter of achieving the satisfactory verbal icon to being a search for images and symbols adequate to our predicament”. The challenge for teachers is to use such refined and highly defined symbols and images, such fitting emblems of our adversity, to generate discussions in which ideas and values may be articulated and clarified, challenged, questioned and debated – in which, in short, students might be taught to engage in reflective considerations of societal, religious and personal issues. The end result might be that, teachers and pupils alike, achieve “what Bashō called ‘the world of true understanding’, which is always lying just beneath the surface and just beyond the horizon of the actual words we speak” (Heaney, 2002, p.57).

REFERENCES

- Connolly, P. and Healy, J. (2003) The Development of Children's Attitudes towards "The Troubles" in Northern Ireland, in Hargie, O. and Dickson, D. (eds) *Researching the Troubles: Social Science Perspectives on the Northern Ireland Conflict*, London, Mainstream, pp.37-57.
- Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment [CCEA] (1997) *Mutual Understanding and Cultural Heritage: Cross Curricular Guidance Materials*, Belfast: CCEA.
- Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment [CCEA] (2003) *Proposals for Curriculum and Assessment at Key Stage 3 Part I: Background Rationale and Detail*, Belfast: CCEA.
- Deane, S. (1984) *Heroic Styles: the Tradition of an Idea*, Derry: Field Day Theatre Company Limited.
- Donaldson, A. (1999) Education in Northern Ireland: A Challenge for Pluralism, *Irish Educational Studies*, Vol. 18 pp. 40-48.
- Heaney, S. (1975) *North*, London: Faber and Faber.
- Heaney, S. (1979) *Field Work*, London: Faber and Faber.
- Heaney, S. (1988) *The Government of the Tongue*, London: Faber and Faber.
- Heaney, S. (2002) *Finders Keepers: Selected Prose 1971-2000*, London: Faber and Faber.
- Kennedy-Andrews, E. (2003), *Fiction and the Northern Ireland Troubles since 1969: (de-) constructing the north*, Dublin: Four Courts Press.
- Leitch, M. (1981) *Silvers City*, London: Secker and Warburg.
- Longley, E. (1986) *Poetry in the Wars*, Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, pp.140-169.
- McCully, A., Smyth, P. and O'Doherty, M. (1999) Exploring Controversial Issues Northern Ireland, *Irish Educational Studies*, Vol. 18, pp.49-61.
- Marriott, S. (1985) "Me Mum she says it's bigotry": Children's responses to *The Twelfth Day of July*, *Children's Literature in Education*, Vol. 16, No.1, pp. 53-61.
- Marriott, S.(1998) Culture, Identity and Children's Literature, *The Irish Journal of Education*, Vol. 29, pp.9-20.
- Montgomery, A., Fraser, G., McGlynn, C., Smith, A. and Gallagher, T. (2003) *Integrated Education In Northern Ireland: Integration in Practice*, Coleraine: UNESCO Centre, University of Ulster.
- Park, D. (1990) "Killing a Brit" in *Oranges from Spain*, London: Jonathan Cape, pp.17-22.
- Reynolds, M. (1999) Values Education, Reflective Practice and Initial Teacher Training, *Irish Educational Studies*, Vol. 18, pp. 129-140.
- Simmons, J. (1986) *Poems 1956-1986*, Dublin: The Gallery Press.
- Smith, A. and Robinson, A. (1996) *Education for Mutual Understanding: The Initial Statutory Years*, Coleraine: University of Ulster Centre for the Study of Conflict.
- University of Ulster (1997) *Speak Your Piece: Exploring Controversial Issues: A Guide for Teachers, Youth and Community Workers*, Coleraine: University of Ulster.
- Wilson Foster, J. (2003) Review of Cosgrove, B. *The Yew-Tree at the Head of the Strand*, *Studies*, Vol. 92, pp.76-78.

APPENDIX ONE

Belfast Boys' Model School (Protestant, secondary)
Hunterhouse College (Protestant, girls' grammar)
Malone College (co-educational, integrated)
Royal Belfast Academical Institution (Protestant, boys' grammar)
St Genevieve's High School (Catholic, secondary)
St Louise's Comprehensive College (Catholic, 95% girls)
St Malachy's College (Catholic boys' grammar)
St Mary's Christian Brothers Grammar School (Catholic, boys)
Victoria College (Protestant, girls' grammar)

APPENDIX TWO

- Fiacc, P. (1979) "Christ Goodbye" and "The Ditch of Dawn" in *The Selected Padraic Fiacc*, Belfast: The Blackstaff Press, p.61 and p.65.
- Heaney, S. (1972) "The Other Side" in *Wintering Out*, London: Faber and Faber, pp.34-36.
- Heaney, S. (1975) "A Constable Calls" in *North*, London: Faber and Faber, p.66.
- Heaney, S. (1979) "The Toome Road" in *Field Work*, London: Faber and Faber, p.15.
- Leitch, M. (1981) *Silver's City*, London: Secker and Warburg, pp.1-7.
- Longley, M. (1985) "Wreaths" in *Poems 1963-1983*, Dublin: The Gallery Press, pp.143-149.
- McLiam Wilson, R. (1998) *Eureka Street*, London: Vintage, pp.222-226.
- Park, D. (1990) "Killing a Brit" in *Oranges from Spain*, London: Jonathan Cape, pp. 17-22.
- Rodgers, W. A. (1971) "Home Thoughts from Abroad", in *Collected Poems*, London: Oxford University Press, p.131.
- Simmons, J. (1986) "The Ballad of Gerry Kelly: Newsagent", "Claudy" and "Lament for a Dead Policeman", in *Poems 1956-1986*, Dublin: The Gallery Press, p.123, p.125, pp. 173- 184.
- Stranney, E. (1996) "Sudden", in Marcus, D. (ed) *Phoenix Irish Short Stories*, London: Phoenix House, pp. 199-203.

