Philoctetes, the main character in Sophocle’s *Philoctetes* experiences a stark difference in affection from people around him from the beginning to the end of the story. He goes from being a cast off on an uninhabited island to a war hero for the Greek people. I am going to identify the driving forces that lead Philoctetes on this journey from being considered “bad company” to “good company” amongst his peers. Some of the things that will be taken into consideration are his reason for being considered “bad company” in the first place, his interactions with other characters in the play, outside events going on throughout the play and Philoctetes’ own actions that could influence his journey. It is evident throughout the story that external forces like the Trojan War and the Greek God Heracles, rather than the personal actions of Philoctetes, were the driving forces in Philoctetes original path to bad company as well as his journey back to being good company.

Philoctetes did not really do anything wrong, it was merely his unfortunate circumstances that made him into bad company. Philoctetes begins as being considered “bad company” because he has a nasty, smelly foot injury which causes him to shriek hideously and disrupt the members of his former crew (151). Philoctetes was not abandoned on the island of Lemnos for committing a heinous crime such as murder or rape; he was simply an irritant because of his “flesh devouring ulcer” (151). There is no textual evidence that makes Philoctetes out to be an evil or villainous character. I think it is important to note this because it leads me to believe that if Philoctetes’ leg
was to be healed he would no longer be considered “bad company.” There is nothing that would suggest the people of Greece would hold a grudge with a healthy Philoctetes. He actually seems like a friendly person that welcomes the few random strangers that wind up on his lonely island, Lemnos (161). Philoctetes’ reactions to this injury are rather normal; nonetheless, he was sent away to live in solitude on Lemnos just for being a pest. This climb to greatness might be hindered if Philoctetes was put on the island for an ethical mistake. The people of Greece may not have been quite so apologetic.

Philoctetes was on a ship going to fight in the Trojan War when he suffered the injury to his leg. Philoctetes is a burden to the crew on the ship because he smells, yells and is quite annoying (151). The captain cannot turn around to take Philoctetes back to Greece; that is not very efficient. Since they did not know that Philoctetes would be such a huge piece of the puzzle that is defeating the Trojans, they just decided to leave him on an uninhabited island, Lemnos. The Trojan War started the cause and effect chain that left Philoctetes alone on the island.

If it was not discovered that he is the missing piece to take down Troy, then Philoctetes would have likely been abandoned on Lemnos for his entire life. Philoctetes had already been on the island for about ten years, and had never been offered a ride back home (162). He really has little to offer to society other than his bow skills; if it were not for the Trojan war, then no one would need his bow nor his skills. He received this bow from Heracles, and the bow has a very true shot that does not miss its target. Now he has the option to go with Odysseus and Neoptolemus because he is the key to defeating the Trojans. Odysseus says to Neoptolemus, “Troy falls before this bow of his, no other way” (155). Philoctetes would be considered a war hero if he went to Troy and sacked the Trojans. Philoctetes would no longer worry about being a
loner on the island because the people of Greece would not only accept him back into society, but they would also praise him and recognize him as a prominent member of society.

Philoctetes is not intrigued by this offer because going to Troy and winning the war would be helping the people that originally put him on the island in the first place. He has held a grudge against those people for 10 long, lonely years and healing his leg and being accepted into society is not worth giving up this personal battle with the men that left him on Lemnos. He would actually rather commit suicide than go with Neoptolemus. Philoctetes says, “I’ll throw myself from off a cliff, and smash my skull upon the rocks below (189). Neoptolemus explains that Philoctetes would be “adjudged the greatest of the Greeks” and that he could seek “healing hands” to rid him of his ailment (203). It seems that it is not enough for Philoctetes to no longer be a burden on those around; he has no interest in helping the people that sent him away. Philoctetes refuses Neoptolemus’s offer and is going to remain on the island alone at this point because heroism and a fixed leg is not enough to convince him to go.

It is not until the Greek god Heracles appears and delivers advice to Philoctetes that he should agree to go to Troy. Heracles does not offer any new reasons as to why Philoctetes should travel with the crew. He merely repeats Neoptolemus’s arguments that he will be healed of his “gruesome plague,” have a life of great glory and conquer Troy (207). Without hearing any new arguments from Heracles, he goes on the voyage, because this is what he was told to do and he was told by a god. Philoctetes says to Heracles, “Oh how keenly I have longed to hear you speaking; now at last you have appeared before me. All that you have ordered I shall follow” (207). In deus ex machine, Heracles just shows up and tells Philoctetes what to do and he listens. I think it shows that Philoctetes did not really control his own destiny; he was just following an order from a god. Philoctetes cannot be considered responsible for his own rise to “good
company.” He decided that he was not going to defeat Troy, and instead he would suffer longer on the island. Heracles is the one that is mostly responsible for Philoctetes’ journey away from being “bad company” because he is the one that convinces Philoctetes to go to Troy.