

EXTENSION ENGLISH 1 ASSESSMENT TASK 2

Seminar Presentation

Conveying an understanding of the nineteenth century world, and the way in which composers have sought to comment on the institutions and values of the period through critical and creative works.

The nineteenth century world, as presented by various authors of that time, was a period of questionable and oppressive values, in which the individual was significantly burdened by the expectations placed upon them by society. One of the more insightful models developed to explore or explain the presence of values considered to be oppressive or otherwise inequitable in nineteenth century society was the notion of a “compact majority”, devised by playwright and poet, Henrik Ibsen.

Ibsen argued that, within society, there exists two key groups. **SLIDE:A COMPACT MAJORITY** In this model, the group generally identified as the proletariat is referred to instead as the “compact majority” – that is, the value accepting group. This “compact majority” is seen to accept the *dictat* of the value-generating/value-electing group – that is, “the establishment”, which is comprised of various influences, including political bodies, religious groups, and educational institutions – all of whom are responsible for creating and disseminating values. These are the two *key* groups within society, although Ibsen suggests that there is another still. **SLIDE:A COMPACT MAJORITY** He terms them “fighters at the outposts” – this group rejects the values imposed upon them by society, or, at the very least, is seen to challenge them.

In Ibsen's own works, we see key figures such as Nora and Dr. Stockmann, as well as supporting characters, such as Captain Horster and Petra, portrayed as these “fighters at the outposts”. The manner in which Ibsen critiques society is consistent with this model, which itself invites further discussion.

Ibsen's criticism of “society” here is confined to a particular aspect of the same. **SLIDE:LIMITED CRITICISM** Perhaps inadvertently, he excuses the “compact majority” and, on the charge of social injustice, instead foregrounds the value-electing group as sole perpetrators – they appear to be offered in appeasement, a propitiation for the crimes of society as a whole. Consistently, it is those *with power* depicted as being guilty of committing crimes against the individual in nineteenth century society – and this is not confined solely to the works of Ibsen.

Whilst discussing Ibsen, however, it is worth noting that this concept of the powerful oppressing the individual does *not* function in a pseudo-Marxist political framework – quite the opposite. **SLIDE:AN ENEMY OF THE PEOPLE** In Act Four (IV) of Ibsen's play, *An Enemy of the People*, Dr. Stockmann declares that “The minority is always right.” He is speaking of the fighters at the outposts. For him, the resistance shall always be a minority movement – the masses are controlled by the value-electors, who, strangely enough, “approve of the very truths that the fighters at the outposts held to in the days of our grandfathers.” Placing aside all argument regarding the apparent futility of their cause in light of this extreme relativism, it is clear that Ibsen holds the establishment-opposing minority of “the outposts” to be correct. **SLIDE:BLACK**

A recurring feature of texts studied and considered to be the canonical works of the nineteenth century is this lucid critique, obviously directed not at any “common” people, but at the value-setting classes and bodies. For this reason, Ibsen's model is rather insightful, especially given that he did not have our present benefit of hindsight.

Ibsen's rather explicit identification with an elite minority is something other authors and playwrights of the period perhaps do not as candidly express, although analysis of their works would suggest that many of Ibsen's peers agreed with him in this. A commonly heard criticism from **this class** is that the writing styles employed by authors – especially Henry James – of 19th century literature are long-winded and overly conversational in nature. Ibsen is spared this criticism as a small mercy of translation, and James has the defence of his deliberate speech when dictating his works to a scribe – both these aside, the 'accessibility' of these works has often been criticised – and not without reason. **SLIDE:ELITISM AND ACCESSIBILITY**

“Shakespeare was written for the masses.” This notion is indoctrinated into students throughout high school, to the point where it is possible to make the assumption that any archaic language in canonical works was once perfectly intelligible to the common people. Needless to say, it wasn't.

Even Henry James' peer and friend, Edith Wharton, has expressed difficulty in comprehending James' languid style, however, of greater importance is the accessibility of the text to the common people. Regardless as to the *message* within a text, this must be encoded in a form the target audience is capable of understanding. A Marxist criticism of literature is quite applicable here – without a doubt, much of this literature we now see to have had an impact in the nineteenth century *was* inaccessible, employing a lexicon beyond that of much of the population. Composers have sought to comment on the institutions and values of the period not through a blatant and “accessible” appeal to the common people, but in another way. **SLIDE:BLACK**

Both James and Wharton are somewhat self-critical in their writings, in the sense that both belong to the aristocratic element of society that they sought to criticise. Wharton's *The House of Mirth*, although written in 1905, may be viewed a product of the century prior in terms of the values it criticises. Whilst contemporary sensitivities may cause us to reject the notion that such criticisms are timeless, there is an element of truth in such a proposition; certainly, society had not seen that much change between the previous century and 1905. **SLIDE:CRITICISMS OF THE RULING CLASS** Both works critique the indolent nature of these classes, as well as the nature of relationships and the influence of wealth upon these.

Notably, social criticism in both these works is confined to the value-electing group, without allusion to the wrongs of the “compact majority”. This is consistent with Ibsen's criticism of society – the “compact majority” are largely ignored, the group of lesser consequence in the scheme of things, for if social issues are to be resolved this must, apparently, be achieved from above.

SLIDE:PRODUCTS OF CHARACTERISATION The texts examined thus far all contain characters of greater wealth and status than perhaps would be considered representative of the typical person in this period – perhaps this is justification for the focus on the ills of the value-setters?

Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* is set in the imagined county of Wessex – the purpose of this “imagined” county being to capture the cultural atmosphere of the English countryside, prior to the impact of the Industrial Revolution. From the location alone, Hardy has refrained from a direct critique of the members of a moneyed aristocracy, and yet, by the end of this novel, the nature of criticism is perfectly clear. **SLIDE:BLACK**

Alec d'Urberville is the most explicit figure of such aristocracy in this text, portrayed as

having come into money, and acquiring the all-but-forgotten name of d'Urberville – one of many aspects of this text foreshadowing the demise of Hardy's protagonist. As an object of criticism, Alec is mostly left alone for the earlier parts of the book – following his rape of Tess, Alec quietly disappears, as more poignant criticisms of society are elucidated by Hardy, in the development and subsequent fall of the relationship between Angel and Tess – Hardy criticises the institution of marriage, and, through this, the oppression of women in society. Tess is portrayed as being *unable* to survive alone. Alec d'Urberville is brought back into the flow of the text, first with Hardy's masterful use of irony, in a form that criticises the notion of forgiveness within Christianity, and highlights the hypocrisy of the institution of the church itself, and subsequently, most importantly, to make Tess dependent upon him, as she struggles to escape from poverty at Flintcomb Ash whilst still attempting to support her mother and siblings.

As with Ibsen, the criticisms in this text are primarily directed at the institutions of the nineteenth century, rather than at the common people. Tess is presented as being blameless, and the faults of her father and the other occupants of her birthplace are depicted with far greater compassion than Hardy's portrayal of the hypocritical and flawed nature of society's value-setting institutions. **SLIDE:VALUE SETTING INSTITUTIONS**

So what are these “value-setting institutions”? Some have already been defined. The governing bodies, the church, educational institutions. But there are other groups beside these, less often subjected to criticism. **SLIDE:A CASTAWAY** Poet and translator Augusta Webster satirically writes in her poem *A Castaway* of how “worthy men... think all's done” if the people can just be made to listen – satirical not because the people refuse to hear, but because their listening serves to resolve little. The speaker in Webster's poem is a prostitute, who declares herself modest, launching into a criticism of all professions – lawyers, preachers, doctors, journalists, tradesmen...

This sort of blanket criticism is easy to disregard, however, other texts are seen to support such a viewpoint, though their expression is less explicit. The question at this point is *how* does one define this 'blanket' group? In Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People*, the protagonist attempts to warn the community of a danger in their midst, and is ostracised for it. It is clear to the reader that the community will eventually fall prey to the contamination, and in this way Ibsen passes judgement on another institution – that of the “community”. **SLIDE:THE COMMUNITY**

It is this notion of community, sacred in Victorian thought, that is seen to oppress the individual. This “community” is comprised primarily of the value-accepting “compact majority” who are seen to enforce the values of the establishment. **SLIDE:CONCLUSION** The *way* in which composers have sought to comment on this is two-fold, with some electing to criticise the value-setting classes alone, in an attempt to instigate change from above, whilst other authors, such as Ibsen and Webster, instead launch their critique at the masses, who, by their passivity and acceptance of values, are seen to be in conflict with the individual.

The values of the period, as well as the institutions responsible for dissemination of these, have been commented on and criticised by composers in a variety of ways. The nature of this comment is seen to depend on the author's own background, and, through exploring this, a greater understanding of the nineteenth century world is developed. **SLIDE:BLACK**

“The minority is always right.” Act IV, *An Enemy of the People*.

<http://www2.open.ac.uk/ClassicalStudies/GreekPlays/Conf99/Hardwck.htm>

<http://www.gettysburg.edu/academics/english/hardy/contexts/art/drama.html>

Recreant Strength – The “compact majority” was Ibsen’s way of describing those members of society who accepted the *dictat* of the value-generating/value-electing group – “the establishment”. See Schwendter, R. *Partial Cultures, Subcultures, Picot Persons, Plural Identities*. European Expert Meeting “Overlapping cultures and plural identities” (Vienna, 23-26 May 1991). Available online: http://www.vienna-thinktank.at/ocpi1991/91ocpi_schwendter.htm

<http://people.freenet.de/Laca/TessOfTheDUrbervilles.html>