An Analysis of the Roles of Light Imagery and Moral Dilemmas in Harry Mulisch’s *The Assault*
**Reflective Statement: Harry Mulisch's *The Assault***

In our interactive oral we discussed the cultural and contextual considerations of Harry Mulisch's *The Assault*. During our discussion we covered the role of history and Dutch culture in this novel as well as the differences between the ways in which our relatives deal with their war memories and Mulisch’s protagonist, Anton, deals with his.

Through our discussion, we came to a general consensus that although this novel was written for Dutch audiences, it resonates with people of other backgrounds and generations. However, it was brought to our attention that historical specificities are rather important in terms of the authenticity of the novel. Therefore, since the novel was written initially for Dutch readers of Mulisch's generation, certain allusions to Dutch history such as the provos, the Dutch peace movement and the Dutch colonies in Indonesia, resonate with the actualities and make the novel more engaging.

From our discussion, we established the idea that by having the novel jump back and forth in time, Mulisch suggests that individuals cannot have their own identities without incorporating the positive and negative aspects of their pasts.

By discussing the historical allusions in this novel we came to the conclusion that Mulisch draws attention to the role of coincidence and chance in history rather than cause and effect. However, Mulisch illustrates the idea that despite the role of chance in history, there are often parallels in history repeating itself.

We agreed that it is easy to understand the desire for Germans to forget but also make sense of the happenings of World War II by accusing Hitler of being the devil and putting the country under a spell. However, Mulisch believes that one should avoid making such simple moral justifications of the past and come to terms with it instead. Furthermore, we found it difficult to understand how a peaceful cause such as that of the Resistance fighters can be associated with violence. Thus, Mulisch introduces us to the idea of moral complexities by demonstrating that our preconceptions of what went on in the war are not necessarily correct.

I think the most useful part of our interactive oral was finding that our own family members, who have lived through WWII or other wars such as the Iran-Iraq War, do not repress their memories of the war but prefer to learn from them and pass their stories on to later generations.
Analysis of the Roles of Light Imagery and Moral Dilemmas in Harry Mulisch’s The Assault

In The Assault, Harry Mulisch illustrates the moral questions that come into play in the life of a twelve-year-old boy, Anton Steenwijk, during World War II. Despite a banal English translation, Mulisch vividly portrays Anton’s story with the use of symbolism. In doing so, Mulisch forces the reader to question the dilemmas with which Anton is faced. In this compelling novel, Mulisch uses the recurring images of darkness and light to illustrate the ambiguity and complexity of moral dilemmas involving good and evil as well as the known and the unknown.

Mulisch introduces this motif of light and darkness through the novel’s epigraph. When Mulisch cites Pliny the Younger (Letters, IV, 16) in saying, “By then day had broken everywhere, but here it was still night—no, more than night”, he sets forth the idea that even in the light there is darkness. Moreover, nothing is purely good or completely evil, for even in the greatest of times there is still hardship. Through the use of light to symbolize the known and the good, and darkness to symbolize the unknown as well as the evil in the world, Mulisch explores the morally ambiguous nature of human beings.

Throughout the novel, contrast between light and darkness serves many purposes. For instance, on pages 35 and 36, Truus describes a night when she walks home alone in the darkness after curfew on Resistance business and waits for day to break in order to find her way. This incident directly relates to the epigraph through the mention of “dawn”; however, here Mulisch uses darkness and light to establish the lack of clarity that one experiences while in “the dark”. Through Truus’s story, Mulisch begins to establish the idea of darkness representing the violence, oppression, and evil involved in
the work of Resistance fighters. Thus, the epigraph then illustrates that although it may not be apparent on a superficial level, at a closer look, life is filled with moral complexities that are incomprehensible. Much in this way, Truus’s story is a symbolic reflection of her life in which she is unclear about the moral nature of her actions as a Resistance fighter. She tells Anton, "...I was scared...perhaps even more by the silence than by the darkness. I knew that there were lots of people all about, but everything had disappeared. The world stopped at my skin. My fear had nothing to do with the War anymore" (p 36). In this quotation, “the people all about” represent the fact that Truus is aware of the good intentions that unite the Resistance fighters; however, the “disappearance” of everything symbolizes her inability to see the difference between the common crimes of the Resistance and of the Fascists. By saying that the “world had stopped at [her] skin”, Mulisch illustrates Truus’s difficulty with identifying the good in the violent acts she commits. However, Truus ultimately prefers to be uncertain about this dilemma than to leave it in “silence” and not take a stand against what she knows to be definitely immoral: the actions of the Fascists. Thus, through the use of imagery in the epigraph and in Truus’s story, Mulisch starts developing the motif of light and darkness as a means to exploring moral ambiguities.

Perhaps the most obvious use of light imagery in this novel establishes contrast between the known and the unknown. Anton encounters Truus immediately after the Fascists kill his family; however, not only is Anton unaware of his loss, but he is also placed in a cell with a stranger. At the time, Anton cannot make sense of his current situation, and the darkness of the cell emphasizes this uncertainty, for he is unable to see Truus’s face. "He opened his eyes wide to see but the darkness filled them like black
water...as he calmed down, he began to see a pale strip of light...” (p 38-39) In this case, the darkness represents a fear of the unknown while the light represents comfort in the familiar. Moreover, the ambiguity of this situation as well as that of Truus’s unrevealed identity illustrate the moral ambiguity that Truus represents as a Resistance fighter.

Not only does Mulisch use light and darkness to establish a contrast between the known and the unknown, but he also uses this symbolism to further emphasize the morally ambiguous nature of the Resistance fighters' actions. Mulisch frequently uses historical references to illustrate how often various individuals in differing situations are faced with moral dilemmas. The Resistance fighters in *The Assault*, for instance, are brutal and violent in their killings of WWII figures; however, their intentions are to prevent the German officers from killing more innocent people. Thus, Mulisch brings into question whether it is morally acceptable to behave in a conventionally unacceptable manner for a just cause. In order to illustrate this moral complexity, Mulisch again uses the light and darkness motif when Truus, says, “Hate is the darkness, that’s no good. And yet we’ve got to hate the Fascists, and that’s considered perfectly all right. How is that possible? It’s because we hate them in the name of the light, I guess, whereas they hate only in the name of darkness.” (p 38). Through the use of light and darkness, Mulisch expresses the morally complex role of the Resistance fighters of WWII, thus challenging the modern reader’s preconceptions of the wartime occurrences and realities.

Mulisch also uses this contrasting image of light and darkness to illustrate the morally complex decision of sacrificing one’s own happiness for that of others. Mulisch does so through the relationship between Truus and Takes, two distinguished Resistance fighters who frequently work together. Although Takes’s is a married man with children,
the two fall in love. However, as a highly ethical woman, Truus refuses to act on her feelings towards Takes. She understands that “[his wife and children] need him, as much as [Anton] needs [his] father and mother…” (p 39). By not acting on her emotions, Truus puts the happiness of others before her own and thus, serves as a symbol of two fundamental dichotomies: love and emotions as opposed to ethics as well as the interest of others as opposed to that of one’s self. Thus, Truus’s life consists of a compilation of various divergent forces that threaten her moral state of being. To illustrate these opposing forces, Mulisch establishes contrast between “rebellious streaks of light [curling] and [flashing] around her head against the dark background” (p 138) when Anton views a photograph of her many years after their encounter. Anton always glorifies Truus, for she is his only source of comfort at a time of great hardship; however, Mulisch later reveals that Truus is not purely a source of good during her lifetime. Thus, Mulisch’s use of symbolism in through light and darkness serves to emphasize the contrasting forces that embody the morally complex nature of Truus’s life.

Mulisch further extends this image of light and darkness to illustrate the lasting effects of the dark war years. Throughout this novel, Anton frequently faces the continuing influence of the war on his life as well as the lives of those whom he encounters. For instance, on page 92, Mulisch illustrates the ways in which being the son of an assassinated German officer becomes detrimental to the life of Fake Ploeg Jr. Although Fake and Anton both lose their parents as a result of the war, the two lead rather different lives. While Anton becomes a successful anesthesiologist due to his interest in forgetting his traumatic wartime childhood, Fake drops in social status due to his father’s role in the war. In order to illustrate such continuing effects of the war,
Mulisch again uses light and darkness in the image of a volcano on page 55. “The cloud of [black] ash...[that] continues to rain down on all its continents for years” represents the continuing effects of the war. However, ambiguity is established again when Fake Ploeg Sr is portrayed on page 92 for the first time as a father rather than simply a Fascist. His son’s grief over losing his father illustrates that humans are not one-dimensional. Thus, Mulisch’s use of light imagery in the form of the volcano both emphasizes the morally ambiguous nature of human beings in which individuals are not simply defined by one characteristic, as well as the ambiguity in the continuing effects of the war.

In Mulisch’s *The Assault*, the use of light and darkness illustrates the complex nature of moral dilemmas. Through Mulisch’s use of imagery, this novel investigates moral dilemmas ranging from choosing ethics instead of love to choosing others over one’s self. The recurring images of darkness and light cause the reader to develop a heightened ability to distinguish the underlying meaning behind this repetition. Although at first glance it may appear excessive, Mulisch’s use of imagery ultimately serves as an effective technique to artfully enrich the content and themes of the novel and express an understanding of history that had only began to flourish during the time of the novel’s publication.

**Bibliography**

Reflective statement: Hedda Gabler

Upon reading Hedda Gabler, I had not grasped the importance of paganism in relation to the characters of Hedda and Loevborg. The interactive oral greatly deepened my understanding of how parallels are drawn between these particular characters and pagan ideals. Most of the class had originally seen the relationship between Hedda and Loevborg as an intimate friendship; however, with the suggestion that "Hedda and Loevborg have a bond which is almost spiritual" we came to the conclusion that their approach to paganism in their relationship represented a fundamental contrast to society with its engrained Christian values.

Unbeknown to most of the class, before the discussion, was Loevborg's close resemblance to the pagan god of passion and wine: Dionysus. The class reflected on how Dionysus' rejection by the gods due to his drinking habits mirrored Loevborg's own ostracization. The significance of Loevborg wearing a crown of vine leaves was revealed as it links Loevborg further to Dionysus and the pagan way of living and is clearly an intimate vision shared by Hedda and Loevborg. This connection between the Pagan Gods and the characters is an intriguing tool used by Ibsen which emphasises their divergence from the norm and how for this reason they are scorned by society. After some consideration, it was concluded that Hedda and Loevborg desire to embrace the ideals encapsulated by paganism; that is to say, "the freedom which it represents" and which society does not provide.

Meanwhile, Hedda's character presents a similar parallel with the pagan god Apollo. Whilst Apollo's symbol is one of arrows and hunting, Hedda's is her pistols. The class's early opinion of Hedda's suicide was that she'd killed herself to escape her lack of purpose in life.
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However, the discussion led us to realise that she had additional motivations: her wish was to free herself in a memorable manner which reflected pagan beauty whilst accentuating her rejection of society’s norms. It was concluded that this use of pagan symbolism connects Hedda to an archetype of people who feel oppressed by society rather than placing her as an anomaly.

The interactive oral has been a paramount addition to our understanding of the role of paganism within the play. It made us consider how religious societies can be seen to imprison the spirit of man, placing constraints upon individuals and making the escape from Christian values at the time thoroughly inconceivable.
24.02.2013

The role of humour in Hedda Gabler.

"Why does everything I touch become mean and ludicrous?"^1

Henrik Ibsen's Hedda Gabler has been a play shrouded by controversy since its first performance in 1891 after which it was "universally condemned"^2 by 19th century society.

Upon its introduction to the stage it was clear that "Even enthusiastic admirers of Ibsen's work [...] failed to understand what Ibsen meant"^3 and were quite bewildered by the comical tone which is recurrent in the play. However, despite baffling Ibsen's contemporaries, the aspect of comedy in Hedda Gabler is commonly emphasised in today's productions^4, viewed as a tool to enhance tragedy rather than a fundamental failure on Ibsen's part. Comedy, present in numerous different forms - such as black humour, comical irony and comedy of the absurd - is a crucial device to the play as it reinforces the audience's understanding of Hedda's frustration at being trapped in the comfort and familiarity of bourgeois society. Yet, in contrast, it is also used to undermine the seriousness of her final dramatic gesture, mocking both society and the audience through Brack and Tesman's ludicrous reactions.

The most pronounced effect of comedy in the play is that it allows the audience to comprehend Hedda's viewpoint, which induces sympathy for a woman who would be otherwise difficult to pity. Humour on Hedda's part principally targets the character of George Tesman, her rather ridiculous husband, whom Hedda ruthlessly teases for his enthusiasm for "His special subject"^5, a topic of interest which Hedda finds exceedingly dull. This teasing, in which Hedda is accompanied by Judge Brack, occurs in the form of banter between the two,

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^3 Ibid.
^4 "George is milked for all his comic potential": a review on the recent production of Hedda Gabler at the Old Vic in which Sheridan Smith plays Hedda - Letts, Q. (2012). Fun to watch, but the complex Hedda Gabler proves too difficult to capture. Daily Mail.
in which Tesman's "special subject" is continually emphasised. The humour arises from the oblivious nature of Tesman, who is jokingly addressed as "a specialist on the subject" and the fact that the cruel nature of Hedda's ridiculing completely eludes him. Despite the shameless unkindness towards her husband, the audience is complicit in this teasing of Tesman whose exaggerated use of meaningless expressions ("good heavens!", "fancy that!") and boyish excitement at the reunion with his slippers, make him an easy target for laughter. The audience is therefore made to empathise with Hedda for this unequal match with a man who has neither the wit nor the social class to provide a satisfying conversation for her. A further suggestion that Hedda finds Tesman's company inadequate and unbearable is portrayed through numerous scornful comments which slip through her emotionless facade, such as, "Talking of boring, here comes the professor." or through the occasional verbal slip-up, as is the case when she implores Tesman to "stay as long as you can - as long as you like, dear" given her bitter humour, the audience cannot help but find such comments amusing. Whilst this clear lack of any real affection towards Tesman evokes a number of witty remarks from Hedda, it also enables the audience to recognise how fundamentally unhappy, trapped and bored Hedda feels within her marriage.

There are several occasions during the play in which Hedda inflicts a comical misunderstanding upon Tesman, as a result of which the audience can only laugh at his stupidity. Hedda deceptively indicates her passion for Tesman by claiming that she burned Edvard Loevborg's manuscript for his "sake"; this comedy of situation causes a hilarious
reaction in which Tesman is left in confusion between his doubt and glee that Hedda actually loves him. With the conviction that Hedda is "burning with love" for him, Tesman wonders whether "young wives often feel like that towards their husbands?"; the comic irony of this question is certainly a source of amusement, given that Hedda has only declared her nonexistent compassion for Tesman in order to escape the blame for burning the manuscript. Whilst Ibsen uses this scene to acutely illustrate Hedda's dark and manipulative side, it draws her character closer to the audience as Tesman's highly apparent foolishness makes it easier to side with Hedda and accept the entertainment which comes from exploiting Tesman's gullibility.

Comedy plays another essential role in Hedda Gabler by enhancing the tragedy of the play - a role which was initially greatly misunderstood by Ibsen's peers. There comes a point when the humour becomes so bleak and dispiriting that Ibsen is exploiting the thin line between tragedy and comedy. Situations such as these occur on more than one occasion during Hedda Gabler, one of the more noticeable being Hedda's "expression of repulsion" once she has discovered that Eilert Loevborg shot himself accidentally in the stomach, "The - lower part." Despite the repugnance and horror of the incident, the exaggerated disgust displayed by Hedda evokes vulgar humour, causing her following comment, "why does everything I touch become mean and ludicrous?" to summon nervous laughter from the audience. Yet this dramatic comment of Hedda's is not so far from the truth, making her character all the more pitiable. Hedda's only desire - to influence a man's destiny - has failed to materialise due to the untidiness of

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14 Ibid.
15 Ibid. p. 99.
16 Ibid.
17 Ibid.
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Loevborg's death and as the audience gradually realise that without this power, Hedda's life has become meaningless, the tragedy of the play is greatly elevated.

This darker side of comedy is put to exceptionally good use in the final scene of the play and is crucial to Ibsen's desired effect on his audience. Leading up to the dramatic closing of the play, Ibsen introduces a scene in which the quiet contentedness of bourgeois society is stifling to Hedda. Ibsen accentuates Hedda's tone of frustration and exclusion in the question which she addresses to Tesman and Mrs.Elveste: "Can't I be of use to you two in any way?"\(^{18}\), a query to which Tesman rather insensitively replies "No, none at all."\(^{19}\). Whilst this tragically exposes Hedda's lack of purpose in life, Tesman's tactlessness would evoke a wry smile from the audience, turning the joke on Hedda. As a result, Hedda is backed into a situation in which she feels the only way out is in doing something beautiful with her life - killing herself - throwing it away in a manner so dramatic that her name will most certainly endure. In reality, the shock of what she's done puts an end to Hedda's fantasy, producing a twisted reaction from the remaining characters. Whilst Tesman begins frantically screaming "She's shot herself! Shot herself in the head! Fancy that!"\(^{20}\), Brack is intrinsically stunned at her suicide given that "People don't do such things!"\(^{21}\). Brack's outrageous remark, suggesting that what Hedda has done is simply not within the boundaries of acceptable social behaviour, and Tesman's own hysterical bearing might conceivably result in a wave of disbelieving laughter. This humour used by Ibsen almost anticipates the comedy of the absurd which came into being in the mid1900s. Ibsen forces his audience into discomfort as they laugh at the outrage of their society and, in effect, at themselves. The audience is coerced into accepting the realism behind Ibsen's play as he uses the comic element to eschew the neat and traditional

\(^{19}\) Ibid.
\(^{20}\) Ibid. p. 104.
\(^{21}\) Ibid. p. 104.
ending. He opens people's eyes to the distress which is present in the everyday life of women who are oppressed by society and in doing so, he also presents society's 'noble' response – ludicrous laughter and criticism – which haunts every aspect of Hedda's life, even her death.

In conclusion, Ibsen's use of comedy was out of sync with the tragedy of his time and audiences of the day would have found it difficult to accept Hedda's dissatisfaction as a woman, explaining why the humour which arises out of her frustration mystified Ibsen's contemporaries. Humour is used in several ways within the play: to bring Hedda's character closer to the audience so they can empathise with her frustration with Tesman and her situation as a woman, and, to demonstrate the ludicrousness of a society which scorns and shuns those who reject it. Comedy is a fundamental aspect of the play, allowing the audience to see Hedda as a human (and not an emotionless monster) as her resentment towards her life is inherent in her character, emerging through her comical witticisms, thus aiding the audience to feel sympathy for her and understand why she feels the desperate need to end her life.

Without a doubt, had the comedy been eliminated from the play, the element of realism would have receded leaving a tragic tale with little resemblance to everyday life. Ibsen aspired to reveal to his audience the oppression of 19th century Norwegian society in a manner which his peers could relate to; he did so with the aid of the comical aspect. Ibsen’s main criticism is of society and as the play unfolds his message to the audience becomes clearer: the joke is on them.
Bibliography:


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Reflective Statement

Hedda Gabler – Henrik Ibsen

My knowledge of the Norwegian social and cultural situation in the late 19th century was very limited prior to the interactive oral. Consequently my understanding of Hedda Gabler (Henrik Ibsen) was equally limited.

As a result of the discussion of social classes in 19th century Norway, the reasons behind Hedda’s marriage to Tesman (someone she outranked socially) were debated. Did she want a relationship in which she could dominate or was Tesman her last chance of pursuing the lifestyle she had enjoyed as the daughter of a general? Furthermore this analysis of social class helped define the purpose and function of each character in the play (such as Lövborg who symbolizes the undefined social delimitations in Norway at the time subsequent to the abolishment of nobility) as well as the relationship Hedda shares with different characters. For instance, she envies Mrs Elvsted because the latter embodies the freedom Hedda longs for. Furthermore her relationship with Brack is one in which the gender and class distinctions overlap. Although the two are social equals; he can manipulate Hedda due to his advantage over her as a man. This highlights the fragility of Hedda’s position in the play. As the relationships between characters are equally defined by gender; the discussion of this topic clarified the social expectations of women and consequently also Hedda’s marriage to Tesman as well as her desire for the power to which men were entitled to. She subjects herself to a miserable life, married to George Tesman, and refuses to “step outside” of her comfort zone (as Mrs Elvsted has done) because to do so is unthinkable to her. As a result it is necessary to consider whether she is constrained by her gender or her personality. This pushed me to exhibit a sympathetic approach when analyzing Hedda’s character and circumstances.

The interactive oral was an indispensable experience, without which I would never have fully understood the social and cultural obligations that dictated Hedda’s life and from which she so desperately wanted to escape.

Word Count: 335
The symbolic significance of Loevborg’s manuscript in Henrik Ibsen’s play *Hedda Gabler*

“I’m burning it! I’m burning your child!” (Act III)

Henrik Ibsen’s *Hedda Gabler* is set against the background of an evolving Norwegian society in the late nineteenth century as it moves away from aristocratic social values towards those of an emerging middle class. Such social transformations were also accompanied by a revolution in the nature of relationships between men and women in Norwegian society. The item which most accurately symbolizes such evolutions is Eilert Loevborg’s manuscript, his “real book” (pg. 49) which discusses “the future” (pg. 49). The former takes on symbolic significance in the course of the play, specifically in the climactic scene in Act III when Hedda burns the manuscript. This scene is key in understanding the lengths to which Hedda will go in order to fulfill her ambitions to control a man’s fate.

Loevborg’s manuscript is first mentioned during his call to the Tesman household in Act II where he refers to it as his “real book” (pg. 49). The manuscript is the source of competition between the two very differing characters of George Tesman and Eilert Loevborg. At the start of the play Loevborg is in fact referred to, by Auntie Jiju, as “the man who was [Tesman’s] most dangerous rival” (pg. 9) as the two men are “in the same field” (pg. 19) and “studying the same subject”. Furthermore, Judge Brack’s announcement of that Tesman and Loevborg will be competing for the same “nomination” (pg. 31) highlights, for the audience, said struggle with authentic rivalry. Furthermore Loevborg intends to “defeat [Tesman] in the
eyes of the world" (pg. 51) with the publication of his manuscript; the key to his success. The individual rivalry escalates to represent existing class competition between the aristocratic and bourgeois societies as these two characters embody the social values of their respective classes. Loevborg is originally of a high and aristocratic society but in recent years he has "had the mightiest fall. And now he's lying [...] in the pit he dug for himself" which is an eloquent manner of describing his fall from the grace of his relatives, who "wield a good deal of influence" (pg. 30), due to his morally questionable antics. George Tesman, however, is clearly of a lower social class to both Loevborg and his wife Hedda (an aristocrat) as it is apparent they are not social equals. This becomes evident to the audience whilst she describes, for Brack, her reasons for marrying Tesman. As Hedda puts it she had "danced herself tired" (pg. 38) and consequently settled for Tesman; a "very respectable man" (pg. 38).

Such social alterations are further conveyed by the nature of the manuscript itself which treats the subject of "the future" (pg. 49), the "forces that will shape [...] civilization" and "the direction in which that civilization may develop" (pg. 49). The topic of Loevborg's research is an unconventional one, this is conveyed to the audience by Tesman's astonished response; "But, I say, we don't know anything about that." (pg. 49), his reaction may have mirrored Ibsen's prediction of the audience's reaction to such works. The very nature of the manuscript presents a future in which the two men will no longer be competing on social grounds, but rather on intellectual grounds. Similarly, it also represents the evolution of the nature of relationships between men and women. This theme in the play is represented by Mrs Elvsted and Loevborg's partnership, which is revealed to the audience by Mrs Elvsted
who tells Hedda that “Whenever he wrote anything [they] always – did it together” (pg. 26). Furthermore “[Loevborg] made a – sort of – real person of [her]. Taught [her] to think – and to understand all kinds of things” and then “let [her] work with [him]” (pg. 25-26). This working relationship proved to be one of a platonic and intellectual nature, and argument which can be cemented by Loevborg’s declaration to “have no further use for [her]” (pg. 80) as he doesn’t “intend to do any more work” (pg. 80) as a result of losing his manuscript. This statement demonstrates that their association was founded on intellect. The document symbolizes the fruits of Loevborg and Mrs Elvsted’s relationship (one between two individuals who are the product of social liberation) which serves as evidence of the success of this revolutionized male-female relationship. However, this purely intellectual affiliation between the two characters is contrasted by their reference to the manuscript as their “little child” (pg. 81), as if it were their offspring which would convey an affinity of a more intimate nature. Ibsen’s personification of the manuscript possibly disprove the hopes for an evolved relationship between the genders as it suggests a return to the “traditional” relationship between a man and a woman; one of procreation.

The climactic scene in the play is the final scene of Act III when Hedda “(throws the pages into the stove and whispers to herself) I’m burning your child, Thea! […] I’m burning it! I’m burning your child!” (pg. 84, 85). Not only does Ibsen’s violent depiction of Hedda relishing the act of burning a child shock the audience, but it also highlights her fear and resentment of motherhood (a recurrent theme in the play). Nevertheless, this can also be interpreted as a violent outburst of anger and envy directed at Mrs. Elvsted and Loevborg. In this scene it become clear that her eruption is one of envy directed at Mrs. Elvsted who Hedda singles out
as she “burns [her] child! [Her,] with [her] beautiful, wavy hair!” (pg. 84, 85). This jealousy supports the notion that Hedda envies the power Mrs. Elvsted has to “shape a man’s destiny” (pg. 82) (which she secured when she succeeded in developing the significant relationship Hedda is unable to develop) which is expressed in Hedda’s comment “(as though to herself)” (pg. 82).

Additionally it is important to note that another fictitious symbolisation for the manuscript is introduced in this scene; that of Eilert Loevborg himself. This representation is created when Loevborg lies to protect Mrs. Elvsted and says that he “tore it into a thousand pieces. And scattered them [where] they will sink. Deeper and deeper. As shall [he].” (pg. 80). Consequently Hedda’s act of destroying the manuscript represents an act of ruining Loevborg. Moreover Loevborg’s intentions of protecting Mrs. Elvsted are made unambiguous to Hedda as he explains to her what would be worse than “to kill a child” (pg. 83). It is also at this point that Hedda believes she has taken control and will be the force for a “beautiful” suicide (pg. 84); finally shaping a man’s destiny. Ironically her plan does not go as she had planned and the “child” is to be brought back to life by Mrs. Elvsted and Tesman, leaving Hedda at the mercy of Judge Brack.

Thus the manuscript underlines crucial character developments, specifically for the presentation of Hedda Gabler. Her jealousy stems from the fact that Mrs Elvsted embodies all that she yearns for; the control over a man’s life akin to that which Mrs. Elvsted exercises over Loevborg as she reformed him. Moreover, Hedda envies the relationship shared between Mrs. Elvsted and Loevborg which is one in which she has “inspired him” (pg. 58). In burning
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the manuscript Hedda is inadvertently manifesting, to the audience, her resentment of the transformations society is undergoing. Consequently she is also manifesting an opposition to the evolution of society. Therefore the burning of the manuscript symbolizes Hedda’s inability to move forward and adapt to the changes moulding late nineteenth century Norwegian society. This resentment stems from Hedda’s yearning for the privileged life she was entitled to as “General Gabler’s daughter” (pg. 2) and her terror of anything that might separate her from such an entitlement (this argument is also one that justifies her fear “of a scandal” (pg. 56)). The manuscript represents the elements of Norwegian society that the audience witnesses Hedda struggle against throughout the play.

Owing to the fact that the manuscript represents competition between George Tesman and Eilert Loevborg, and the class competition existing between the aristocratic and the bourgeois societies, the manuscript is a symbol in Ibsen’s Hedda Gabler for the social changes reforming late nineteenth century Norwegian society. Moreover the manuscript is a symbol for the fruits of an emerging revolutionized male-female relationship which is symbolized by Loevborg and Mrs Elvsted’s affiliation. Finally the burning of a manuscript discussing the future could be a dramatisation that Ibsen has used as a means of foreshadowing Hedda Gabler’s fate. Her action of burning the book reflects her inability to contemplate social evolution, and ultimately her inability to allow herself to be moulded by the forces transforming society, a vice that inevitably leads to her defeat and ultimately her suicide.

Word Count: 1443
Example 11—English A: literature HL written assignment

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Bibliography

Sources used

Reflective Statement on *Ghosts* by Henrik Ibsen

**Question:** How was your understanding of cultural and contextual considerations of the work developed through the interactive oral discussion?

Discussing Ibsen's *Ghosts* allowed me not only to place the novel within its contemporary context but also to provide me with a deepened insight into the minds of the play's characters. For instance, discovering the negative way in which artists were perceived at the time led me to understand both Pastor Manders' disdain at Oscar's career choice and the ease with which Oscar assumes that soliciting artists is what caused his *Vermoulu*.

Furthermore, the discussion led me to fully appreciate the chilling effect of the play. This is because I learned that this effect was completely intentional and calculated down to the minutest detail by Ibsen himself. That *Ghosts* was written to be more than simply entertaining is evident by the precision with which the playwright chose to stage it. Indeed, it is often through details such as stage directions that Ibsen communicated important messages. Among these include criticisms of issues such as the over-importance attributed to duty and the hypocrisy of the clergy. With *Ghosts* Ibsen hoped to open the eyes of the Norwegian and the worldwide audience to these issues.

The discussion also permitted me to see why the play, which a modern audience would hardly describe as shocking, inspired such negative reactions when it was first published. Though some of the problems featured in *Ghosts*, such as incest, are as taboo today as they were in 1881 when the play was first published, a contemporary audience would be more able to discuss them openly than a 19th century audience, who tended to ignore the issues. This allowed me to truly grasp how revolutionary the play was at the time of its publication.

Finally, the interactive oral led me to understand the extent to which realism is the essential element without which the play may not have been so effective or upsetting to the audience. The public's horrified rejection of the piece was largely because the secret-ridden and faulted characters of *Ghosts* were not an exotic people but (seemingly) ordinary Norwegians. Indeed, the Alving family seemed, on the outside, so mundane that they could have been any spectator's next-door neighbours. It was, importantly, only once the secrets behind closed doors were revealed that the family became repulsive. It is this idea which horrified Ibsen's contemporaries: they were not ready to face the possibility that their reality, a civilised society, could, in fact, just be an illusion.

*Words: 398*
What is the function of doors in the stage directions in Ibsen’s *Ghosts*?

Word Count: 1337

English A Literature HL

Written Assignment

Session: May 2013
When Henrik Ibsen’s *Ghosts* was first published in 1881, it was considered scandalous. Challenging many of the accepted values of the time, *Ghosts* “aroused a hostility beyond anything Ibsen had envisaged” (Meyer 12). One aspect of the play that contributed to this effect was Ibsen’s use of staging. A central part of the staging in *Ghosts* is the four doors, which are frequently specified in his detailed stage directions. In order to fully appreciate the play, it is essential to examine the symbolism and use of doors within it. To do so, the reader must note where the doors in the play are located, what they each signify, how doors are used as places of transition, and finally what the significance of doors being open or closed is.

The four doors in the play are clearly differentiated and each has its own uses and implications. Within the main room, called the “garden-room” (Ibsen 27), are three doors, two to the right of the room and one to the left. The first door on the right-hand side of the garden room leads to the dining room, and the one beside it to the hall. This door leads to the formal entrance to the house and is the only door that Pastor Manders and Regina, who both care enormously about appearances, use. The door on the left leads into the more personal area of the house, upstairs and the bedrooms, which is only accessed by Mrs. Alving, Oswald and their trusted servant, Regina. Attached to the garden room is a conservatory containing another door leading into the garden.

This garden door is especially significant and reveals much about each character’s personality and social status. It is not a respectable door and is primarily used by lower-class characters. For instance, Engstrand, a vulgar character in the play both in his position in society and in his manner (he is a carpenter planning to open what seems to be a brothel), first appears "standing
at the garden door" (Ibsen 27). His daughter Regina, on the other hand, never uses the garden door. This is because her character is that of a social climber, keen to separate herself from her lower-class background. Further evidence to support this includes the way she speaks French in order to snub her unrefined father, using words such as “rendezvous” (Ibsen 28) and “mon Dieu” (Ibsen 29) because she knows that he will not understand them.

However, Mrs. Alving and Oswald do occasionally use the garden door, though only in times of absolute crisis. For Oswald, this is when the orphanage burns down. Panicked, the young man, “Runs out through the garden door” (Ibsen 82) whilst all the other characters “hurry out through the hall” (Ibsen 82) to get to the fire. This reaction suggests that Oswald genuinely cares more about the orphanage than the other characters. Because the orphanage is his father’s legacy, Oswald’s dismay at its destruction reminds the audience of the child’s ideal he still has of the captain. When Mrs. Alving uses the garden door it is also in times of distress, concerning something she truly cares about. However, it is vital to note that when the orphanage burns down she goes to it through the front door, signifying that its loss did not devastate her to the extent that she would lose her composure. Indeed, what the door shows Mrs. Alving to truly care about is her son, as she only rushes out “through the garden door” (Ibsen 83) when she becomes excessively distressed that Oswald has not returned from the fire.

Doors are also widely used to symbolise moments of transition. For instance, through the dining room door occurs the vital turning point in the story, where Pastor Manders, Mrs. Alving and the audience discover Regina and Oswald’s budding romance. Regina’s “Oswald! Are you mad? Let me go!” is only
partly concealed by the "half-open door" (Ibsen 56). Not only does this turn of events change the whole course of the play, but the carelessness of Oswald’s having left the door open (“the door swings half open behind him”, Ibsen 55) also reveals the indifference that he feels toward being found out. This somewhat forewarns his marriage proposal that follows, as his carelessness about being discovered indicates that Oswald may indeed be serious about Regina.

Doors also symbolise the transition between past and present and how these two can bleed into one another. Oswald’s bold advances on Regina is heard when “From the dining room is heard the crash of the chair being knocked over”, followed by Regina’s sharp “Oswald! Are you mad? Let me go!” (Ibsen 56). The door mentioned here, the dining room door, is the same door that Mrs. Alving previously pointed toward when telling Pastor Manders about how her husband seduced their servant, Joanna (“Points to the first door on the right ‘It was in the dining room that I first found out about it’”, Ibsen 53). Thus, her vision of Oswald as the “ghost” (Ibsen 56) of his father is amplified by having the two parallel situations occurring in the same exact doorway.

Standing in the doorway represents another kind of transition: the transition from one situation to the next, a place in between past occurrences and future action. When Mrs Alving stands “In the doorway” (Ibsen 57) before taking up her interrupted conversation with Pastor Manders about the Oswald-Regina situation, the parallel between being halfway through a doorway and halfway to a solution or resolution cannot be ignored.

The significance of doors being open or shut in the play is equally crucial to the understanding of its dramatic effect. After the orphanage has burned down, all the doors on the set are left “standing open” (Ibsen 82). This symbolises
shared and open thoughts, as everyone, the whole town, is involved in the 
tragedy and the Alving household is not alone in grieving the orphanage's loss.
Thus, with all the doors open, there is nothing, physically or mentally, separating 
them.

Leaving a door semi-open has different connotations altogether. It 
establishes an invitation for people to enter the room and shows how those in 
the room may desire a connection with those out of it. This can be observed 
when Mrs. Alving replies "leave the door open" (Ibsen 70) to Oswald's offer to 
close it, suggesting the hope that her son, in the dining room, will come and talk 
to her in the garden room.

Closed doors, however, indicate an altogether different mind frame. When 
Oswald has an anxiety attack, he enters the garden room and exclaims, "Shut all 
the doors!" (Ibsen 88). By closing all the doors he seeks safety, sealing himself 
inside and locking the rest of the world out. This paranoid attitude shows a mind 
closed to others, as opposed to the way things were after the fire, when all the 
doors and minds onstage were open. When a character enters the room and then 
closes the door, an atmosphere of secrecy is established and a cocoon is created 
around those within the room. An example of this is when Oswald enters the 
living room and "closes the door behind him" (Ibsen 70), just before he confesses 
to his Vermoulu. The closed doors serve to make his discourse more secretive 
and focused. The closed doors allow the audience to understand that the subject 
about to be discussed is sensitive, intensifying the discourse as our focus rests 
solely on the characters.

There is no doubt that doors play an important role in Ghosts. However, 
though they help to refine the way the message is communicated, it is the play's
characters that demonstrate what the message is. The characters, especially Mrs. Alving, show how people can and must free themselves from suffocating social conventions. Nonetheless, *Ghosts*’ ambiguous ending leads the reader to understand that unless serious action takes place, any real change is impossible. In the context of the play, which explores this idea, the door, that can both entrap and liberate, is a very powerful dramatic and symbolic tool.
Works Cited


Literary Essay + Reflection Rubric

Criterion A: Fulfilling the requirements of the reflective statement
• To what extent does the student show how their understanding of cultural and contextual elements was developed through the interactive oral?

Note: The word limit for the reflective statement is 300–400 words. If the word limit is exceeded, 1 mark will be deducted.

Marks Level descriptor
0 The work does not reach a standard described by the descriptors below.
1 Reflection on the interactive oral shows superficial development of the student’s understanding of cultural and contextual elements.
2 Reflection on the interactive oral shows some development of the student’s understanding of cultural and contextual elements.
3 Reflection on the interactive oral shows development of the student’s understanding of cultural and contextual elements.

Criterion B: Knowledge and understanding
• How effectively has the student used the topic and the essay to show knowledge and understanding of the chosen work?

Marks Level descriptor
0 The work does not reach a standard described by the descriptors below.
1–2 The essay shows some knowledge but little understanding of the work used for the assignment.
3–4 The essay shows knowledge and understanding of, and some insight into, the work used for the assignment.
5–6 The essay shows detailed knowledge and understanding of, and perceptive insight into, the work used for the assignment.

Criterion C: Appreciation of the writer’s choices
• To what extent does the student appreciate how the writer’s choices of language, structure, technique and style shape meaning?

Marks Level descriptor
0 The work does not reach a standard described by the descriptors below.
1–2 There is some mention, but little appreciation, of the ways in which language, structure, technique and style shape meaning.
3–4 There is adequate appreciation of the ways in which language, structure, technique and style shape meaning.
5–6 There is excellent appreciation of the ways in which language, structure, technique and style shape meaning.

Criterion D: Organization and development
• How effectively have the ideas been organized, and how well are references to the works integrated into the development of the ideas?

Note: The word limit for the essay is 1,200–1,500 words. If the word limit is exceeded, 2 marks will be deducted.

Marks Level descriptor
0 The work does not reach a standard described by the descriptors below.
1 There is some attempt to organize ideas, but little use of examples from the works used.
2 Ideas are superficially organized and developed, with some integrated examples from the works used.
3 Ideas are adequately organized and developed, with appropriately integrated examples from the works used.
4 Ideas are effectively organized and developed, with well-integrated examples from the works used.
5 Ideas are persuasively organized and developed, with effectively integrated examples from the works used.

Criterion E: Language
• How clear, varied and accurate is the language?
• How appropriate is the choice of register, style and terminology? (“Register” refers, in this context, to the student’s use of elements such as vocabulary, tone, sentence structure and terminology appropriate to the task.)

Marks Level descriptor
0 The work does not reach a standard described by the descriptors below.
1 Language is rarely clear and appropriate; there are many errors in grammar, vocabulary and sentence construction, and little sense of register and style.
2 Language is sometimes clear and carefully chosen; grammar, vocabulary and sentence construction are fairly accurate, although errors and inconsistencies are apparent; the register and style are to some extent appropriate to the task.
3 Language is clear and carefully chosen, with an adequate degree of accuracy in grammar, vocabulary and sentence construction despite some lapses; register and style are mostly appropriate to the task.
4 Language is clear and carefully chosen, with a good degree of accuracy in grammar, vocabulary and sentence construction; register and style are consistently appropriate to the task.
5 Language is very clear, effective, carefully chosen and precise, with a high degree of accuracy in grammar, vocabulary and sentence construction; register and style are effective and appropriate to the task.
Example 9—English A: literature HL written assignment

Assessment

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Criterion A

While it is a little implicit at times, there is enough evidence of developed understanding of cultural and contextual elements here to justify the mark awarded. The candidate considers the impact of occupation on a country with a coloniser's background of its own and on the occupiers, along with the legacy of former members of the resistance and collaborators. The contextual setting of the work within the candidate’s own culture is also a valid response; however, too much emphasis on this, given the restrictions of the word limit, would probably not assist the candidate in answering the question, which should be the only prompt to the reflective statement: “How was your understanding of cultural and contextual considerations of the work developed through the interactive oral?”

It would be nice to see a little more concrete detail about the history and culture of the setting of the work, yet this reflective statement represents a good, focused achievement with scope to be even better.

Another good feature of the reflective statement is that it makes it very clear that valuable interactive orals took place and that the candidate has thought about—reflected upon—them. What is not expected here is simply a collection of notes made following isolated research.

Criterion B

The topic chosen is suitably tight and at the same time relevant to many sections of the novel; a connection between the imagery and the moral aspects is effectively established in the introduction. The candidate uses the topic to show knowledge and understanding of the work with pertinent and detailed textual evidence selected from various sections. Some insight is shown in the way the candidate is able to relate the detail to an interpretation of the work as a whole but this overarching reading of the work could have been taken further—especially, perhaps, in the discussion of moral ambiguity.

Criterion C

The topic chosen has a clear focus on the way the writer shapes his work and creates meaning. The candidate selects quotations with care and analyses them thoughtfully, although some of the examples would have stood more thorough probing—such as the discussion of the epigraph from Pliny, which just needed a little more depth to clinch it, and the section on “the world stopped at my skin”.

Criterion D

From a confident, focused opening establishing the validity of the link and laying out a structure for the
discussion, the candidate develops an effective argument and focus is generally maintained, although some of the supporting detail—such as the reference to Fake Ploeg Jr—is rather rushed over and thus slightly less persuasive.

**Criterion E**

In all respects this assignment is very well written. Register is suitably literary and diction is, on the whole, sensitively chosen. While there are a few technical slips—some of them simply careless, which is disappointing—the mark awarded is clearly earned.

- Student work

- Assessment comments

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http://ibpublishing.ibo.org/server2/rest/app/tsm.xml?doc=d_1_a1an_tsm_1402_1_e&part=3&chapter=10&mode=moderator
Example 10—English A: literature HL written assignment

Assessment

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Criterion A

This is a thoughtful and engaged reflective statement that truly grapples with how knowledge acquired as a result of the interactive oral has enriched the candidate’s reading of the work. The discussion of paganism and the cult of Dionysus is neatly linked to the text and opens up a level of understanding that goes beyond the obvious.

Criterion B

The topic offers the candidate an opportunity to explore a relatively untrodden aspect of a popular text. The chosen aspect is specifically focused enough for a discussion to be feasible within the word limit while at the same time offering an opportunity for the candidate to range widely through the work in selecting supporting examples. Knowledge and understanding of the text are evident in the essay, although some examples, such as those in the section on Tesman (page 2), are not always given adequate context. There is some assertion, but overall knowledge and understanding are detailed enough to justify the mark awarded.

Criterion C

The chosen area is very strongly directed to appreciation of the writer’s choices, but discussion and analysis of supporting examples are not all that probing as, for example, in the section on the mocking of Tesman’s research subject (pages 1–2) and that on comedy of situation (pages 2–3). Thus it is an adequate response in relation to this criterion; to show an excellent level of appreciation, the analysis of features needs more depth.

Criterion D

The essay is structurally clear and effective, with neatly embedded supporting examples and elegant paragraph transitions. The ideas in the introduction are logically developed and the argument is neatly pulled together in the conclusion.

Criterion E

While there are a few lapses in diction and register, language use in this essay is clear and confident, and appropriate technical or academic terms are deployed with ease. The candidate’s style is a touch verbose, so the problem of limited analysis identified in the notes on criterion C could have been overcome with some careful editing, to enable scope for further discussion within the word limit to be released.
Example 11—English A: literature HL written assignment

Assessment

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Criterion A

This reflective statement makes appropriate comment on the social context of the play, but while the interactive oral appears to have covered the right ground the candidate does not go into a great deal or range of detail, spending rather too long on the text itself. The style is a little ponderous; because the focus of this criterion is on content and not expression, detail and reflection on content are expected. It is evident that there has been some development of the candidate’s understanding of cultural and contextual elements here, but ideally there should be clearer evidence of response to the various cultural underpinnings of the work.

Criterion B

The chosen topic, with a clear and defined focus on a literary aspect of the work, is likely to elicit an essay that will meet the requirements of the written assignment. Textual knowledge and understanding are good, with references to the play ranging quite widely. Because the manuscript is discussed at several moments in the play, the topic truly offers the candidate an opportunity to demonstrate knowledge and understanding of the whole work; however, there is lack of support for some comments, which justifies the mark awarded. In the early stages of the essay there is a slightly narrative approach. To show real understanding, the candidate needs to make some sort of proposal from the evidence assembled, such as the comment that the manuscript represents Loevborg’s first “real book”.

Criterion C

Stylistic analysis is effective and, although a little uneven, it is more than adequate. Examples are selected with some precision but are sometimes used as a kind of running narrative; a little more unpacking of how the writer is working is needed. Better sections are, for example, when the candidate pauses to explore the writer’s means of showing the manuscript’s symbolic significance, especially on pages 3–4.

Criterion D

The essay has a clear sense of structure and supporting examples are appropriately and for the most part elegantly integrated. The overall effect is very methodical with some effective transitions but the argument is rushed in places and thus not always fully persuasive.

Criterion E

Language is clear and carefully chosen and the register is appropriately academic but sentence structures are not...
fully controlled and diction occasionally lacks precision.

Student work

Assessment comments

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Example 12—English A: literature HL written assignment

Assessment

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Criterion A

The reflective statement covers good ground, firmly setting the play within the context of many aspects of late nineteenth-century Norwegian society; there is also some useful focus on a relevant aspect of cultural context in the discussion of theatrical realism. It is clear that the ideas discussed in the interactive oral have enriched the candidate’s reading of the play.

Criterion B

The topic has a good focus on the mechanics of the play and allows the candidate to range widely throughout it. The inclusion of “in the stage directions” in the title could be unnecessarily limiting, or rather redundant. The candidate makes some assertions about the function and role of some of the doors that do not receive persuasive support: Why is the garden door “not a respectable door” (page 1)? There is evident knowledge and understanding, but too much assertion and lack of development of a compelling thesis justify the mark awarded.

Criterion C

With a focus on stage directions as well as dialogue and using examples taken from various sections of the play, there is potential for much to credit here. However, analysis is adequate at best and supporting examples are sometimes used as running narrative rather than to show appreciation of the writer’s choices: the exploration of Oswald’s running out “through the garden door” is scant. The discussion of the half-open door to the dining room is useful, but not all examples are so well handled.

Criterion D

The organization of ideas is clear and methodical; supporting examples are neatly embedded. The introduction lays out a clear line of structure but the overall impression given by the essay is somewhat of “one thing after another” in a series of often rather short, undeveloped paragraphs instead of the building of a persuasive line of argument.

Criterion E

Language use is clear, register is generally appropriate and the degree of mechanical accuracy is good. However, some lack of precision in diction and some slightly awkward phrasing are justified by the mark awarded.