

Paper 2 Exemplar – May 2017

Question 3: To what extent do at least two of the works you have studied show that an individual is in control of his or her own destiny?

How does one remain in control of his or her own life when conflicts arise? Do they remain in power, or does this force shift into another's hands? Many literary texts explore power and control, depicting how characters govern their own fates in the presence of conflict. In Death and the Maiden by Ariel Dorfman, this is no different. First premiering to an English-speaking audience at the Royal Court Upstairs in London on July 9th, 1001, the play recounts the story of a character, Paulina Salas, who kidnaps a man and puts him on trial in order to regain a sense of control over her own life. Haunted by her traumatic past, she is intent on obtaining justice, convinced that in doing so, she will be able to live normally again, without her trauma dictating her every move. In Hedda Gabler, however, playwright Henrik Ibsen portrays this notion quite differently, depicting the titular character, Hedda, desperately trying to free herself from the 19th century social norms that rob her from the fate she deserves. First performed at the Konigliches Residenz Theatre on January 31st, 1891 in Munich, Germany, the play focuses on external conflict to depict the lack of power Hedda has over her life. Nevertheless, in both plays, the author's use of conflict as a tool to drive the plot forward and convey the thematic idea that individuals are unable to escape from conflicts' oppression, leading to a lack of control over their own destiny.

To begin with, Death and the Maiden uses Paulina Salas's traumatic past to convey that her internal conflict prevents her from living life and dictating her own future. This is first exemplified at the beginning of Act 1, Scene 1 when her husband, Gerardo Escobar, returns home in an unfamiliar car. As Paulina hears the car approach, she "reached for her



gun in her drawer,” panicked and completely frightened. These actions characterize her as a very paranoid woman, unable to greet her husband with open arms and love, but instead, with a gun. Not only does this foreshadow the fact that show was violently abused in the past, but it also suggests to the audience that she had been so scarred by the torture she endured that she can no longer live, constantly reading that evil is looming close. Thus, the audience understands that due to the violence she experienced, she has lost control of her own life, letting fear govern her fate instead. This is further seen in the play when Paulina identifies the man who brings her husband home as her torturer, merely by his voice. She says “During all these years, not an hour has passed that I haven’t heard it, the same voice, next to me, next to my ear, that same voice mixed with my saliva. You think I’d forget a voice like this?” Dorman uses Paulina’s anaphora and repetition to characterize her as mentally unstable and broken. Furthermore, her dialogue provides visual imagery as the audience imagines the voice of Roberto, the alleged perpetrator, playing in a loop in Paulina’s head, like a broken cassette recorder. This therefore characterizes Paulina as someone who has had her sanity shattered to pieces, but through her confusion of her sense of taste and sound, further depicts her as scarred beyond return. The visual imagery also alludes to the cassette recorder that will symbolize Paulina’s thirst for justice and revenge, through recording Roberto’s forced confession. Therefore, through Paulina’s erratic and unstable behavior, the audience understands that because of the torture she faced from the Secret Police trying to get information out of the resistance, this has resulted in her inability to derive enjoyment from life and pursuing any other goals other than justice, hinting at her lack of control over her future.

In Hedda Gabler on the other hand, Ibsen uses the external conflict between Hedda and society's perception of women to portray her inability to hold power over her own fate. This is first apparent when Hedda explains to Judge Brack that she married because "she has simply danced herself tired" and "her time was up" in a cold, controlled tone. Not only does her tone characterize her as an unsentimental woman, very uncommon in 19th century Norway, but it also conveys her distaste and anger towards the fact that because society dictated she was too old to remain single, she was forced to get married. Furthermore, Hedda uses the metaphor of a dance to refer to her life before marriage, explaining that, because of the dance's connotations, it was a time of joy, festivities, and celebration. This provides a stark contrast to her description of married, "boring" life, reinforcing the notion that she married out of obligation rather than love. The audience sees that Hedda is trapped by the confinement of society, forced to let them dictate her future. In addition to this, Hedda exclaims in Act 2 that "it is the middle class she has gotten into" and that it is the reason as to "why life is so wretched, so absolutely ludicrous." Not only does this exclamation depict her scorn towards the lower part of society, but it also insinuates that Hedda, despite being middle-class, still views herself on a higher hierarchical level. The adjectives she uses to describe her current life reflect her tone of anger and misery, further suggesting that she is discontent with society having thrust her into a life she did not want. Essentially, this characterization portrays Hedda as a woman, who during that time period, was supposed to be loving, caring, and obedient, yet she wants nothing more than to be the opposite. The audience is shown that Hedda, in face of her external conflict, has lost power over her own fate so that it now lies in the hands of society.

Though both plays illustrate conflict as an oppressive tool over one's life and destiny, Death and the Maiden's conflict results in abuse of power on others due to being mired in her past rather than to spite society. Ariel Dorfman uses Paulina's husband, Gerardo, as a foil to Paulina to enhance her unstable heavier and convey that her torture has led to her inability to fulfill her own life. Gerardo tells Paulina in Act 2, Scene 1 that she "stayed there behind with them, locked in that basement." Not only does the basement act as a visual image due to the audience picturing Paulina locked and tortured, but it is also used as a metaphor to represent Paulina's mind, locked in the past. Gerardo tells Paulina that she is stuck in the past, and thus, unable to look forward to, let alone control, her future. He then continues, "For fifteen years, you've done nothing with your life. Not a thing. Look at you, just when we have a chance to start over again, you begin to open all the wounds." This further characterizes Paulina as unstable, as Gerardo represents the voice of civilization, someone rational. Furthermore, Dorfman here suggests that Paulina is so intent on justice and so broken by her past that she has become futile, and has amounted to nothing. Her dreams of "becoming a doctor" have vanished, hinting at the notion that her traumatic past now governs her life, both present and future.

In contrast, Ibsen presents Hedda as a character who, since she cannot control her own destiny, will opt to destroy other people's lives in society. This is apparent in Act 2 when Hedda explains to Thea that "for once in her life" she wants to "have power over a human being's fate." Because she states that it has never happened before in her lifetime, Hedda insinuates that she has never been in control of her own life. Furthermore, her confession foreshadows Hedda's need for control due to being unable to have some over her own destiny, leading her to meddle into Ejlert Lovborg's life by causing him to relapse

into his drinking habit and destroying his precious manuscript. In addition to these actions, Hedda pushes Ejlert to commit suicide by handing him a pistol and urging him to do it “beautifully.” This shows that Hedda romanticizes death, finding beauty in the act of taking one’s own life. This compares Hedda’s admiration to the action of defying social norms as by killing oneself, one can escape the external conflict with society. The audience sees that because Hedda cannot control her own destiny, sealed to the fate that society has scripted for her, she wants to hold power over Ejlert and wants to experience freedom from his suicide.

In both Death and the Maiden and Hedda Gabler pistols are motifs used as props to symbolize power. In both plays, the authors use the guns to give power to the women, thus illustrating their attempts at regaining power over their destinies through violence. In Death and the Maiden, Paulina use the gun so that the men cannot “use their strengths to win the argument” showing that Paulina uses the gun as a tool to overcome the conflict and regain control. In Hedda Gabler, however, the pistol is initially directed at Ejlert to break from society’s rules. However, upon finding out that his death was not in fact, beautiful, and that Judge Brack knows the truth, Hedda feels revulsion and decides to end her own life in an attempt to escape society’s oppression. However, from Judge Brack’s reaction of “one doesn’t do that kind of thing!” in Act 4, the audience sees that Hedda did not even hold power over her destiny as in the end, society’s views still judge her after death.

In conclusion, both Henrik Ibsen and Ariel Dorfman used conflict as a tool to present the thematic idea that the two female protagonists are unable to hold power and control over their own destinies. However, Death and the Maiden’s ambivalent and open end allows the audience to reflect on themselves and decide as to whether or not Paulina ends

up freeing herself from her past as the play concludes with Paulina listening to “Death and the Maiden,” a song that used to make her ill thinking about her torture. Hedda Gabler cannot escape from societal norms as she is forced to have her destiny dictated by society. Ibsen wanted to “depict human destinies on a groundwork of social conditions of the present day.”