There are **3 characters in the play.**

**2. Helen Martins is the most important character because:**
Helen, she is the protagonist of the play. The entire play is played out in Helen’s home. She is also the reason Elsa comes to New Bethesda, to visit Helen because she is worried about her emotional state. Helen is also the reason for Marius’ visits; he cares for her and tries to fit her into his world. All of the characters gather at Helen’s home to discuss her emotional state and future.

**3. The following character relate to Helen:**
Elsa relates to Helen through her “Mecca” she sees it as Helen wants it to be seen and she has been drawn to it from the first moment she saw it as she states “Believe me Helen, when I saw your “Mecca” for the first time, I just stood there and gaped.”(Page 22). To Elsa, Helen’s “Mecca” is a miracle “…your little miracle of light and colour” page 23. Helen and Elsa also share trust between each other, they are friends and share a passion for Helen’s art.

Marius relates to Helen through their friendship, the possibility of love and the history he has with her. Marius cares for Helen and wants to be involved in her life and to 'help' her even if they do not agree on her “Mecca” as Marius himself states “A true friendship should be able to accommodate a difference of opinion.”(Page 44) Marius sees Helen the way he wants to see her and not for the person she truly is.

**4. Yes I think the play has a happy ending** because all three characters have gotten closure on aspects of their lives of which they were still unsure; they have all also come to conclusions about their lives. Helen has realised that her “Mecca” is complete “My Mecca is finished…”page 74 she has also finally stood up for herself against Marius, the church and the town who want to dictate her life. Elsa opened up about the hardships she faced while she was away, she also learns to trust again when she metaphorically tells Helen to catch her “Open your arms and catch me! I’m going to jump!” page 76 this statement also refers back to a previous conversation between Helen and Elsa about trust in which Elsa tells Helen a story about a father and a son and the lesson of trust (page 20) showing that Elsa truly puts he faith in Helen. Marius realise he has lost the battle to change Helen back to the women she once was, and after years of trying he realises he must let her go and move on as he states “All these years it has always felt as if I could reach you. It seemed so inevitable that I would, so right that we should find each other again and be together for what times was left to us in the same world.” (page 69) But he also realise that Helen is happy in her world.

**5. The general, human issue that the play is about is the preconceived ideas of cultures… (theme/main idea)**
**Art vs. Religion:** The church is against her “Mecca”, Helen chose her art over the church on the first Sunday she chose to stay home and make her first owl and she understood that there would be consequences for her actions but her art was more important to her she states in a conversation with Marius “...But don’t think that missing church that Sunday was something I did lightly, Marius. You don't break the habit of the lifetime without realizing that life will never quite be the same again.” (page 63)

**Apartheid:** The play is set in apartheid South-Africa. Elsa struggles to come to terms with the situation, she is faced with an apartheid situation when a black farm workers wife was kicked of the farm by the “baas” when her husband died and Elsa picked her and her baby up beside the road hiking (page 7) She also encourages her students to freedom of speech and ends up with a hearing at her school because of it. She wants the coloured people’s decisions and thought to be listened to as well as she states on page 13 “…has anybody bothered to ask the coloured people what they think about it all?” The lack of people’s rights is a central theme as Helen also feels her rights are being stripped away.

Page 76
Explore several important themes and aspects such as: characters, symbols, the representation of the position of woman and the role of art.

- Women’s rights: Women’s rights are brought up in various conversations in the play. Such as Helen not being able to live alone because she is an elderly women or that it is frowned upon for her to make her art because it is not something women must be capable to do. Katrina’s life is also a part of the theme of women’s rights as her husband abuses her “And making all sorts terrible threats about her and the baby.” (page 11) also that she cannot leave him because “They’re married” (page 11) she is also only seventeen years old so it is also a child’s rights issue. Another example is the women Elsa meets beside the road that was evicted from the farm by the “baas” because her husband died.

- Trust: The trust between Helen and Elsa how it is broken in the middle of the play but built up again at the end.

- Journeys: The journey Helen takes her entire life to complete her “Mecca” and the one that lies ahead now that her “Mecca” is completed. Elsa’s journey to forget all the negative things in her life and to move on to a better place. Marius’s journey to save Helen ever since she started her “Mecca” as well as the journey he completed since his wife passed, and in the end of the play to forget Helen and how he feels about her.

Page 77

-Notes

1st Act – The conversation introduces the problems that the two women are facing.

2nd Act – There is an extra character. This changes the tone and content of the conversation. Some resolution is brought to the problems that were raised in the 1st act.

Page 78

-Notes

**CHARACTER: Miss Helen Martins**

Grew up in a century when there were strict expectations of all members of society but particularly women.

She is the widow of a man called Stefanus.

Miss Helen Martins, an elderly South African widow and an artist. Miss Helen lives alone in the town of New Bethesda, where her eccentric sculptures have served to isolate her from her neighbours. Since her husband’s death, her work has become the spiritual centre of Miss Helen’s life, bringing her a sense of fulfilment that was missing earlier, when she lived as a conventional member of society. Now that she is becoming increasingly unable to manage on her own, her wellspring of creativity seems at an end, and she is faced with a sense of darkness and despair that threatens at times to overwhelm her.

Page 81

-Exercise

1. My first response to the pictures of the art was that I thought it looked strange and this aroused a feeling of curiousness (to find out why it was made that way, the meaning behind it). At first glance I found the art strange because it reminded me of a graveyard, but you look at the individual pieces you can see the different images that she tried to depict, but I still don’t find them attractive.

2. I think the woman who made this art has a vivid imagination but she must also have been creative. I think she would have been a creative person with an interesting imagination, who loved making statues and incorporating them in her garden. I think she also had a love for animals and the middle-east with the different images she depicts.

3. There are religious symbols amongst the art: the wise men and camels. This reminds me of Christianity. Yes, there is a sculpture that looks like a church which reminds me of Christianity. It could also be a mosque which reminds me of the Muslim religion. There is also an image of a face which reminds me of an extinct religion. Then there are also statues that refer to different cultures with their own unique religions.

-Notes

Transformation of the Owl House: Helen Martins was ill one night and watched the moon shining through her window. She thought that her life had become drab and grey, and decided that she would change it by bringing light into her environment. That moment of self-reflection sprang the entire transformation of the Owl House.

Helen’s marriage to Stefanus gives her the opportunity to reflect on what really matters in her life and whether marriage (which was expected from women in small villages) provided her with real fulfilment. Helen was never happy in her marriage, she always pretended to be.
CHARACTER: ELSA BARLOW
28 Year old school teacher from Cape Town.
The play opens with Elsa’s arrival at Miss Helen’s house. She has driven for twelve hours from Cape Town and appears tires and irritable. She tells Helen that she gave a lift to a young woman (“African” – black) and her baby.

Elsa Barlow, a teacher in her twenties. Elsa is Miss Helen’s closest friend and the only person who treats the older woman’s work with respect and interest. Concerned for her friend’s well-being, Elsa arrives from Cape Town for an unannounced visit and urges Miss Helen to resist local attempts to persuade her to enter a retirement home. Elsa herself is in many ways confused and troubled; fearing commitment in her life, she has recently had an abortion and is now questioning that decision. Miss Helen has long served as a source of inspiration for her, and her reaction to the older woman’s growing inability to cope is tied to her need for Miss Helen to remain a strong role model.

Page 82
-Exercise
P 16
1. Elsa: Single, adulterer, Outspoken, troubled, caring, dominating, rude, independent, strong, truthful, trustworthy
2. Elsa’s life problems: Elsa has trust issues, she has had an affair with a married man who chose his wife over her, she was also impregnated by him but she had an abortion which only added to her emotional instability. She is also against the apartheid government and tries to advocate against this government, she tries to teach people about freedom of speech. She is also against traditions and conformity. Elsa also struggles with “Afrikaner” conventions.
3. She has come to visit Helen: Elsa is worried about Helen’s emotional wellbeing because of the letter she received from Helen as stated on page 27. She is Helen’s friend and has come to support her and help her through the difficult time she is having.
4. Elsa’s role in Helen’s life: Elsa is Helen’s only true friend who accepts her and her art just as they are; she is a lover of Helen’s work. Elsa and Helen trust only each other. Elsa also makes Helen feel like a “young girl” again.
5. Helen mean to Elsa: Helen is a friend but also makes her life better with the art she creates. Helen is the only person she is truly honest and herself with. She is her confidant and her shoulder in times of need.

-Notes
Elsa is a single woman who has been in a relationship with a married man (affair) and she has fallen pregnant. She had an abortion and is deeply scarred by the experience. This helps to explain why she was so upset difficulties of the African woman with the baby whom she had given a lift to, although her reaction is extreme (revealed in 2nd Act that she “stopped the car, switched off the engine, closed my eyes and started to scream”).

-Exercise
P 73 – Explain Elsa’s reaction. Her feelings about the encounter are complex. P 13 read and write.
It is the first time truly expresses her hurt in a physical manner about all the sadness she has experienced. Elsa feels remorse about the baby as well as the relationship she had with David. She has feelings of hate and sadness towards herself, David, the apartheid nation, and the school she is teaching at. She mourns for her dead baby and by seeing this women and her strength in these horrible circumstances, she is disappointed in herself and her actions.

P 5 & 6 – Elsa and Helen have a deep and special friendship.
In the 1st Act Elsa says “Let’s face it, we’ve both got a little girl hidden away in us somewhere”. Helen replies “And they like to play together”.
Despite the differences between their ages, occupations and cultural backgrounds (Elsa is English- peaking while Helen is rooted in Afrikaans culture), they discuss and disagree about a wide range of private and political matters.

P 20 - Helen and Elsa agree that the essence of their friendship, the thing that makes it special, is “trust”. It is written “the really big word is … Trust”.
For Helen and Elsa, the fact that they can trust each other means that they can let their defences down, show their faults and vulnerabilities, and be truly themselves with each other.
Fugard suggests in The Road to Mecca, is the only way a relationship between two people (whether they are partners, parents, children or friends) can mean anything.
Exercise
1. What is Elsa’s challenge to Helen? To talk to Marius and tell him her true feelings and to stand up for what she wants.
2. How does Helen challenge Elsa in return? She challenges her to cry and let go of the anger (Page 73), she also challenges her into awareness and her responsibility (Page 61).

Page 83
Notes
The play ends on a note of hope. As the two women prepare for bed, Elsa offers Helen a Valium. The final line is spoken by Elsa: “Open your arms and catch me! I’m going to jump!” (P 20)

Exercise
Elsa means the following by saying “I’m going to jump!” – She is saying that she will take a leap of faith not only by putting her trust in Helen again but also in her own life by moving on from the hardships she has experienced and starting over.

CHARACTER: Dominee Marius Byleveld

As the minister of the community, his job is to take care of everyone who attends his church. He is interested in their spiritual wellbeing and believes, but also in their life circumstances and whether they are living lives that are good and happy.

Helen describes Marius as “an old friend,” but it is evident that her friendship with him is not as deep or profound as her friendship with Elsa. There is an unspoken conflict between Marius and Helen over religious and artistic issues. Their conflict is expressed in polite terms.

Marius Byleveld, a pastor and long-time friend of Miss Helen. Marius and Miss Helen are contemporaries, and it is he who is urging her to enter a retirement home. A far more complex character than he initially appears, he seems at first to represent simply the repressive elements in conventional society that see Miss Helen’s work and lifestyle as a dangerous break with the status quo. It becomes clear as the story progresses, however, that although there are indeed aspects of that outlook in Marius, his concern for Miss Helen’s welfare is entirely genuine and is in fact motivated largely by the long-cherished love he feels for her.

Exercise
1. What is the reason for Marius’s visit? What does he want Helen to do? Marius has come to help her fill in the forms for “Sunshine home for the aged”. He and the church council want Helen to move into the old age home because they don’t think she can look after herself anymore. (Act 2 49-51) He has also brought her some vegetables out of his garden (Act 2 page 40) Marius visits Helen on a regular basis; he is the only person in town who visits her except for Katrina.
2. Marius claims that he knows what is good for Helen and that is why he has come to visit her. Do you believe him? Why?
   Yes, he has good intentions towards Helen. He believes she needs help and is concerned with her wellbeing and feelings. (Act 2 page 55) Marius sees Helen as confused and being able to take care of herself (Act 2 page 56) The reason for his concern is the candle incident where Helen nearly burned the house down (Act 2 page 57) 3. Elsa claims that Marius is in love with Helen (Fugard 2003:74). Do you agree with her? Why?
   No, he just cares for her wellbeing (act 2 page 55) and her safety. He cannot truly be in love with her because not know or understand the real her (act 2 page 24) He does not like her “Mecca” and thinks she has changed (Act 2 page 53). Marius tries to treat Helen like a child, he sees her as confused needing protection from herself and Elsa (Act 2 page 56-57) Marius wants to be her protector rather than her lover. He sees her art, her “Mecca” as a nightmare (page 61) If he was truly in love with her, he would love her “Mecca” as well; it is a part of her. (Page 61-62). Marius also feels betrayed by Helen and her “idolatry” (page 63) He speaks clearly about his feelings for Helen on page 64 where we realise that maybe he could be in love with Helen as he states that she does not know his “true feelings” for her. He saw Helen in his future alongside him and that they would “be together” page 69.

Page 84
Notes
Helen’s statues of mermaids, owls and pilgrims on camels, on their way to Mecca, offend Marius because they refer to another religion or vision of life: they do not fit into his views of what widowed old ladies are supposed to do.
He says of Helen’s statues: “In another age and time it might have been called idolatry” or the worship of false gods. Later Marius remembers how Helen missed church to make her first statue of an owl, and it is clear that he views the making of the statues as a kind of competition in Helen’s mind and life with “the true faith” of Christianity. To Elsa, though, the statues are an expression of something else: Helen’s “vision” of life and her desire for beauty and light.

There are three different views of Helen’s art, which is at the centre of the play’s development.

A symbol, then, is an image or object that represents another quality or meaning.

Symbols in Helen Martins’s art:
The owl – This was Helen’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).

Mecca – Mecca, the capital of the Middle Eastern country of Saudi Arabia, is the holy city of the religion of Islam. To travel to Mecca is the high point, or goal, of a devout Muslim’s religious life.

Mecca is, therefore, the symbol of a spiritual or personal goal.

Glass – Helen used glass in her art because it reflects light. Her aim as an artist was to fill her living space, and her life, with light, which is a symbol of clarity and happiness.

Camels and their riders – As Mecca is situated in a desert country, pilgrims on their way to the holy city would often ride on camels (which are known as “ships of the desert” because of their ability to undertake long journeys across desert landscapes).

Page 85
-Notes
The meaning of symbols is not fixed in any rigid way: artists, such as Helen Martins, often use existing symbols in new ways. Thus The Road to Mecca refers to Mecca, the holy city of Islam, but nobody in the play actually travels to Saudi Arabia. Rather, Mecca represents a state of mind in which spiritual fulfilment and freedom have been reached.

Helen’s use of the word “Mecca” in The Road to Mecca is associated with Islam, not Christianity. Christian religion was the only right way to live. The Church was the instrument of God’s will and the Bible was the ultimate authority.

By using The Road to Mecca as the title of his play, Fugard aligns himself with a different religion from Christianity — Islam. The holy symbol of Islam is not the cross, but the city of Mecca, where pilgrims travel as the culmination of their devotion to God.

Pilgrimages - Mecca in Saudi Arabia. Every adult Muslim must make a pilgrimage (or Hajj) to Mecca once in his or her lifetime to worship at the Holy Mosque in the city.

There is a clear conflict between Helen’s “Mecca” and the Christian faith.

Page 86
-Notes
P 30 & 31 – There is concern whether Helen is able to look after herself and her home. To stay in her own house she is able to keep her independence in her own home as an active artist.

There is an opposition/conflict between what the church wants for her and what she wants for herself.

Throughout the play, Elsa and Helen talk a great deal about Mecca and its meaning for Helen. At their first meeting, Helen asks Elsa the way to Mecca and then proudly corrects her. This is very unusual behaviour for a woman in a tiny, Christian dominated village in the Karoo: we would expect her, if she showed any religious belief at all, to be interested in the location of the nearest church.

-Exercise
P 22
1. Is Helen’s Mecca the same as the holy city of Islam in Saudi Arabia? Why, or why not? No, this is her own “pilgrimage”. Her “Mecca” is her own journey of self-discovery and it is a world she has created for herself which she visits daily. Her “Mecca” does not have any involvement in Islam or religion.
2. We know that Mecca is the goal of Islam’s most important and meaningful pilgrimage. In what way can Helen’s art be compared to a pilgrimage? Her Art is a journey for her; each piece takes her a step closer to self-discovery, and new creative outlets. Her “Mecca” takes her on her pilgrimages to freedom, creativity and light.
3. Helen creates her “Mecca” as a non-Christian holy site. Can you speculate about the values of Christianity that she might be rejecting in this action? (Hint: you might consider that, in the early part of the twentieth century, a divorced woman living on her own was not entirely acceptable in some small communities.) The values of the “old” Christian church that she should be in church each Sunday, that she is not allowed to make these ‘strange’ art pieces and that she should conform to the church and societies rules for what is acceptable behaviour.

Page 87
-Notes
Helen associates religious values with her art. For Helen, “Mecca” is associated with the freedom to express herself and her inner vision. In the same way as the city of Mecca is the goal of the major spiritual pilgrimage of Islam (the Haj), Helen’s “Mecca” is the goal of her journey as an artist. She might feel that she has reached Mecca when she has finished decorating her house with light and building sculptures in her yard. It is clear that, as long as Helen continues work on her “Mecca”, she will have a reason to live.

By marrying in her early adulthood, Helen Martins was, therefore, living up to social expectations. But separating from her husband was not part of what was expected of a woman, and would have brought some degree of shame or notoriety upon her. Therefore, at the end of her marriage, Helen would have been seen as an unusual, slightly misdirected woman, who had strayed from the path that society laid down for her.

There was, presumably, a shortage of eligible men, so Helen Martins’s marriage prospects were not very good. And in the early part of the twentieth century, it was not socially appropriate for single, middle-aged women (Helen, by then, was in her late middle age) to take up a new career and manage it on their own.

Helen Martins was, therefore, a very unusual woman, who did not conform to what society expected of her in any way. Instead, Helen began an activity that is usually considered as belonging to men only: making sculptures.

-Exercise
Ways in which Helen does not conform to what is expected from a woman.
Helen is a forward thinking, unusual women for her time. Since her husband’s death she has not conformed to what is expected of a widowed white woman. Helen did not truly mourn her husband, nor did she join the other ladies of her age in church activities. She went against all that was seen normal by living on her own and not getting married again. She stepped away from her religion and started making sculptures which was not ‘normal’ for that time. The people would have reacted in the same way people usually do when someone is different; by pushing them away. The people must have tried to avoid Helen as they now saw her as strange and unstable. Most people would have thought she went insane. That is why Helen only has three friends. The children were afraid of her and her house but so also were the parents.

Page 89
-Notes
The experience Helen describes in these lines is also common amongst women, who marry and then discover that they do not share real love with their husbands. After Stefanus’s funeral, Helen feels as though she is dead: as though her life is over and there is nothing meaningful in it any more. But she realises that her marriage was deathly and that, after Stefanus’s death, she is free.

-Exercise
Write a paragraph about the ways in which women are not “free” in marriage.
When two people get married they are connected to one another and there are certain roles as dictated by society that should be filled by each individual, it cannot be said for all marriages but in many the women are not “free” this would have been especially true in Helen’s time. In many marriages the women is part of her husband’s household and sadly is not as free to make her own choices. Some men would even go to the extent of believing that their wife is their property which leaves a door opens to abuse and domestic violence.
It is beginning to appear that women’s problems, as depicted in *The Road to Mecca*, are largely caused by men. This is certainly true of Katrina and Helen, as well as the woman to whom Elsa gives a lift on the road to Nieu Bethesda. But what about Elsa? She is a single woman living an independent life in a large city, and so we might assume that she is free to please herself.

**Exercise**

Read the sections of *The Road to Mecca* in which Elsa describes her relationship with David (pp. 28–31 and 76). Then write two pages in which you answer the following questions:

1. What problem in Elsa’s relationship with David led to their separation? He is married.
2. What were the consequences of the relationship? She fell pregnant, had an abortion and ended up with a broken heart.
5. Who is to blame in the situation? Both David and Elsa were consensual adults, they knew it was wrong but they continued the affair. They are both to blame.
6. Finally, would you say that Elsa is as much the victim of a man as Katrina is? No, she had a choice in having an affair with a married man and she also chose to have and abortion, she could have chosen differently. We do not know Katrina’s background if she was married of by her parents or what her situation was, but Katrina does not choose for her husband to drink and beat her, it is not in her hands.

Marius is a complex character. He is acting in all good faith, as a representative of the Church Council, when he visits Helen. But are his actions really aimed at increasing her happiness, as he believes they are? Or is he, like Stefanus, also guilty of trying to suppress Helen’s creativity? If so, is he perhaps just like all the other men in the play – maybe well-intentioned, but in fact quite unaware of the needs and goals of the women around him? Or is this going too far? What do you think?

**Page 91**

**Exercise**

1. Why does Helen miss the church service? She got a picture (dreamed) of an owl which was to be her first sculpture which she had to start work on immediately while it was still fresh in her mind. She wanted to remember clearly what she saw. (page 62)
2. What is Marius’s response to her absence from the church service? He feels “grieved” and betrayed. He thinks Helen has turned her back on him and religion as he states “You turned you back on your church, on your faith and then on us for that?”(page 62) He does not understand the importance it held for Helen.

**Notes**

By choosing to stay at home, though, she also chooses not to go to church, which means that she is not going what is expected of her as a “good”, well-behaved, widow and member of her religious community.

As you now know, Helen’s art is not “good” or expected behaviour from a middle-aged woman in her position, who would have been expected to get involved in the life of the village by attending church.

**Exercise**

What would be expected of a woman of Helen’s age to do/ not and give reason.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attending church</th>
<th>People of Helen’s age are set on religious customs such as attending church every Sunday.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Taking care of her home</td>
<td>Most widows will want another companion, it should be acceptable to date again if a person is lonely and wants another companion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Going out with single men</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socialising with other villagers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Making art

It keeps a person busy while you stimulate your mind and do something fun and artistic. Many old age homes and old people do arts and crafts to keep busy.

Talking to people

It does not matter your age you should not discriminate, it is also not apartheid South-Africa anymore in many old age homes you will find people from different races to socialize with.

-Notes

It should also indicate to you that there were clear notions about “good” behaviour for a widow. She might have been expected to involve herself in “good works”, such as helping the poor or visiting the sick – but she would certainly not have been expected to make art in her back yard or in her house.

In general, women are not expected to become artists as this conflicts with their social role as home-makers and the caregivers of children. Being an artist takes a woman’s time away from such domestic activities.

Page 92

-Notes

Once Helen decides, on that first Sunday morning, not to go to church as expected, but to stay at home and make her first owl, it seems her path is set and she cannot stray from it.

Page 93

-Exercise

Write a paragraph (about 15 lines) explaining what Helen has done “wrong” in Marius’s eyes and what his view is of her statues.

Now read Elsa’s comments on his speech, on p. 69 of your text, and write a paragraph answering the following questions:

1. According to Elsa, what motivates Marius’s response to Helen’s statues?
   Fear – “it frightens them” page 59
   Being different- “…she dared to be different!” Page 60
   Idolatry- “…it might have been called idolatry.” Page 61

2. What is her view of them? Elsa sees the statues as an expression of freedom – “…they express freedom” page 61. She sees her “mecca” as beautiful and a miracle – “…your little miracle of light and colour.” Page 23

3. What is the difference between Elsa’s and Marius’s view of the statues? Elsa sees them as art and an expression of freedom. Marius sees them as monstrosities and a nightmare. They have opposite viewpoint. Marius almost gives a defensive response to Helen’s statues the reason for this is that they are different. People don’t accept something or someone that is different so easily. In the play it can be seen that Helen being different scares the children and the people in town only because they are not educated and do not understand. Elsa does not fear the statues or Helen even though they are different she sees them as an expression of freedom and a beautiful miracle created by Helen. Elsa and Marius both have different views about Helen’s wellbeing and art, which intern leads to an argument.

Marius sees that Helen has changed. Marius realises what is going on for the first time in 15 years. According to Marius, Helen turned her back on the church, her faith and on the community especially him (page 63) because of the sculptures she is making. He sees the statues as “monstrosities” that have stolen Helen away from them and he feels that they cannot replace human love and affection, and the yard is a “nightmare” (pg. 61) Marius is disappointed in Helen for the choices she has made to get where she is now and disappointed in himself that he did not notice earlier. (pg. 59 -69)
Notes
It is a question of freedom. Helen wants and needs the freedom to create what her imagination can envision: but to do that, she has to refuse to do what her community wants of her, namely conducting her life quietly and concerning herself with the activities and wellbeing of other villagers, and, of course, attending church. Her choice to pursue her art instead of doing what is expected of her by the society of the time is what offends Marius. From Marius's point of view, she is not free because she has responsibilities to her community. Those responsibilities demand that she should conform to expectations and live a “good” life as befits a woman in her situation.

Three different views of Helen’s art:
Helen - “my Mecca” (my “holy city”)
Elsa - Beautiful; surprising
Marius - “cement monstrosities”; dangerous

Interpretation of art:
Helen
A journey
Light
Freedom
Art

Elsa
Helen’s life pg. 55
Monsters pg. 60
Freedom 60-61
Miracle

Marius
Ornaments pg. 51
Hobby pg. 53
Nightmare pg. 61
Idolatry pg. 61

Page 94
-Notes
It should be clear by now that Helen is a rebel against what her society expects of her, and that, by filling her house with ground glass and her yard with statues of pilgrims, camels, owls and mermaids, she was making a statement about artists’ freedom to express their own personal vision. In this way, as both Elsa and Marius notice, she is a threat to the established norms of the village, which do not approve of the kind of art she makes.

-Exercise
Now write two paragraphs about your own opinion of Helen Martins’s art. You may wish to consult the official website of the Owl House: or any other text concerning Helen Martins’s life and art. Your paragraphs should:
1. Say whether you like Helen Martins’s art or not, and why.
2. State your opinion of the meaning of Helen’s art.
3. Say what you think Helen’s status as an artist should be.

In her own lifetime, though, she was viewed with suspicion and her work was seen by many as dangerous and even inspired by evil forces. Rather, they are complex notions of freedom, art and religion, as well as women’s place in society.
**ASSIGNMENT**

**What is the reason for Marius’s visit? What does he want Helen to do?**

When you analyse a play, remember to pay attention to the stage directions as well as the dialogue between characters. The main reason for Marius’s visit is to convince Helen to move to a retirement home in Graaff-Reinet. He wants her to complete the application form for the old-age home. When you make a statement such as this, you need to provide support or evidence from the play. How do we know that this is the real reason behind Marius’s visit? When the act starts, we see Marius and Elsa at a table with Helen, “the centre of attraction being a basket of vegetables which Marius has brought with him”. However, it soon emerges that bringing the vegetables is not the real reason for his visit. He informs Helen that a room has been made available in the home and that a “decision must be made, one way or the other”. He places subtle pressure on her by noting that she was moved to the top of the waiting list “as a personal favour”.

**Marius claims that he knows what is good for Helen and that is why he has come to visit her. Do you believe him? Why?**

This question requires you to give your opinion. You may choose to agree that Marius knows what it best for Helen or you may choose to disagree. The most important part of this answer is the way in which you support whichever argument you make. Your opinion must be based on the play. I would argue that Marius cannot know what is best for Helen because he does not really understand her. Helen is an artist, but Marius dismisses her art by referring to it as a “hobby” and by calling her statues “ornaments”, “that nightmare” and “cement monstrosities”. He has no respect for Helen or her work as he tells her that her “life has become as grotesque as those creations of [hers] out there”. Marius is obviously concerned about Helen’s safety, especially after the fire in her home. He also thinks that Helen would be better off as an active part of the church and the community. For Helen, however, her life as Stefanus’s wife was not a happy one. She did not love him and, even as she sat “obediently” next to him in church, she knew that “it was all a terrible, terrible lie”. Her art and the home she made for herself have allowed her to live a life of some truth and freedom. This is what is best for her, even though it is not something that Marius or the community can understand.

**Elsa claims that Marius is in love with Helen (Fugard 2003: 74). Do you agree with her? Why?**

As with the previous question, you may agree or disagree with Elsa, but you must support your argument with close reference to the play. For instance, if I argue that Elsa is wrong about Marius’s feelings for Helen, I must explain my opinion. I would argue that Marius is threatened by Helen. He is scared of her art and her commitment to living life on her own terms. He admits: “I am frightened of what you have done to yourself and your life, yes, that is true!” On the other hand, I could agree with Elsa and point out that Marius thought it “inevitable” and “right” that they “should find each other again and be together for what time was left to [them] in the same world”. He keeps insisting that his “only concern has been her well-being”. However, you should ask yourself whether this is enough to convince you that he is in love with her. Do you think that it is possible to love someone if you do not understand them or respect their choices? The play suggests that going to the retirement home would have harmed Helen more than it would have helped her. If Marius really loved her, would he not have realised this? These are just examples of the types of questions you should be asking yourself when you attempt to answer this question.