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## The Reforming Power of Drama: Historical Authenticity and Storytelling in Herman Heijermans' *Op hoop van zegen*

Herman Heijermans' *Op hoop van zegen*, his 1900 drama about fishermen exploited by a wicked shipowner, is a very Dutch play. It addresses two forces with which the people of the Low Countries have had a long and ambivalent relationship, the sea and capitalism, one natural and one human-made element in their history. The drama is performed internationally<sup>1</sup> because it addresses universal and timeless issues that affect societies everywhere. Bos, the shipowner, like any tyrant from history, maintains and secures control over many lives and irrationally uses his power for personal gain. He despises those who support his high standard of living with their labor, "Tuig! - Rapalje! - Dat héle nest deugde niet."<sup>2</sup> He is self-centered and believes himself to be self-sufficient, even though Geert,<sup>3</sup> his socialist antithesis, reminds him otherwise:

Wie haalt de vis uit zee? - Wie waagt z'n leven elk uur van de dag? - Wie komme in geen vijf, zes weke uit d'r kleren? - Wie lope met handen vol zoutvreters? - Wie hebbe geen water om d'r kop en d'r pote te wasse? - Wie slape as beeste in 't volkslogies in kooie twee an twee? - Wie late moeder en vrouwe achter om aalmoeze te bèdele? - Met twaalf koppe gaan we straks in zee - Wat krijge wij van de besomming - wat jij? Wij doen't werk - jij zit thuis. - Je schip is geassureerd - en wij - wij kenne werrekke as 'r'n ongeluk gebeurt - wij zijn de assurantie niet waard... (420-421)<sup>4</sup>

Heijermans exposes Bos' attitude as grossly inappropriate in a country that championed itself as a just society. Historian Adam Hopkins states: "The country had seen itself as the natural home of justice ever since the early days of the Republic. Sometimes this inclined it to smugness, sometimes to quite a surprising radicalism."<sup>5</sup> Despite the long tradition of republican government in the Netherlands, Bos' absolute will as a businessman and property owner is completely legal and acceptable according to the rules

of a society that offers little relief to its poor. As the industrial Revolution became a reality in the Netherlands (beginning about 1850<sup>6</sup>) government was inclined to protect the vulnerable segments of the population from the exploitation of capitalist bosses. The "Arbeidswet," which limited the employment of women and children in the work force, was in effect in 1889. It prohibited the use of children under the age of 12, and employers could no longer force women to work immediately after giving birth. Generally, women and children under the age of 16 could work only 11-hour days.<sup>7</sup> The Dutch government had in fact a good record of intervening where it perceived unfairness. This makes Bos' actions all the more shocking, because he is completely within his rights when he sends the 12-year-old boy Pietje, 17-year-old Barend, and all the rest out on an unseaworthy ship. The boys are legally of age, the insurance company declared the vessel safe, and there are no other independent laws protecting the crew at this time. Heijermans puts before us a depiction of life within a politically and economically weak segment of Dutch society and shows that limited government regulation is not enough to protect it. He exposes the vulnerability of people with no economic or political protection and demonstrates that this is a shameful tendency in Dutch society.<sup>8</sup> Although the situation he describes is historically authentic, Heijermans does not use this authenticity to make a direct plea for government policies or political reforms. This shows that he was not as interested in affecting parliament or socialist doctrine as in changing the mentality of the middle class which maintained a privileged lifestyle on the labor of working-class people. He sought reform, not in the work-a-day arena of politics, but in the minds and hearts of those who read and saw his drama.

Herman Heijermans was born in 1864 in Rotterdam, the fourth of ten children and first son of Herman and Matilde Heijermans née Spiers. Herman Heijermans senior was a journalist who worked for the *Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant*. He earned little money and his occupation allowed him less time to

spend with his large family than he wished. Herman junior's parents did not encourage him to go into his father's profession. Instead he started a career in banking at the age of 17 and initially proved to be quite efficient at it. Because his middle-class heritage dictated thus and because he desired to marry the daughter of a wealthy businessman, Heijermans, as a young man in his early twenties, went into business for himself. Here he soon discovered the limitations of his talents. Due to bad investments and poor business advice, he failed miserably and lost the hand of his fiancée. Despite his promising beginning, Heijermans never became a skillful businessman and wisely turned to a profession for which he had infinitely greater passion and by which he came more honestly: he began to write. In 1892 he moved from Rotterdam to a section of Amsterdam where many artists lived. In 1895, barely one year after its inception, he became a member of the Sociaal-Democratische Arbeiders Partij, which represented the most organized wing of the Dutch socialist movement at the time. From this point on Heijermans maintained an unflagging and intense sense of solidarity with people who eked out a meager existence in factories, on the land or on the sea. To the same degree he despised the middle-class bosses and property owners who exercised control over the lives of working-class people.<sup>9</sup> These two aspects of Heijermans' life, his writing and socialist leanings, demonstrate the extent to which he openly rejected the middle class and its values even though he tried to maintain a middle-class existence throughout his life.

Although biographical information should never be given too much importance in understanding an author's works and activities, one may surmise that Heijermans despised his class of origin because of the humiliation his business failures brought him in bourgeois circles.<sup>10</sup> In a sense, his choice of profession and political affiliation represent protests against his class, while his work criticizes it. Heijermans could not have been hopeful of earning substantial amounts of money with writing because, then as now, such work was neither steady nor well paid. At that time, Dutch writers were under an even greater disadvantage because the Netherlands had not signed the Berne Convention that protected copyright.<sup>11</sup> By the same token, Heijermans' socialism was not theoretical. Tanja Bürgel writes: "Sperber war kein Theoretiker" - which is a valid statement for aesthetic as well as socialist theory.<sup>12</sup>

He could not have been seeking political power by joining the party either, because the Sociaal-Democratische Arbeiders Partij had relatively few members in 1895 - approximately 1,000.<sup>13</sup> In 1899 the party won two seats in the Second Chamber (equivalent of the House of Commons)<sup>14</sup> but its membership remained relatively small, reaching 2,200 by 1898.<sup>15</sup> Obviously more people were voting socialist than were joining the party,<sup>16</sup> but there was still no great political power to be found with the socialists at the time Heijermans wrote and premiered *Op hoop van zegen*. Moreover, the party membership could not come to an agreement about which policy of social change to adopt. Should there be an all-out revolution and a complete dismantling of the present system, or should change be brought about through compromise and reform within the existing system? This dilemma split the party membership and further weakened the movement and led to an irreparable split in 1909. Heijermans, who was living in Berlin at the time, remained with the reformist faction under P.J. Troelstra, at least in spirit. Even so, large or small, divided or united, the party represented Heijermans' belief about working class people and their plight and obviously represented a political posture pitted against the various levels of the middle class. It also presented a forum from which Heijermans could express his attitudes about class relations in Dutch society. As Flaxman explains, "It was, then, sympathy rather than dialectics which inclined Heijermans toward Socialism"<sup>17</sup> and Schilp supports this statement when he refers to Heijermans as a "gevoelssocialist."<sup>18</sup>

And indeed, Heijermans did not intend his play to influence government policy, though it may have. He simply wished to create on stage the lives of people who toiled for the fishing industry, and he did so by incorporating items that affected their lives. At the time of the production of *Op hoop van zegen*, a petition to government on behalf of fishermen and their families would have possibly produced some results, given the fact that many of the issues dear to socialists were being addressed by the liberal cabinet of N. G. Pierson, which held power from 1897-1901. This cabinet passed into law provisions such as the possibility for conscripts to hire substitutes (1898), compulsory education (1900), a public health service (1901), and a Workers' Compensation Bill (1901).<sup>19</sup> In 1900 the plight of fishermen was not an issue in government, yet employees of the fishing industry

were indeed a section of working-class society in need of protective legislation. Although still not in place at the time of *Op hoop van zegen*, laws protecting bakers, stonemasons, miners, agricultural workers, and dock workers were passed 5-8 years before fishermen received relief from the whims and questionable discretion of ship owners.<sup>20</sup> With their respective laws, each segment of working class society was relieved of abuses allowed by the economic free-for-all of the *laissez faire* economy. Although Heijermans was not seeking directly to influence government, there is evidence in notes from the Second Chamber from December 1903 that his drama was a possible impetus for government to review the manner in which seafaring vessels were inspected.<sup>21</sup> Thus, some positive political action can be attributed to the effect of the play on members of parliament. On October 8, 1908, parliament passed the Fisheries Act which did not go into effect until July 1, 1911.<sup>22</sup> This Act provided for a separate inspection of seafaring vessels beyond private insurance companies and inspectors employed by ship owners. With this government regulation, a ship that did not pass inspection could not be registered and therefore could not legally go to sea. In other words, the new law addressed the problem depicted in *Op hoop van zegen*. As we have said, however, Heijermans did not seek reform by direct political action. Despite the atmosphere of modest political reform under Pierson, Heijermans describes in detail the milieu for which he feels great sympathy but prescribes no answer to its problems, no course of action for its situation, nor any political reforms to alleviate the indigent conditions in which it exists. As a man of the theatre, he knows that a play cannot do that.

The need of the fishing people struck Heijermans because he lived in fishing villages such as Wijk aan Zee, Katwijk, and Scheveningen. He enjoyed the villages because of their peaceful surroundings, because he needed to concentrate on his work and "omdat hij van vissers hield."<sup>23</sup> He knew much about their lives and incorporates many of their concerns in *Op hoop van zegen*. With Heijermans' acute interest in the plight of the people involved in the fishing industry, the building of the "Hoop," a ship equipped and crewed to offer medical and spiritual aid to fishermen at sea, most likely came to his attention and suggested to him a title for the drama. The "Hoop" was relatively expensive, rather limited in its scope,

and more of a service than real protection, yet it was the only thing government was doing for fishermen at the time. A government pamphlet describes the boat in this manner: "As a result of private initiative, and with an annual State endowment of about fl. 10,000, the Hospital and Church Boat 'de Hoop' was fitted out, and since 1899 has been rendering service to fishermen of all nationalities. From June until the herring-fishing is over, this vessel cruises in the North Sea, in order to provide the crews of the fishing-fleet with medical and religious assistance."<sup>24</sup> The blatant contradiction of the word "hope" in naming the fated craft and the coincidence of the timing of the play - written between October 15 and December 9, 1900 and premiered that month - with the establishment of the actual ship "de Hoop" suggest that Heijermans fashioned his title to level a critical message at the inadequate measures of government and private institutions that could aid fishermen in more substantive ways. Juxtaposing the fictitious "Hoop van Zegen," which is rotten to the hull and doomed, with the blessings and bandages one could receive on the real "Hoop" clearly demonstrates that the government was not doing enough to save the lives of fishermen at sea.

The above information attests to the fact that the authenticity of historical record is an integral part of understanding this drama in its historical context and its depiction of life in a Dutch fishing village. The story revolves, after all, around a type of ship with physical dimensions and a distinct history. The "Hoop van Zegen" - or the "drijvende doodkist" (446 and 457) as the ship inspector Simon refers to her - is a lugger, which was typically a wooden craft equipped with two lug sails. Toward the end of the 19th century shipbuilders constructed luggers more and more out of metal and equipped them with steam power or motors. A possible motivation for Bos is to see his out-dated wooden craft perish so that he can use the insurance money to replace it with a modern version. Heijermans spins his tale around this particular type of ship, because the lugger, more than any other ship, typifies the expansion of the fishing industry in the industrial age. With its large capacity - 275 cubic meters - and rapid sailing speeds, it could be sent out on trips that lasted 5-7 weeks, 3-5 times per season.<sup>25</sup> Because they could carry greater loads and stay out longer than the traditional flat-bottomed boats,<sup>26</sup> luggers became the preferred ship for fishing; their numbers more than doubled from 1880 to 1900,

from 121 to 275 respectively.<sup>27</sup> In Heijermans' drama the lugger's 275 cubic meters command a ghostly and mysterious presence in the narrative and on stage. The "Hoop van Zegen" is the element around which he constructs the plot, for despite its trust-invoking name, it becomes a symbol of human callousness, the industrial age, and an instrument of oppression all in one. It represents an important aspect of the fishermen's exploitation because a ship that can stay out longer and carry greater loads increases, not only the profits of the ship owner, but also the hardship that the fishermen must endure.

One of the central figures of the drama is Knier, who has already lost her two eldest sons and her husband to Bos and the fishing industry when the play opens. Depending on one's view, Knier lost her family either to the Netherlands' "chief goldmine"<sup>28</sup> as a government document of 1915 calls it, or the sea, i.e., fate, nature, or God's will. Her initial loss occurred when a fishing vessel named after Bos' daughter, the "Clementine," went down. The fact that Knier's husband and two eldest sons perished on a boat so sentimentally close to Bos is Heijermans' indication of the cause of the tragedy and where the guilt lies. After the loss of her two eldest sons and husband, Knier receives three years' support from the widows' endowment (397). Figures from 1916 show that, on the average, widows of fishermen received fl. 1.50 per week and 25 cents extra per child, while in the winter months fl. 2.25 per week and 50 cents per child were paid out, with a fl. 5.00 bonus at Christmas.<sup>29</sup> Heijermans pretty well respects the historical record when he makes Knier say (or at least she does in the translated versions from 1912 and 1925) that she received fl. 3.00 per week.<sup>30</sup> The weekly sums were charity taken out of endowments established and maintained by the fishermen themselves, the ship owners, other private contributions, and some government subsidy. According to Gouda, the endowments were substantial, as figures from 1916 show: fl. 49,500 in Katwijk - Noordwijk aan Zee, fl. 107,000 in Vlaardingen, and fl. 216,000 in Scheveningen, which supported 174 widows and 183 children.<sup>31</sup>

In light of these figures, Bos' "contribution" barely amounts to a Christmas bonus for a single family when he discovers that his bookkeeper Kaps has donated fl. 4.88 to the "Widows and Orphans Fund" supposedly by mistake (445). Bos, of course,

is angry about the "loss" of the money, and Kaps is possibly being subversive here by making Bos support the widows and orphans that his actions create. But Heijermans exaggerates when he has the bookkeeper Kaps exclaim, "de opgave van 'Veritas' over oktober - enkel van oktober - vergaan 105 zeilschepen en dertig stoomschepen - da's wéing gerekend: in één maand bij de 1500 dooien..." (455)<sup>32</sup> In actuality, with the sinking of the "Hoop van Zegen" and the dead man on the "Anne," Heijermans kills off practically half of the yearly average for one village: from 1900 to 1915 the average number of men lost at sea each year was 31,<sup>33</sup> which adds up to 465 fatalities in fifteen years. These numbers are high enough as they stand; there is no industry today that would tolerate or get away with that many accidents in so few years, let alone deaths. Heijermans' sensational numbers show that he was not as interested in being completely truthful as much as he desired to create an effect. However, Heijermans does not exaggerate Knier's situation; that corresponds to historical record. The fact that she can only support herself and her two remaining sons by working for Bos and the village pastor as a cleaning woman and accepting their table scraps (397) is no exaggeration.

The above description of the historical record is essential for an understanding of this drama in its historical context and its depiction of life in a Dutch fishing village. Even though Heijermans was not a theorist, his work possesses theoretical significance to which its material background contributes. Heijermans was a proponent of milieu drama, and *Op hoop van zegen* is certainly that.<sup>34</sup> Milieu, in the description of diametrically opposed classes, commands a central position in the play, with the action being played out first in Knier's poverty-stricken surroundings, where she scratches out a living on a few guilders per week, then in Bos' command post of oppression where he is to receive fl. 14,000 for his lost lugger. Heijermans delimits and identifies his characters by the material and cultural boundaries in which he sets them. Cultural mores and material surroundings essentially constitute the personalities of his characters. Thus, the more one knows about the socio-economic background of the situation the better the drama comes across.

Due to this accent on milieu, the stage for *Op hoop van zegen* becomes a forum for Heijermans' political and moral persuasions. Drama for him must

possess social significance in order to be true drama, and its social significance resides in the stark depiction of milieu. In generic terms, one refers to this type of drama as "Tendenzkunst" or "purpose-art," meaning art that advanced the cause of working class people. In Heijermans' words this meant, "Writing proletarian world views into art," or "artistic production, art criticism and reception from class consciousness, from a class position".<sup>35</sup> Heijermans was committed to this manner of writing drama and thus critics consider him to be a Naturalist writer like his contemporary Gerhard Hauptmann.<sup>36</sup> Peter Szondi writes:

Naturalist Drama elected its heroes from the lower strata of society. It found there people whose willpower was unbroken, who could engage their entire being in actions toward which their passion drove them, who were not separated from one another by anything fundamental - neither self-centeredness nor reflection - people who were able to carry the weight of a Drama essentially limited to an (always) present, interpersonal action.<sup>37</sup>

In many ways Heijermans followed in the Naturalist tradition. He was certainly not a proponent of art for art's sake. In one article he writes: "Art is the expression of unconditional love and devotion to humankind. It is not the utterance of a certain individual for himself, it cannot be thought of as anything else but a beautiful gift for the general public."<sup>38</sup> In 1911 he wrote a play entitled "Glück auf!" about coal miners in western Germany, based on experiences he had during a week spent with the miners at their strenuous and dangerous work. In the preface to this play Heijermans writes:

"Voor een nadenkend sociaal-demokraat ... telt dit geharrewar, dit berijden van esthetische stokpaardjes niet mee. Voor hem staat het ontroerende leven hoger dan kunstrichtinkjes en met verzorgde nagels gekonstrueerde kaartenhuisjes. 't 'Naturalisme', 't 'realisme', de 'neo-romantiek', de 'neo-klassieke' kunst, de subtiele 'innerlijkheid' enz. mogen dingen zijn, waarover burgerlijk-denkenenden zich moeilijk maken - wij weten te goed, dat de burgerlijke estetikamode-schakeringen nodig heeft, om zich op de been te houden."<sup>39</sup>

When studying the narrative and social setting of *Op hoop van zegen*, one discovers that these two utterances were true for Heijermans' work years before he wrote them. In other words, Heijermans does not write in a vacuum. Socio-economic history provides his authentic setting, class conflict his material, and an effect on the status quo is his implicit desire where writing and producing drama is concerned.

Even though Heijermans sees the substandard living conditions of fisher (wo)men as a gross injustice imposed on innocent people by the system, his answer to the underlying political problem lies outside the pettiness of daily politics and lacks revolutionary fervor. Although conflicting class interests play a central role in the play, he does not incite rebellion, as van Neck-Yoder correctly points out: "*Op Hoop van Zegen* was written to move the middle class to moderate responses, not to incite the lower classes to action."<sup>40</sup> Heijermans, I believe, here addresses the smugness of the Dutch middle class where the treatment of their fellow working class citizens is concerned. He claimed that traditional bourgeois conceptions of "honor, courage, Fatherland, virtue, religion, love, home life, etc."<sup>41</sup> had taken over in the thematic and cultural production of art. Art, in other words, was a self-legitimizing institution for the bourgeoisie and not an agent of change.

Heijermans exposes the hypocrisy of these societal values as they manifest themselves in the story of the "Hoop van Zegen." The three characters - Simon, Barend, Geert - who know the deadly truth move within social and economic structures that discredit them in middle-class circles. On stage, as part of a representative story about life in a fishing village, they present a different image. Simon knows that the ship is not seaworthy but nobody believes him because he is a poor drunkard; he lacks honor and virtue in bourgeois eyes. Simon makes a futile point of reminding those who will listen that he was not drunk the day he made his grim discovery and passed word to Bos, with his daughter standing there (446-447). Nobody believes Barend that the boat is rotten because he is thought to be cowardly and indolent; he has not worked in months and refuses to go on the boat to earn money for his family. His own mother says to him, "Is 't nou ineens mis geworden, nou 't gaat beuge en jij, boerde lafbek, mee mot?" (424)<sup>42</sup> He also rejects the family tradition, which

dictates that he become a fisherman. The earrings his mother passes down to him, which his father wore only on Sundays, are laden with tradition, heritage, and religious significance. He rejects these values to lead a safe existence on shore as a carpenter or mason. The earrings from his father literally hook Barend into a life and early death at sea. As the harbor police take Barend away, the earrings and his mother prying his hands from the door of her house seal his fate at sea passed down by generations of fishermen. In the end Barend's partially decomposed body washes ashore and he can only be identified by the earrings (451). No one in the village follows Geert in his belief about the unfairness of their situation because he is a convict with socialist leanings. He spent time in the naval brig for hitting a superior, demonstrating that he lacks obedience to the powers that be. As a socialist he is an internationalist and opposes religious belief. All three, like male Cassandra-figures, know the truth about their situation but must suffer the frustration of the truth when nobody believes what they say. None of these characters is trustworthy or credible in a society that, across classes, values hard work, submissiveness to the existing order, self-sufficiency, property, nationalism, the authority of the church, the traditional family unit, and societal relationships based on exchange values (11 men and one boy for fl. 14,000). Heijermans shows that Bos, who embodies these values, is the true perversion of them, not the drunkard, the "coward" or the socialist convict. While the community believes that Simon, Barend and Geert criticize Bos and his ship for selfish reasons or with questionable authority, nobody imputes base motives to Bos when he legally coerces 11 men and a 12-year-old boy to take the unsound ship to sea to further line his pockets.

Heijermans was director and owner of theater companies for many years. He knew his audience. His challenge was to attract a paying public, taking in the drama for an evening's pleasure, while enabling them to become aware of the plight of the working poor for which they were directly and morally responsible. Ashley Dukes states in this vein: "Undoubtedly the 'naturalistic drama' suggested probable inhumanity and possible horror. In any case it clearly offered no hope of an enjoyable evening ..."<sup>43</sup> Revolutionizing this play would have entailed performing it in the market square of fishing communities like Maassluis or Vlaardingen at the time of its inception. Fishing

people, however, were not the intended audience. Heijermans measures real experiences of the working class against the constraints put on it by the middle class, dramatizes the conflict and plainly lays it out before what are bound to be spectators from the middle class. The anticipated audience effaces the revolutionary potential of the play but carries on the dynamics of social criticism, polemics and awareness-building. Instead of a revolutionizing play it becomes then an instructive play, in the sense that it exposes the unfairness of the *laissez faire* economy and the injustice of those few who benefit from it to precisely those few.

The point of cognition comes, for both reader and audience, when Knier's two remaining sons perish with the "Hoop van Zegen." She returns to the exploitative relationship that she maintained with Bos and his family after her husband and two elder sons died for him in the same manner twelve years before. Like Bertolt Brecht's *Mother Courage*, who loses her children due to her adherence to capitalist economic and tyrannical social structures and the war on which they thrive, Knier has learned nothing new from her experiences. She too adheres to the way of her milieu with its powerlessness and impoverished surroundings.<sup>44</sup> Brecht writes in January 1949 about a performance of *Mother Courage and Her Children* (1941): "...that Mother Courage learns nothing from her extreme misery inspired the audience with nothing but pity!"<sup>45</sup> Brecht expresses disappointment because he intended the audience to become alienated from the story enough not to feel sympathy for Mother Courage, but recognize on its own, in an objective and intellectual manner, the real conditions of a capitalist society, inherently evil, based on greed and destruction of the innocent.

However, Brecht's play does not include a figure who undergoes a conversion that leads to this insight. Bos's daughter Clementine possesses exactly that function in *Op hoop van zegen*. Heijermans leaves us with the certainty that Knier will die a poor and lonely widow and that nothing will change for her and her kind. Van Neck Yoder states: "...Heijermans has shown that Knier has not learned where the cause of her misery really lies; but the audience and the reader know."<sup>46</sup> So does Clementine. Her insight is more important in relation to the drama's anticipated audience than Knier's wrong perception of her situation, because Clementine is Heijermans'

vehicle through which he fosters a change of heart and mind in his audience. Heijermans uses a much more effective medium than petitions, direct appeals to government, or inciting riots; he tells her and the audience stories. Heijermans' emphasis on politics as feeling<sup>47</sup> explains why storytelling plays a major role in this drama. It is an element that speaks to the emotional participation of his audience rather than alienating or even frightening it with a radical political message. Heijermans portrays on stage images that speak to the emotions, and not hermetically structured arguments that challenge or engage the intellect. Dukes writes:

Perhaps the secret is that Heijermans never tires of his own philosophy. He is content to see it firmly planted on the ground; he does not demand that it should walk the tight-rope or turn somersaults as an intellectual exercise. He has accepted a view of life which some call materialistic, and others positivist, or scientific, or humanitarian; but for him it is simply humane, - founded upon social justice and human need.<sup>48</sup>

The drama is about unjust, untimely and unnecessary death, and so its emotional effect is in complete harmony with Heijermans' call for social and economic transformation. It is about the destruction of families by greed and selfishness (Bos' family is the only one that remains intact in the end). The subtitle "Spel van de zee" reflects and parallels, in a more encompassing frame narrative, the stories told on the stormy night on which we suppose the "Hoop van Zegen" goes down with all 12 crew members: the women tell their stories even as some of them are losing their families or hopes for a family. The fact that the setting is "een Noordzee-vissersplaats" accords the piece a sense of generality and offers the action as a collective fate, but the stories represent a collective experience. This experience of injustice is not particular to this Dutch fishing village on the North Sea but common to all of them.<sup>49</sup>

Interestingly, Clementine is the only middle-class person depicted from the start as having any compassion for the fisher folk. If Kniertje symbolizes them, as critics maintain,<sup>50</sup> then Clementine represents the middle-class audience that receives the stories and the one character that really learns something about

the unnecessary tragedy presented in those stories. She is the only character who undergoes change; her social and political awareness becomes an issue in the play. At the beginning she appears as a tourist, painting portraits that romanticize the hardship she sees (387-388 and 392).<sup>51</sup> On the night of the storm, she takes in the experience of the fisherwomen by listening to their stories (427-442), and at the end she accepts the guilt for the death of 12 fellow villagers due to her father's actions (452). The audience is to be affected as she is by the hardships through which her class, and more directly her father, puts the entire village. The transformation that Clementine undergoes is also meant to take place in the middle-class audience. Thus the storytelling must advance its experience beyond these particular scenes and, what is more important, beyond the stage. The real experience of the fishing people is what the audience must learn, hence the emphasis on material surroundings, everyday concerns and stories. Here Heijermans transforms the collective experience of the fisher folk into the collective experience of the middle-class audience by staging wives and widows of fishermen telling stories of their misery and hardship to a sympathetic listener of the bourgeois class. As Walter Benjamin says of the storyteller: "The storyteller takes what he tells from experience - his own or that reported by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tales."<sup>52</sup> In a sense Clementine becomes the ideal listener whom the audience emulates and imitates. The drama becomes a genuine education of the middle class and it is, in this manner, consistent with the role of the writer in society as Heijermans understands it. For him, a poet was to "... feel the calling, one who turned to his community with heart and soul. In that good old bygone time, a poet knew no passion more beautiful than to speak to the people, to be a bard of the people, and to retell for what one suffered and struggled."<sup>53</sup> Heijermans speaks to the people in *Op hoop van zegen*, but not to the suffering fisher folk or the working class; rather to the middle-class people who exploit them through their economically, politically and socially advantageous position.

The audience and reader will also recognize that the sea is the greater threat to the existence of the fishermen as far as the fishermen understand anything about their plight. Reinder P. Meijer assumes we are to understand the same thing: "Not the ship owner,

however callous he may be, but the sea is the greatest enemy."<sup>54</sup> To be sure, the elements play an important role in the lives of the fishermen, as typified by Kaps' remarks: "*op de zee wijzend*. Ja, as je'm ziet zo as vandaag - zo glad en met al die drijvende meeuwe - dan zou je niet gelove dat-ie zoveel mensen vermoordt..." (455)<sup>55</sup> But this reading of the play, though valid, renders it politically harmless. Heijermans does not disguise the fact that the drama revolves around and finds its agency in opposing class interests, power structures, and opposing wills defined by class. It is therefore impossible to think of this drama as an apolitical picture of life in a Dutch fishing village. Bos represents capital, the harbor police represent the state, and the church manifests itself in Knier's naive belief that God will protect her family at sea; these three elements of society constitute instruments of control, which make up the real danger which threatens the fishermen and their families, their true enemy. The truth of the matter is that the fisher folk have as little control over economic, political, and religious forces as they do over the natural power of the sea.

Still, Heijermans shows that, in this particular setting, there is no revolutionary antecedent.<sup>56</sup> The fishermen allow the exploitation essentially out of fear for their jobs, but mostly owing to their religious beliefs mixed with cultural mores such as the value of hard work, obedience to the hand that feeds you and dedication to a way of life. Therefore they make no offensive move to take control of their destinies. The reader and spectator see Bos blame the tragedy of death and lost property on the elements (God's will) rather than on his own actions motivated by greed. He refers to the sinking of the ship as an act of God (451) or a curse (454); God becomes, in essence, Bos' scapegoat. After the tragedy, Knier believes that the hand of God has struck again, and it is in Bos' interest to support her in that belief. He realizes that the caliber of Knier's tragedy, without her belief that it was God's hand that caused it, would produce a volatile situation with revolutionary potential. Heijermans was not interested in remaining politically harmless, but he also did not desire to frighten his audience with crass political messages. He speaks to basic attributes, such as responsibility for others and justice for everybody, that the Netherlands championed in itself as a nation. Thus the audience must come to the realization that Knier's situation is a gross injustice, even though Knier does not. Geert

is an obvious exception to the other men and women in the play who made their living from the sea, for he understands that Bos exercises the power and why he possesses the power. But Geert is not a central figure, while Clementine and Knier are.<sup>57</sup> Heijermans is seeking to provide the audience and reader with a much broader view of this representative situation than mere politics can offer. The tools he uses as a writer are storytelling and historical record to demonstrate injustice to the very class that perpetrates and perpetuates it. In this manner Heijermans speaks to the emotions and reforms minds, not politics, while he shows us that the truth about society lies with its outsiders and not with the pillars of the community.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Most recently in Minneapolis, at the Guthrie Theater in January 1993.

<sup>2</sup> Herman Heijermans, *Op hoop van zegen, Toneelwerken I-III* (Amsterdam: G.A. van Oorschot, 1965) 1:458. All further references to this work appear in the text. Translation: "Scum! Rabble! The whole lot of them were worthless." (Translations from the play, in this article, are by the present editor).

<sup>3</sup> Interestingly the name Geert has its own connotations in Heijermans' life, as C.A. Schilp explains: "Hij gebruikte het pseudoniem Gerritje als er iets te kraken viel; was het stuk in zijn ogen goed dan ondertekende hij met H.H. Jr. Uiteraard kreeg zijn schuilnaam al spoedig een gevreesde klank." C.A. Schilp, *Herman Heijermans* (Amsterdam: Moussault's Uitgeverij, 1967) 37.

<sup>4</sup> "Who pulls the fish out of the sea? Who risks his life every hour of the day? Who goes five or six weeks without taking his clothes off? Who has salt water sores all over his hands? Who doesn't have any water to wash his hands and face? Who sleeps in the fore-castle two to a bunk, like animals in their stalls? Who leaves their mothers and wives behind to go begging? Twelve of us are about to go to sea. How much of the income will we get, and how much will you get? We do the work and you stay home. The ship's insured, but we can die like dogs if there's a disaster, we're not worth insuring."

<sup>5</sup> Adam Hopkins, *Holland, Its History, Paintings and People* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988) 123.

<sup>6</sup> Th. van Tijn, "Het sociale leven in Nederland 1845-1875," *Geschiedenis van het moderne Nederland: Politieke, economische en sociale ontwikkelingen*, eds. Th. van Tijn et al. (Houten: De Haan, 1988) 43-44. See also I.J. Brugmans, *Paardenkracht en mensenkracht: sociaal-economische geschiedenis van Nederland, 1795-1940* (1960; Leiden: Martinus Nijhoff, 1983) 201.

<sup>7</sup> J.T. Minderaa, "De politieke ontwikkeling in Nederland 1889-1914," in Th. van Tijn et al. 332.

<sup>8</sup> According to the voting laws of the time these people could not even vote their way out of misery. In order to obtain the right to vote one had to be literate, at least 25 years of age, and male. Other stipulations included permanence of residence; amount of rent paid; amount of taxes paid; amount in wages or pension received; and one could not be receiving assistance from the government. See Minderaa 302-303.

<sup>9</sup> Seymour L. Flaxman, *Herman Heijermans And His Dramas* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1954) 15-63; Schilp 19-130.

<sup>10</sup> Schilp 41.

<sup>11</sup> Schilp 73. Not signing the Berne Convention meant that Dutch publishers were free to translate and sell books by international authors without penalty. Dutch writers, however, were also open to such abuses from abroad. With the success of *Op Hoop van Zegen*, Heijermans suffered financially under this absurd situation. The Netherlands eventually signed in 1911.

<sup>12</sup> Tanja Bürgel, ed. "Einleitung," *Tendenzkunst-Debatte 1910-1912*, Textausgaben zur frühen sozialistischen Literatur in Deutschland 17 (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1987): XVI. Heijermans published newspaper articles and editorials in Berlin under the name Heinz Sperber, one of his many pseudonyms.

<sup>13</sup> E.H. Kossmann, *The Low Countries: 1780-1940* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978) 509. In 1897 13,500 votes were cast for the socialists; in 1901 this number rose dramatically to 40,585.

<sup>14</sup> Kossmann 509.

<sup>15</sup> Kossmann 444.

<sup>16</sup> A.J. Barnouw, *Holland Under Queen Wilhelmina* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1923) 87.

<sup>17</sup> Flaxman 32.

<sup>18</sup> Schilp 42.

<sup>19</sup> Kossmann 496.

<sup>20</sup> Minderaa 333.

<sup>21</sup> Flaxman 39.

<sup>22</sup> *A General View of the Netherlands: Fisheries*, vol. IX (The Hague: Department of Agriculture, Industry and Trade, 1915) 11.

<sup>23</sup> Schilp 72.

<sup>24</sup> *A General View...* 29.

<sup>25</sup> D.J. Gouda, *De nederlandse zeevisserij tijdens de eerste wereldoorlog 1914-1918* (Haarlem: Schuyt & Co., 1978) 16.

<sup>26</sup> The smaller boats generally held only 150 cubic meters (Gouda 16). To see the full effect of the industrial age on the fishing business, note the increase in numbers of *kantjes* (a 100 kilogram unit of fish, Gouda 52) brought in from the sea: in 1850 42,000 (Gouda 14) which increased to 760,101 by 1905 (Gouda 52). These increased numbers are due in large part to the deregulation of the fishing industry in June 1857. Before 1857 government regulated the types of ships, their equipment and crews, the size and material of netting, the time and place fishing could take place, the manner in which herring were processed, the type and amount of salt used and even the time when ships could return to harbor. See J.T. Buijs, "Een nieuw leven," *De Gids* 31.30 (1867): 99.

<sup>27</sup> Gouda 18.

<sup>28</sup> *A General View...* 4.

<sup>29</sup> Gouda 31. According to Gouda's figures Knier received fl. 141.50 per year. Data show that in 1890, two years after Knier loses her sons and husband, a family of 4 adults - uneducated, unskilled workers in a rural community - existed on fl. 463.38 per year, fl. 282.59 (61%) of which went for food while fl.

21.70 (4.7%) went for shelter. Knier barely received a third of this amount which reflects the amount spent, not received, by the average working poor family. See Th. van Tijn, "Het sociale leven in Nederland 1895-1914," van Tijn et al. 278.

<sup>30</sup> Herman Heijermans, *The Good Hope: A Drama of the Sea in Four Acts*, trans. Harriet Gampert Higgins, *The Drama*, Vol. 8 (November 1912): 28-29. Here Knier tells us: "Three years I had an allowance - the first year three - the second two twenty-five - and the third one dollar - the other nine I had to root around for myself." Compare this with Herman Heijermans *The Good Hope: A Drama of the Sea*, trans. Lilian Sanders and Caroline Heijermans-Houwink (New York: Samuel French Inc., 1925) 567. "For three years I had the pension... the first year three gulden a week, the second year, two-fifty, the third two-twenty-five. The other nine years I had to scratch for myself." This same part reads much differently in Heijermans collected works, "Drie jaar heb'k ondersteuning gehad - de andere negen kon 'k ronscharrele..." (397). I have not seen the Dutch first edition.

<sup>31</sup> Gouda 31.

<sup>32</sup> "The official figures for October - just for October - show 105 sailing ships and thirty steamships lost - and they call that a low figure; almost 1500 people killed in one month."

<sup>33</sup> Gouda 31.

<sup>34</sup> Evert de Jong, "Heijermans Milieudramaturg," *De nieuwe taalgids* 69.1 (1976): 54-56.

<sup>35</sup> Bürgel XVII. "Einschreibung proletarischer Weltanschauung in Kunst, ..." or "künstlerische Produktion, Kunstkritik und Rezeption vom Bewusstsein, von der Position der Klasse aus."

<sup>36</sup> The following critics have done studies of Heijermans and Hauptmann, comparing especially their dramas *Op hoop van zegen* and *Die Weber*: Flaxman 221-227; Schilp 127-129; Hilde van Neck Yoder, *Dramatizations of Social Change: Herman Heijermans' Plays as Compared with Selected Dramas by Ibsen, Hauptmann and Chekov* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1978) 35-43.

<sup>37</sup> Peter Szondi, *Theory of the Modern Drama*, ed. and trans. Michael Hays. *Theory and History of Literature*

29 (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota Press, 1987) 50.

<sup>38</sup> Heinz Sperber, "Vorpostengefechte," in Bürgel, 50-51. "Kunst ist der Ausdruck unbedingter Liebe und Hingebung für die Menschheit. Sie ist nicht die Auslassung eines bestimmten Individuums für sich selbst, sie kann nicht anders gedacht werden als wie ein schönes Geschenk für die Allgemeinheit."

<sup>39</sup> Herman Heijermans, "Begeleidend Woord: Glück auf!" *Toneelwerken* 3: 1643.

<sup>40</sup> van Neck Yoder 24. See also page 29: "By portraying Kniertje as a symbol of the fishing people, rather than Geert or Jo, Heijermans has not made change (let alone revolution) but rather submission and endurance the moving, convincing, positive qualities."

<sup>41</sup> Heinz Sperber, "Tendenziöse Kunst," in Bürgel 13.

<sup>42</sup> "Has she suddenly become unseaworthy now she's off to the cod fishery and you, you little coward, have to go in her?"

<sup>43</sup> Ashley Dukes, "The Plays of Herman Heijermans." *The Drama: A Quarterly Review of Dramatic Literature* 8 (Nov 1912): 5.

<sup>44</sup> Piet Simons, "De Myte van Knier of de Hollandse Mutter Courage," *Ons Erfdeel* 16.1 (1973): 121.

<sup>45</sup> Bertolt Brecht, *Arbeitsjournal*, 2 volumes, ed. Werner Hecht (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1973) 2: 891.

<sup>46</sup> van Neck Yoder 32.

<sup>47</sup> Flaxman 31.

<sup>48</sup> Dukes 12.

<sup>49</sup> "I wish to emphasize that I speak here of a collective *experience* and not a general situation" - Klaas van der Sanden, "Herman Heijermans' Literature of the Real," *The Good Hope: A Study Guide*, ed. Michael Lupu (Minneapolis: The Guthrie Theatre, 1992): 11. Van der Sanden correctly points out that Heijermans wanted to show the generality and commonality of the story he depicted in drama. However, the situation itself refers to the skeletal story line while a collective experience is constituted from the mass of individual experiences represented

on stage. This experience is transmitted to the audience. The audience takes the experience home with them while the story entertains them for a few hours. The collective experience of the fishing people is therefore the essential aspect of the drama.

Clementine is also a central figure, whose role demonstrates that Heijermans was indeed concerned with change.

<sup>50</sup> Flaxman 97. "... Kniertje is the central character about whom the play revolves, and it is she who, at its end, stands on the stage as the symbol of her people." See also van-Neck Yoder 29.

<sup>51</sup> Clementine detains Cobus for her painting even though he must return to the retirement home before four. Otherwise he will be disciplined for being away too long. Barend carries in a load of wood on his shoulders that he had gathered from the shore. Clementine wishes to capture him on canvas in just that position, bent over and straining under the weight of the wood.

<sup>52</sup> Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968): 87.

<sup>53</sup> Heinz Sperber, "Kunst und Industrie," in Bürgel 5. "... der sich berufen fühlte, einer, der sich mit Herz und Seele an seine Gemeinde wandte. In jener guten alten, längst vergangenen Zeit kannte ein Dichter keine schönere Leidenschaft, als zum Volke zu reden, der Barde eines Volkes zu sein, und was gelitten und gestritten wurde wiederzugeben."

<sup>54</sup> Reinder P. Meijer, *Literature of the Low Countries: A Short History of Dutch Literature in the Netherlands and Belgium* (Cheltenham: Stanley Thornes Publishers, 1978) 258. See also Hiram Kelly Moderwell, *The Theatre of To-Day* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1928) 214. "But especially it is the sea, as an evil genius, that dominates the spirit of the play."

<sup>55</sup> (pointing to the sea). "Yes, when you see it like it is today, so calm and with all those seagulls soaring, you wouldn't believe it murders so many people."

<sup>56</sup> This is one of van Neck-Yoder's main theses.

<sup>57</sup> van Neck Yoder 29. "By portraying Kniertje as a symbol of the fishing people, rather than Geert or Jo, Heijermans has not made change (let alone revolution) but rather submission and endurance the moving, positive qualities." In my interpretation