Exam question: What is symbolised by the cement sculptures of camels, wise men, owls and angels in Helen's back yard and house in The Road to Mecca?

Symbolised by:
1. Camels:
   - Journey
   The journey that Helen had gone through making her sculptures
   The journey she has gone through in the play. Mecca is situated in a desert country, pilgrims on their way to the holy city would often ride on camels. The spiritual journey is the road to finding peace and self-actualisation, by making and doing something that helps her deal with the battle in her mind.
   Her journey is also on a road to a place of peace.

   Her procession of camels were travelling in a southerly direction, but she knew that the destination of such a spiritual quest should be in the east, so she wrote EAST OOS in the wire netting of the south fence bordering the yard.
   Helen thus created her own 'East': the place where the sun and moon rise, and the direction in which men turn in prayer to Mecca and Jerusalem.

   Without camels for transport the wise men could not have reached their destination; so they are a vital element in the whole pilgrimage, and Helen portrayed 49 of them in the Camel Yard.
   Camels are animals which can survive in scorching desert conditions which are hostile to man. The desert is also seen as 'the domain of the sun, not as the creator of energy upon earth but as pure, celestial radiance, blinding in its manifestation' (Cirlot, 1981: 79). Water (with its own complex symbolism which will be studied later) was essential to camels' survival, and yet they could go for long periods without it. These would all have been meaningful symbols for Helen, who had not only needed to survive in extremely difficult circumstances and an unsympathetic environment, but also required the courage to continue on her own pilgrimage. She had all the need, ideas, enthusiasm and burning energy to attain her goal, but she did not have the means - finances, independence, strength, courage, personality, social attributes or understanding –o do so. She needed to know that there were means of achieving it notwithstanding, and camels could also have sustained her belief in survival and the value of perseverance.

2. Wise men:
   This is appropriate as the wise men were on a pilgrimage which was not centred on worldly matters. Many of them have their arms outstretched or upraised in supplication and prayer and are reaching out towards their goal. The hooked staffs which many carry ascribe a pastoral role in the Church, and are a symbol of faith, divine power and communication (Cirlot 1981: 68). The symbolism of their gifts, of which Helen would have been aware from her religious upbringing, were: gold of obedience which was for kings, representing ultimate human authority; frankincense for priests, who act as bridge-builders bringing God and man together; and myrrh, an aromatic plant used for embalming the bodies of the dead. All of these are inevitable encounters with which one has to deal along the way of life.

3. Owls:
   Owls are not afraid of the dark.
   This was Helen Martins's personal totem animal (an animal that is a symbol of a particular quality). For her, the owl was a symbol of intuition, insight and wisdom (maybe because of its large eyes).
   Owls are obviously invested with great meaning in The Owl House. There have been more owls created than any other subject, and altogether there are approximately 80 owls outside and inside
the house. They dominate the exterior of the house: on the front stoop alone there are 10 owls, including one over the front door, while others watch from corners of the roof, on windowsills, and are positioned all over the yard. On top of the moon gate perches the two-faced owl (combining the two important symbols for Helen of owl and moon), which looks both inward and outward, and simultaneously into the past and the future. One wonders if Helen was aware of Janus, the Latin god of antiquity, who signified the ‘door’ or ‘opening’ and was usually depicted with two faces and looking in opposite directions.

Owls have many symbolic meanings, reaching far back into ancient times, and many of the meanings, from different cultures, are conflicting. It seems to be one of the most ambivalent and complex of all the symbols which Helen chose - which is possibly appropriate for this very complex woman. And because she chose to name her whole body of work after the owl, and identified herself with it, it warrants more attention than any of the other subjects (with the moon) following a close second, as again, Helen personally identified with the moon). It would be enlightening to have known from Helen herself how she viewed owls. She used to venture forth under cover of darkness according to people who knew her; Mrs Norah van Niekerk compared her with an owl for this very reason (interview van Niekerk, N. 1993). When walking at night in Nieu Bethesda, one is very aware of owls swooping silently past or hooting invisibly from the shadows of trees. In all likelihood, Helen would also have gone for walks in the mountains and kloofs surrounding the village.

At dusk it is a common occurrence for an owl to fly out unexpectedly, almost underfoot, from a rock or hole in the ground, so they would have been familiar creatures to her. In the culture in which she grew up, one of the common meanings for owls is that they are birds of wisdom. In the African culture it is known as a harbinger of death. In the Egyptian hieroglyphic system 'it symbolizes death, night, cold and passivity' (Cirlot, 1981: 247). It is also known as the bird of darkness: To the

Chinese the owl represents 'evil, crime, death, horror and ungrateful children', and in Christianity: 'Satan; the powers of darkness; solitude; mourning; desolation; bad news. The call of the owl is the "song of death"' (Cooper, 1990: 124). Those Jews who chose darkness instead of the light of the gospel were represented by the owl; to the Hindus it is the emblem of Yama, the god of the dead; to the Japanese and Mexicans it also stands for death, but in the Greek and Roman traditions the owl was sacred to Athene and Minerva and symbolized wisdom (Cooper, 1990: 124).

The owl is known as 'a ghost-bird because of its being a night-bird and its noiseless flight' (De Vries, 1984: 353). The owl is also attributed to Christ, who went into the Darkness to save the souls in dark hell and returned as the Light of the World, says De Vries (De Vries, 1984: 353). The owl is described as epitomizing loneliness in Psalm 102, v. 6. The King James version reads: 'I am like a pelican of the wilderness: I am like an owl of the desen'; which in the Good News version is translated as: 'I am like a wild bird in the des en, like an owl in abandoned ruins. ' The daughter of Lesbos, Nyctimeoe ('of the night'), had intercourse with her father, and was changed into an owl.

She fled in despair and in her shame still fears daylight and seeks out dark crevices in which to hide (De Vries, 1984: 354). If it was the case that incest occurred with her father, then this is again a possible explanation for how Helen's life unfolded and why she identified so strongly with owls. 'Identifying oneself with animals represents integration of the unconscious and sometimes - like

Live birds were a central feature of the Camel Yard, and birds are a major focus in the iconography of the Camel Yard. Helen, in her very manner of being, has frequently been said to have been 'bird-like'. The bird, being a creature of earth yet not entirely of earth, since he can fly, is a symbol for that incomprehensible pan of man that is sometimes called “spirit” (Singer, 1973: 169). Birds are frequently used to symbolize human souls, some of the earliest examples being found in the art of
ancient Egypt. They are the messengers of the gods, and generally speaking, birds, like angels, are symbols of thought, imagination and of the swiftness of spiritual processes and relationships. They also symbolize freedom. Most birds are solar - the yang principle - but particularly the crane, cock and peacock. All three of these birds were portrayed by Helen. Those birds which belong to the higher realms belong to the Element of air and denote loftiness of spirit.

4. Angels

Mecca signifies suffering and long road to freedom she had to take before this day (day she turned on all the lights). All facing east to where a mecca is as in muslin religion.

The work is all about mystery and fantasy, and not in the least about facts. There are ‘two typical features of a symbol: its non-rational character, and its effectiveness’ she did undergo such an experience~

The Bible was a major influence in her life, in her early years at least, and she would have been well aware of the creation passage in Genesis Chapter I verse 16: sun & moon symbolism is numinous - filled with a sense of the presence of divinity (sun)

The East also symbolized a freedom which she couldn't have, but in her imagination she could travel the universe.

In other ways Helen also manipulated her reality: ‘she also wanted to watch the sun rise and set above Spitsberg [Kompasberg]. So she made a Spitsberg on the opposite side of the real one, so she could have it both ways' The Camel Yard is essentially about a spiritual pilgrimage, with interludes, anecdotes and diversions along the way. The spirituality portrayed is eclectic, and although predominantly Christian, shows an openness to the worshipping of a higher being who might encompass all these different religious viewpoints. Buddhas sit impassively meditating in the yard, and the cross-legged figure of a man wearing a turban probably represents Hinduism. Islam is represented in the Meccas and also some Mecca, the epitome of a spiritual destination, would have represented a spiritual ideal to Helen, but she had no guidance in how to portray it accurately. So instead she created her own imaginative vision of Mecca: glowing domes of light constructed from bottles, insj4e JVhich lanterns could be hung at night, and through which the sun shone during the day. One of them is surmounted with i large inverted red brandy glass. It is interesting to note that this idealized spiritual goal was entirely translucent and filled with light, and was probably the ultimate to which she aspired. In her depiction of spiritual pilgrimage in the Camel Yard, she was enacting her own spiritual pilgrimage, and 'Mecca' was the one spiritual destination which she created more than any other.

Symbolically, illumination comes from the East, and the East was Helen's symbolic destination. It is in the east that the sun and the moon rise, to the east that the wise men followed the star that led them to the baby Jesus, to the east that Muslims turn to pray and to the east that they make a pilgrimage to Mecca. Radiance symbolizes new life emanating from the divinity: light was the first thing which was created and is also the power which dispels darkness and the forces of evil.

Light symbolizes the life of the spirit as opposed to that of the emotions: 'Light and lust are deadly enemies' states De Vries (De Vries, 1984: 297). 'The experience of light is the encounter with ultimate reality' (Cooper, 1990: 96); a perception which is confirmed in all the great religions of the world. In Christianity, Christ is the 'Light of the World' and 'the Father of Lights with whom there is no variableness, neither shadow of turning' (James 1 v. 17). In the Islamic Quran, 'Allah is the Light of the Heavens and of the earth'. Helen's entire house was devoted to light, but it was-light that she created or manipulated herself to dispel the darkness, whether it was internal or external.

Light also symbolizes wisdom - which links it to the owl that is such an important symbol in The Owl
Hiouse - intellect and direct knowledge. It is also the masculine principle - to which, through her choice of subject matter, Helen appeared to be reaching. It is ultimately the 'manifestation of nonbeing and unity.