THE ROAD TO MECCA

The Road to Mecca was first staged in May 1984 at the Yale Repertory Theatre in New Haven, Connecticut. In 1985 it was performed at the Lyttelton Theatre, London, with Yvonne Bryceland as Helen. Thereafter it was presented in Johannesburg at the Market Theatre, once again in London, but this time at the National Theatre, and at the Spoleto USA Festival in Charleston, South Carolina. In 1988 it appeared at the off-Broadway Promenade Theatre in New York.

The title page of *The Road to Mecca* proclaims that the play was `suggested by the life and work of Helen Martins of New Bethesda'. New Bethesda is an isolated, rather backwater village in the `remote fastnesses of the Eastern Cape' of South Africa. A semi-desert region, its landscape is one of `unremitting desolation ... flanked by mountain ranges which intensify its isolation and ensure its inaccessibility' (Durbach 1987:5). Its villages are widely dispersed and their population is composed mainly of Afrikaners.

An inhabitant of such a Karoo village, `a meek, obedient, church-going little widow', as Fugard wrote in an article published in *Twentieth Century Literature* (1993:386), `shocked everybody in [her] community by doing two things: she stopped going to church and she started sculpting'. For about a quarter of a century, she

> transformed her little Gothic house with its Gothic darkness into a light-filled palace of the most unbelievable splendour. In the large yard around her house she created - self-taught - statues, all of them with an eastern theme. She called it the camel-yard. She was obsessed. Her inspiration came from the Rub of Omar Khayym. She saw those last twenty-five years of her life as a journey to Mecca, Mecca not being the real Mecca of Saudi Arabia, but the Mecca of [the] imagination.... (1993:386)

The mythic goal of Mecca in the desert was attained by way of her art. When she was seventy-five years old, the visions ceased coming and she could not complete her work. Being old and alone, suffering from arthritis and weak

eyesight, she fell into a deep depression (Fugard 1993:386).

In the play, the townspeople of New Bethesda have decided that Miss Helen should go to the Sunshine Home for the Aged, a home for the elderly run by the Dutch Reformed Church in Graaff-Reinet. Their motives are not altogether altruistic as they want to be quit of the old woman who has outraged them with her unconventional `hobby'.

Helen does not want to go, but also does not know how to say no. On this score, she writes a letter to a friend in Cape Town, imploring the latter to come to her. Although there is a difference of forty years between the two women, they have much in common. Elsa is the only person who appreciates `Mecca' - Helen's home and her statues - and, like the artist, she is also a rebel, in this case against the aberrations of South Africa's apartheid regime. Furthermore, both Elsa and Helen have found self-fulfilment outside of marriage and motherhood. Helen has her Mecca, and Elsa has her students whom she teaches radical material (Heller 1993:473).

On her way to her friend in New Bethesda, Elsa gives a ride to a indigent African woman and her baby. After giving the woman some cash, Elsa drops her off where the road forks to walk the last eighty miles to Cradock with the baby on her back.

Even though Elsa and Helen `provide the focus of the whole event' (Durbach 1987:3), the local *dominee* appears in the doorway at the end of Act One. Reverend Marius Byleveld has come to persuade Miss Helen to fill in the application form for the Sunshine Home. He finds her irresolute and suspects that this has something to do with the `stranger's' presence. He then questions Helen about her relationship with Elsa. Elsa and later also Helen explain and illustrate to Marius why Helen cannot leave her Mecca. Marius is defeated and leaves, the form (still) unsigned.

In the last few moments of the play the two women are once again alone. Elsa discloses why she has been so irritable all night. Her lover has gone back to his

wife and Elsa has aborted the baby she was expecting. Helen empathises with her friend's pain, and, for the first time, Elsa cries about her double loss. `By reaching out to each other the two women achieve greater insight into the meaning of their lives' (Heller 1993:477).

It is patent from the plot description that *The Road to Mecca*, like *Dimetos* and *The Guest: An Episode in the Life of Eugène Marais*, is a play about art and the artist (Wertheim 1986:16), a play that deals with the genesis and nature of `artistic inspiration, the responsibility of the artist to his vision, the subjugation of the artist by that vision and the opposition of that artistic vision to the conformity of the everyday world' (1986:18). In addition, the drama also looks at what happens when the redemptive function of art no longer prevails and when the artist can no longer `lie' value into existence (Durbach 1987:12), that is, when the `spirit of creativity dies'. This is the one death that frightens Fugard, for he foresees one day also having to cope with the dreaded moment of the extinction of his creativity and silence, like the reclusive widow with the darkness of artistic impotence, old age and death (interviewed by Brink 1990:79).

The village of New Bethesda is approximately twenty-four kilometres from Fugard's place of birth. In an interview at Yale, Fugard - whom Durbach alludes to as `the disaffected Afrikaner ... the traitor to ... national ideology, the outcast from the tribe whose art has made him anathema to the community and isolated him in the terrible freedom of his craft' (1987:4) - said, `Helen is me'. He added that he wrote this deeply personal - if not autobiographical - drama because he `couldn't help responding to this very eccentric character in this strange little community - a community which was in a sense hostile to her life' (Foreword to *The Road to Mecca* 1984:13). The rationale for this hostility was that her exotic existence deviated from and, in fact, defied their `traditional pieties' (Heller 1993:473), and `offended their sensibilities' (Wertheim 1986:18). Thus, the life of Miss Helen may be taken to be a prototype of that of the creative artist in an antagonistic environment (Heller 1993:473).

The theme, then, centres on the struggle between the creativity and enlightenment of the unconventional, non-conformist sculptress and the

repressively conservative and authoritarian Dutch Reformed Church (Wertheim in Arthur 1992:9). Errol Durbach reminds us that the Dutch Reformed Church was often called the National Party at prayer (1987:6), as it sanctioned this party's policies. In the play the Church is represented by the third and last character,[1] Reverend Marius Byleveld, and, to Colleen Angove (1987:88) and Albert Wertheim (1986:23) alike, he is the stereotype of the Afrikaners of New Bethesda (1987:88), embodying the narrow-mindedness, stubbornness and bondage that apparently characterise the dark side of these people's mentality. Miss Helen, again, whose nature `falls away' from conformity and rigidity (Durbach 1987:6), may be viewed as the `mother' of the liberal conscience of white South Africa, the inspiration and the model for emancipation (1987:6-7). The play is about the dialectical struggle between the pastoral voice of the local minister - who tries to manipulate the conservative community's maverick, his attempt backed by the `patriarchal establishment discourse of the Afrikaner tradition' (Bowker 1990:9), and the feminist discourse of the English-speaking teacher from Cape Town for the allegiance of this same maverick (Durbach 1987:16).

In addition to this, the play also concentrates on women's ideologies. The whole of the first act is taken up by a dialogue between two women (Wertheim 1986:18), the one a `progressive' teacher, the other a descendant of the Boers. As the teacher undertakes a geographical journey from Cape Town to New Bethesda, a metaphoric `trek from enlightened South African liberal attitudes into the stagnating world of reactionary nineteenth-century Afrikanerdom' (Durbach 1987:3), the other makes a spiritual journey, from her cottage in the village of New Bethesda to the source of her creativity and artistry: an imaginary temple in Mecca (Wertheim 1986:21, 24).[2] The function of the teacher is to be a `crusader whose calling it is make the voiceless (artist) think for [herself]' and to clear or

[1] By limiting his drama to three characters, `Fugard maintains the Aristotelian unities' (Wertheim 1986:17).

[2] Fugard explains that this is not `the real Mecca', but the Mecca of the mind, `that golden city, that other place, that extraordinary world we all want to reach at some point in our lives' (1993:386).

create a metaphysical space for the latter in which she can stand up for herself and conduct her own competing discourse (Bowker 1990:10).

Although Miss Helen's physical environment is unconventional, her house being converted into a mosque-like shrine of `light and extravagant fantasy' (15), her mind is in darkness. Her use of clichés (for example, `Patience is a virtue, virtue is a grace...' [17]) evinces that she has few, if any, opinions of her own. She further subscribes to the scriptural sentiment that marriage is sacred. In her mind Katrina, her one other friend in the world, should not make a change and leave her husband for another man, simply because she is married. The self-sufficient Elsa, with her `strong opinions and up-to-date liberal feelings on social injustice and the position of women' (Wertheim 1986:19), ascribes the older woman's narrow view to the remnants of the `Afrikaner' in her (22) that dominate her thinking. To substantiate this, Helen is convinced of the sanctity of orthodoxy and disapproves of Elsa's ridicule of the New Bethesda congregation. Her taking the decision of the church council (to sell her carefully decorated house and go to an old-age home) as final reveals how pervasive the influence of the church is.

Notwithstanding this, Miss Helen has not attended a church service in fifteen years. She no longer feels a kinship with the members of the congregation and has severed all lines of communication with them; there is no sense of belonging (Angove 1987:83). She makes a clear distinction between herself and the community by referring to the latter as `they' and not `we' (25). When one of `them', the minister of the church, brings her some potatoes, she tells him that he `shouldn't have bothered' (50). She furthermore takes exception at being included in a discussion of the habits of the Afrikaners, so disavowing her cultural roots.

Elsa provides an accurate assessment of her friend's character - divided between conformity to certain institutions and self-expression - when she labels her `history's first reactionary-revolutionary' (28). The contradictions in Miss Helen suggest the cause of Elsa calling her a hypocrite (24). The contradictions in the persona of Helen Martins may be accredited to Athol Fugard's insight into

the human psyche.

An instance of such contradictory conduct is when Elsa criticises the village people and Miss Helen comes up for them. There may be two explanations for this. Firstly, Elsa is an outsider. Secondly, early socialisation has brought the artist to adhere and conform for many years to the convictions and customs of her community, even if this was at the expense of her own needs and wishes - all for the sake of not being ostracised. A society which has `remained largely impervious to the enlightened political values of the twentieth century' (Durbach 1987:5), together with the austere brand of Calvinist religion preached by the minister of the Dutch Reformed Church has acted as an obstruction to self-expression and self-actualisation; these have curbed her potential and reduced a free spirit to that of an insecure, frightened, old woman.[3] To cite from Sartre's *Sein und Zeit*, hers is a society in which `each is the other and nobody is himself' (quoted in Grimsley 1967:51). Accepting the dictates of society as an external locus of control deprives Miss Helen's *Dasein* of its answerability. In a sense this is comforting and reassuring, as somebody else assumes authorship for her destiny. On the other hand, the existential essence, incorporating the confidence that one has the power to act on one's own behalf, falls into decay,[4] and the opportunity to realise one's potential is lost (Grimsley 1967:4, 51). This is the motive for Miss Helen putting down her strong-minded friend's efforts to get other people to think and act for themselves to `deliberately look[ing] for trouble' (27). Her advice to Elsa - who is to appear before a Board of Enquiry on account of her telling her class to write to the State President on the subject of racial inequality - is to tell a `little white lie' (28) and `say [she's] sorry and [she] won't do it again' (28).

Unlike Elsa, Fugard's Miss Helen is quite accustomed to beguiling others as she had years of practice, sitting next to her late husband, Stefanus, in church - `all a

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[3] Even now the character does not interfere with the decisions made by her community, such as the prohibition of the sale of alcohol, but passively puts up with its intervention.

[4] Miss Helen even supposes that the ability to create depends on visions that come to her from time to time and which are completely beyond her control (37).

terrible, terrible lie ...' [70]. Now again she dodges her friend's questions or lies to her without batting an eyelid. For instance, she lets Elsa understand that the people of the village leave her alone whereas they have been pressing her to go to an old-age home. She also `got tired' of her old curtains (26) and the scabs on her hands are due to a `little accident at the stove' (41) when making prickly-pear syrup. In reality she has burnt both the curtains and her hands in a domestic fire she started. Perhaps Helen's worst fabrication is the claim that she trusts her friend and that her `doors are wide open' when she is with her (32). When Elsa is informed by Marius Byleveld that `Helen knocked over a candle one night and set fire to the curtains' (63) (as opposed to Helen's `One of the lamps started smoking badly and there was a little accident at the stove' [64]), she exclaims bitterly:

> [T]hen all our talk about trust! God, what a joke. You've certainly made me a fool of myself again, but this time I don't think it's funny.... Don't let us ever again talk about trust between the two of us. (64)

It is possible that the character can so easily put a false construction on reality because she is shown to exist in what Jaspers calls a `shell of solitude' (1950:49). Sartre postulates that in order to arrive at the truth - something which precedes change - one must have contact with another person (1948:45) since truth is communicable. Camus furthermore writes that `every ambiguity, every misunderstanding, leads to death' (so when Miss Helen speaks evasively or falsely, she shuts herself off from others, so `killing' herself for them); `clear language and simple words are the only salvation from it (death)' (1961:247). Perhaps the artist is conscious of her spirit ebbing, for she writes in a letter to Elsa that `this, surely, is the darkest night of my soul' (38).

It is not only the persona's soul that is affected but also her body. In the stage directions Fugard makes mention of the `suggestion of personal neglect' (15) about her. Miss Helen's lack of concern about the way she looks may be attributed to her lack of regard for herself, which is betrayed, for instance, when she recollects that Elsa did not appear to notice her when she first arrived. Like Lena in *Boesman and Lena*, the artist yearns to be seen. Over the years she

has `got used to rude eyes, staring at [her] and [her] work, dismissing both of them as ugly' (34). Narrow-minded intolerance and misunderstanding have eroded her sense of self and, as a result, her ideas have dried up and everything is in a state of stagnation. But Elsa's eyes are different. By Miss Helen's admission, they are eyes that she can trust (34) to approve of her and her creations, give her courage, renew her faith in herself (Heller 1993:474) (35) and fill her mind with original, new ideas. To put it differently: the older woman depends on her friend for self-appraisal, self-knowledge and ultimately the affirmation of her own identity. Rollo May holds that for `any human being the possibility of acceptance by and trust in another human being is a necessary condition for the `"I-am" experience' (in Friedman 1964:447-8). Anna Rutherford agrees that `a means of establishing your identity is through your image in the minds of other people, the recognition of yourself through others' (1976:276). Miss Helen believes that her friend possesses the secret of her artistic energy: `It is only through your eyes that I now see my Mecca' (39), the artistic ideal, the source of creativity, and, by extension, her self. Sartre calls this phenomenon `being-seen-by-another' (1958:257).

Like the characters in Eliot's `The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock', who are incapable of action and involvement because of their awareness of how others see them, Miss Helen lets `I dare not wait upon I would'. On this score, she desires an active and forceful partner - or rescuer (such as Elsa) - to whom she can transfer responsibility and who will decide on her behalf. In order to accomplish this, Fugard has her pretend to be defenceless: `you know I don't know how to fight back'; `I can't fight them alone, little Elsie. I need you' (38) and `Won't you help me, little Elsie, please, and speak to him as well? You are so much better at arguing than me' (42). Instead of standing up for herself, as Elsa urges her to, the artist (whether consciously or subconsciously) desires her younger friend to allay her apprehension of isolation and fundamental groundlessness. One may surmise that Miss Helen loves Elsa because she needs her - the three words `I need you' then also appearing in a letter to Elsa. She needs Elsa to bear up against Marius, whom Helen allows to patronise and bully her, and his manipulative rhetoric, the aim of which is to get her to capitulate to his suggestion (Wertheim 1986:18) that she retire to a home for the

elderly. To Elsa Helen bewails her lot, demoting herself to the object position: `all they want is to get rid of me' (60), as if she has no control over it. One cannot really criticise the minister (who, incidentally is invested with great sympathy by the playwright) for his paternalistic attitude to this recalcitrant parishioner. Elsa, nevertheless, accuses him of taking the `grossest advantage' (62) of the old woman and treating her like a child. For example, he speaks about her and not to her. Yet, as Sartre points out: even if someone lets himself `be carried off, in helplessness and in despair, even if he let[s] himself be carried off like an old sack of coal, he [has] chosen his own damnation; he [is] free, free in every way, free to behave like a fool or a machine, free to accept, free to refuse ... (1947:289). Throughout the play Miss Helen rejects the difficult freedom to determine a design, to exercise personal choice, to continue choosing anew, and finally to comprehend that she alone is accountable for who she is and what she makes of her life. Being the source of things is too distressing. Thus, Reverend Byleveld hits the nail on the head when he remarks that Helen is not free, but trapped `with an illiterate little `Coloured' girl and a stranger from a different world as [her] only visitors and friends!' (70) Ironically, it is the stranger from the different world who scolds Miss Helen for not possessing enough faith in her life and her work to defend them against the scepticism of others (64).

That Helen lacks faith in herself is evident from her repeating Elsa's phrases and complimenting the latter on having come up with them (32), and even tolerating Elsa's outbursts, pleading with her to have patience and also taking the blame on herself when her (Helen's) letters are not answered. Miss Helen's excessive reliance on `Elsie' (17) also sheds light upon her feelings of desolation, her deep depression and desire for death now that she has reached a petrifying impasse: `Everything is ending and I am alone in the dark. There is no light left. I would rather do away with myself than carry on like this' (39]).[5] Her suicide attempt could bespeak her loneliness and despair as well as be a plea for attention and love.

[5] It is never established whether Helen's setting the house on fire was accidental or intentional.

Strangely enough, Helen herself has never really loved anyone nor had `any important trusts to betray' (32). This is because she has not opened, and still does not open herself to others. Marius Byleveld observes that the villagers `behave towards [her] in the way she apparently want[s] them to, which is to leave [her] completely alone'. It is *her* `manner which ... keeps them at a distance' (60); it is she who spurns their love `for the company of [the] cement monstrosities' (69) standing outside in her garden, and not they her. It is *her* lifestyle that is `unnatural' and `grotesque' (70).

In epitome, Miss Helen is a character who is unable to balance life-enriching solitude with life-affirming relations. For her it is either the one or the other. Before her husband's death she suspended her self-awareness by merging with Afrikaner society (Durbach 1987:5), and afterwards, she has imposed isolation on herself as she has turned her back on her `staunch Calvinist surroundings' (Seidenspinner 1986:153) and stopped `being the meek, church-going little widow ... all expected her to be...' and has `dared to be different' (66). Released from the constraints marriage imposed on her, she was not going to be restricted by the straitening values of either the church, the *dominee* or the villagers. She has rejected this enslavement and emancipated herself through art. Colleen Angove (1987:84) deems art an egocentric occupation - perhaps because the artist depends on `fantasies born of the imagination' (1987:81) in order to create. Now Miss Helen still exists for her art and herself alone, Elsa being only a means to an end, an instrument of inspiration. In Heideggerian terms, she does not recognise that *Dasein* (`an "I" characterised by "mineness"' [Grimsley 1967:50]) is found in *Mitsein*, that is, in the `midst of other existents' (1967:47) - that *Dasein* and the non-*Dasein* (the world) are inseparable, in constant interaction, being two interdependent aspects of a single structure. This structure is `being-in-the-world' (1967:50) which Heidegger believed to be a `basic state of *Dasein*' (1963:86).

As for self-realisation in the world, Sartre states in *Existentialism* that `I reach my own self in the presence of others' and `in order to get any truth about myself, I must have contact with another person' as `the other is indispensable to my own

existence, as well as to my knowledge about myself. This being so, in discovering the other person I discover my inner being at the same time' (1947:44) as well as my potential for transforming myself.[6] It is Martin Buber's opinion that `I become a self with other selves and am confirmed in my uniqueness through being made present by others in dialogue' (Friedman 1964:542-3). In summary, reaching out to others is rewarded with insight into the essence of one's own existence (Heller 1993:477).

Miss Helen is presented as not interacting spontaneously and selflessly or engaging in dialogue with others, having lost the mode in which a living `I-Thou' relationship or interhuman sociality is effected. Instead of inducing openness of being, Miss Helen's language is chatter, the utterance of the everyday world, which by its verbosity endeavours, in Grimsley's words, to obscure *Dasein*'s abandonment, and blocks the way to an understanding of being (1967:56). That the old woman refrains from genuine communication, or, as Elsa puts it, that she does not drop her defences and lay herself wide open (31), is demonstrated by her disinclination to discuss the letter she has written and to listen to what her friend has to say (although this could also be due to prolonged isolation and desperation). Hers is monologue disguised as dialogue. She does not address Elsa's `thou' and the topics of her conversation are mostly herself, her isolation, her desperation, and, finally, her art.[7] Since `the movement of communication is at one and the same time the preservation of, and the search for, the truth'

[6] Other existentialists confirm the centrality of these concepts. Buber remarks that `the inmost growth of the self is not accomplished ... in man's relation to himself, but in the relation between the one and the other, between men ... (1965:71). Karl Jaspers's contribution to this subject is: `The process of realising [my]self does not develop in isolated *Existenz* but only in communication with the others ...' (in Friedman 1964:204).

[7] Elsa is only an audience to this drama, as she is precluded from acting in it. Nevertheless, she still does her level best to get Miss Helen to take her gaze away from herself and towards others. For instance, she mentions the destitute black woman on her way to Cradock and inquires about the people of New Bethesda (`What's been happening in the village? Give me the news' [22] and `Tell me about Katrina. What has she been up to?' [23]). She keeps on challenging the older woman (Miss Helen declares at the end of the evening that her friend has been `challenge' [78]).

(Jaspers 1957:79-80), the origin of the truth being communication (1950:48), the truth is not disclosed until late in the play when the artist finally bares her true self.

Fugard's Helen is not in touch with her inner self on account of her confusing the human being with the artist. She conceives of herself after the `fashion of the objects' (Grimsley 1967:54) by which she surrounds herself. She takes it that she and her house and garden are one, that they are the real Helen (34), mirroring her very soul:

> This is the best of me, Elsa. This is what I really am. Forget everything else. Nothing, not even my name or my face, is me a much as those Wise Men and their camels travelling to the East, or the light and glitter of this room.... all of them are *me*. (35)

Bugental holds that neurotic individuals have the idea that they are their attainments, their surroundings, anything but themselves (1976:14). Without her wonderland of objects the protagonist of *The Road to Mecca* considers herself `a useless old woman getting on everybody's nerves ...' (35). As having a candle (the symbol of light) was her only reason for growing up, her cathedral of candle-light and glass is now the `only reason' (35) for being alive. When she is no longer able to produce images for a `fantastically reconstituted paradise in the midst of wilderness, destitution, loneliness and spiritual distress' (Durbach 1987:3), she will probably fall victim to an inner] drought and darkness which will ultimately destroy her life: `If my Mecca is finished, Elsa, then so is my life' (40).

It is obvious that external objects console the character and give her courage, and now that she cannot fashion them any longer, Elsa has to take over this role. But human beings cannot be manipulated as light can and courage has to come from within.

Devotion to transitory diversions and things at the expense of the existential identity is, in Heideggerian terms, the `everyday', `fallen' mode (Yalom 1980:359). Heidegger also maintains that to exist `in the world' is not to be solely related to objects; it is to be related to others as well (in Grimsley

1967:50). This is because `without the objects of the world, existential communication has no means to become visible; without communication the objects of the world become pointless and empty (Jaspers in Friedman 1964:204). And Miss Helen does indeed become deeply depressed when she does not have Elsa with whom to share the joy derived from beholding the fruit of her artistic efforts. She becomes suicidal when her creative muse forsakes her. The centre of her life disintegrates and she comes face to face with nothingness and non-being:

> But the worst thing of all ... suppose that I'm waiting for nothing, that there won't be any more pictures inside ever again, that this time I *have* reached the end? Oh God, no! (37)

This is not the first time that Miss Helen's `inside' (as she calls it) is a vacuum. During the years that she was married, her existence was also devoid of direction and she did not really have a reason for being; it was solely habit that kept her and her Stefanus together. The same is true for tradition and, in particular, religion. As she unbosoms herself to Marius, the spokesperson for the establishment: `your sermons, the prayers, the hymns, they had all become just words. And there came a time when even they lost their meaning' (70). She has experienced what many existentialists believe to be endemic in the twentieth century: the sense that God, in the traditional form, is absent from the universe and that faith and the church are without vitality and power (Bedford 1972: 251, 254, 270). After Stefanus passed away, `nothing hurt any more' (71) because Miss Helen herself had died long before. The `black widowhood' (71) apparel she wore was to mourn for the `beautiful, light-filled, glittering life' (69) she could have had, had she had the courage to resist the prohibitions imposed by her society upon individual thought and artistic freedom and realized her potential. She felt guilty and made use of the opportunity to change. Like Eugène Marais, another artist about whom Fugard has written, she countermanded cultural and communal bondage and the constraints of conventional Christianity (Durbach 1987:6). She became a kind of `religious visionary' (Williams quoted in Angove 1987:84), her creative imagination enabling her to move beyond her geographic, concrete location. She embarked on her own pilgrimage in pursuit of a `mystical vision' of a different kind of truth, the truth of personal fulfilment (Angove

1987:79). Through her art she was spirited away from the Afrikaner cottage and `the restraints and darkness of New Bethesda' to a mythical and abstract landscape and right `into the centre of the temple in the heart of Mecca' (Wertheim 1986:24). Having reached this alternative Eden during `moments of spiritual freedom' (Seidenspinner 1986:241), her life meanings became both creative and self-actualising (Frankl's terminology) as she discovered forces within herself, explored her artistic talent and developed her inner vision. The satisfaction she attained in this way could not be parallelled by the stability and security the church supposedly provides (Angove 1987:80).

On the negative side, since self-expression and self-actualisation focus only on the self, the formation of mutual relationships is foiled. In this way Frankl's genuine meaning, as found in self-transcendent goals, is thwarted (Yalom 1980:439-40). Martin Buber summarises it as follows: `There is a sterile kind of heart searching which leads to nothing but self-torture, despair ...' (1958:135).

When the `pictures' (36) cease to enter the non-conformist individual's consciousness, she has more leisure than she can cope with and is shown to fall prey to an anguish and despair that threaten to eradicate the courage that once was hers. No longer can she escape the ennui of everyday existence and her `annihilating, narrow-minded neighbourhood' (Seidenspinner 1986:241) by playing like a child with her `magical toy' (72) of light and colour. Now she is not only estranged from her subjective centre, but also despairs at her being an `abandoned and isolated possibility in a finite existence' (Grimsley 1967:66).

According to existentialists, despair compels the individual to consider his/her Being-in-the-world; it changes the perspective and guides the individual to inner awareness. Kierkegaard postulates in *Either/Or* that `every man who has not tasted the bitterness of despair has missed the significance of life, however beautiful and joyous his life might be' (1959:175). Despair, in the second instance, lays a `burden of responsibility' (Grimsley 1967:26) upon the individual for what s/he did and felt and thought yesterday and what s/he will do and feel and think tomorrow. In *The Road to Mecca* a character is dramatised who does not deny that she is in despair, but who comes to comprehend that by every act

she performs, she alters her own self, feelings, failures and suffering, and that it is within her power to rise above determinism and fashion her destiny.

At first there is a tentative: `I'm quite capable of looking after myself' (40) which is followed by `I can do anything I want to, Elsie ... if I make the effort' (41). Initially qualifying her ability with words and phrases such as `quite' and `if I make the effort', the sculptress eventually announces, expressing herself with an emotional intensity and authority which force the others to listen to her in silence (45): `I can manage by myself' (45); `I've worked out a plan' (58). In spite of what everybody thinks, Miss Helen is confident that she is not mad because she can tell the `difference between what is real and what is not' (73). And regardless of the pressure exercised - the blackmail and the mental battering (as Elsa would have it) - she makes the courageous decision not to sign the form which will reduce her little Mecca - a fantasy of light, glass and mirrors, and the lasting reminder of her journey to the real Mecca - to a `few ornaments in a small room in an old-age home' (73) and herself to a shell of the person she is now. Fighting for her vision and committing an act of defiance in the process, she wins the battle for the seat of her subversive art which is her home. The darkness of her depression lifts and she emerges as a beautiful and radiant, powerful and triumphant creature. Her extraordinary being and vision of brilliance and beauty mesmerise and unite the feuding Elsa and Marius (Durbach 1987:7). The pastor cannot help observing that he has never seen Miss Helen as happy as this, that there is `more light in [her] than in all [her] candles put together' (74).

Now that Miss Helen's existence has been validated, she can afford to be less self-absorbed. She has shed enough tears for herself; now she will cry for others (77). These others are also allowed to participate in her pleasure. Elsa is told to light all the candles in the cottage, so that the artist can reveal to Marius what she learnt the night she became an apprentice and joined the Wise Men of the East in a study of `the celestial geometry of light and colour' (72). Elsa is later instructed to blow these same candles out. In this way Miss Helen is accommodated to the `darkness of mundane experience' (Durbach 1987:18). Elsa's laughter when her friend mistakes Valiums for artificial sweeteners, makes the artist as proud of herself `as any one of [the] statues out there' (79).

The sculptress has grown a great deal in one night. She has changed from being a diffident, self-effacing old woman at the beginning of the play, who has pleaded with her friend for assistance, into a self-assured person who knows that she is loved, who confronts her problems squarely and asserts herself as an autonomous, unique individual. Whereas Elsa has been the more active partner, the physically weak Helen is actually spiritually stronger (Heller 1993:476). At the end she takes the lead and adjures the younger woman to stop screaming and express her emotions through tears. When the latter does cry, Miss Helen comforts her in a motherly fashion (1993:476). She also contradicts Elsa when she corrects her words, `I'm dead, Helen, dead, dead, dead ...' (78) with `No, you're not. You're tired ...' (78).

A lesson that Fugard has the character learn is that responsibility is towards herself. Another lesson that goes hand in hand with the first one is that honesty is an essential ingredient of a true friendship. The truth, then, is what makes the interior defences separating the two women crumble. The artist, evasive at first, promises her friend: `I won't lie to you' (78). She subsequently owns up to her insecurity and fear (`I'm frightened, Elsie, more frightened than that little girl ever was ...' [46]) as well as her struggle with senselessness, now that the radiance has faded and darkness is encroaching upon her soul and everything is ending.[8] This confession brings in its train Elsa's trust, another battle which Miss Helen wins.

Thus, the cliché that even the darkest cloud has a silver lining applies. Miss Helen also acquires the knowledge that the road to her visionary Mecca, the wonderland of artistic accomplishment as well as her defence against wilderness, destitution, loneliness, spiritual distress and darkness (Durbach 1987:3), was a road she had to travel alone - no one could keep her company. Now that it is over, there is only herself at the end of it (78). Fugard's celebration

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[8] However, Durbach hypothesises that to banish darkness is to banish despair - and also reality; it is to move into the `fantasies of the insane where illusion insulates the dreamer against the world' (1987:11).

of the solitary independence of the artist (Seidenspinner 1986:284-5) arrives at the insight that every person is ultimately alone. Yet she would not have it any other way. Her creative activity has given her much pleasure and her existence has had significance, even if it was only for a time. Now that the candle of her creative power has burnt out and she is at the end of her spiritual road (`The journey is over now. This is as far as I can go' [73]), she grasps that she must confront another darkness - the darkness of the soul - as well as discover a new motive for living: `Just as I taught myself how to light candles, and what that means, I must teach myself now how to blow them out ... and what that means' (78).[9] She has to explore other spheres of her personality, embark on a new spiritual quest, one on which `there is only me ... at the end of it' (78), the person and not the artist. Her blowing out the candles is symbolic of her acceptance of, her accommodating herself to, an inescapable reality which comprises the completion of her Mecca (the *Ding an Sich*[10]) and the renunciation of the consoling hope of her `life-lie' (the fact or fiction on which existence is founded). Thus, she wins her lifelong battle against darkness, the darkness outside as well as the darkness within: the absence of artistic vision and courage. She heroically accepts the fate that she cannot change and finds meaning in resignation.

Whereas Miss Helen is resigned to her lot, Fugard's Elsa is impatient and irritable. Shortly after her arrival, after having spent several hours in absolute solitude while driving from Cape Town to New Bethesda, she brusquely charges Helen to stop fussing (16) and to leave her alone (17). Here is an individual who is independent of others to such an extent that she turns down their assistance (1980:152) with aggression.

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[9] Fugard referred to this metaphor in his graduation address at the University of the Witwatersrand where he received an honourary degree: `what Miss Helen realises ... is that to be a true master you have got to know not only how to light them [the candles], but also how to blow them out.... the affirmation in my play is Miss Helen's recognition and acceptance of that necessity' (1992:77).

[10] *Ding an Sich* translates as `the thing in itself'. Wertheim (1986:21) uses it as a synonym for the artistic ideal.

The reason why the English teacher returns time and again to the little village in the midst of the `God-deserted wilderness of the Karoo' (Durbach 1987:3) - `where everything has been all but damned out of existence' (21) - is because she will not meet with censure from the artist should she reveal who she really is, or, as she puts it, have `her stockings down' (18). She compliments Miss Helen on `the rare distinction of being the only person who can make me make a fool of myself ... and enjoy it' (18). From this it follows that Elsa relishes the moments when she can freely express her inner emotions.(68).

Elsa is committed to communicating; words are important to the language teacher. For instance, she has given her class the homework exercise of composing a five hundred-word letter to the State President. When there is no point in talking about a matter, she articulates her despondency in an audible way as well - by screaming. Karl Jaspers, in his essay entitled `Communication', theorises that communication is a prerequisite for the evolvement of the inner being and reason, since the `process of realizing oneself does not develop in isolated *Existenz* but only in communication with the others.... I become myself only in communication' (in Friedman 1964:204, 203).

From the letter to the State President on the subject of racial inequality Elsa has instructed her class to write, it appears that she, unlike Miss Helen, occupies herself with the future. Fugard has endowed her with a strong social conscience and she wonders what is going to happen to her country. She would be grateful if not only her pupils, but also her friend and the other inhabitants of New Bethesda - which could be regarded as the `spiritual landscape of the Afrikaner' (Angove 1987:82) - were to share her concerns about a changing South Africa. As she warns Miss Helen: the valley `can't cut itself off from the twentieth century for ever.... Your little world is not as safe as you would like to believe ...' (25). Although the conservative villagers would like their world to remain as it was in the past, and resent any disruption of their routine, Elsa understands that not adapting to a changed political climate (Durbach 1987:5), that is, freezing themselves in time, will have catastrophic effects. It seems that Fugard's teacher grasps the idea that `human existence is not a static entity but an active

principle, which is ever in movement from state to state' (Grimsley 1967:31).

Existentialist philosophers, such as Sören Kierkegaard, designate the crowd as the `untruth' (Grimsley 1967:34): it is unreliable and constantly shifts its position. The parents of the children Elsa teaches as well as the school board may be compared to the crowd which `distrust[s] anyone who with a free lifestyle and original ideas' (Heller 1993:476). These people oppress the liberal-minded teacher with the demand that she conform. Yet Elsa, with her radical ideas, resists the complacency that the general collective offers to those who avoid answering to the genuineness and uniqueness of their respective existences (Buber 1965:108). Instead, she takes a stand against collectivism, conformity and rigidity.

The assertive Elsa is clearly a rebel. Her role and that of Miss Helen seem to epitomise Camus's words: `only two possible worlds can exist for the human mind, the sacrosanct (or, to speak in Christian terms, the world of Grace) or the rebel world' (1971:26-7). Her purpose in life is to incite those who share her environment to engagement and even to insurrection. As long as she is on the earth and in the classroom, `a little subversion is possible' (28). As Elsa informs the sculptress: `Rebellion starts, Miss Helen, with just one man or woman standing up and saying, "No. Enough!" Albert Camus. French writer' (28).

The same French writer holds that the rebel is also a blasphemer (1971:30). The reader does not need the admonishment of the pastor, Marius Byleveld, in order to discern that phrases and interjections such as `For God's sake' (17, 22), `Oh my God' (62), `God, what a joke' (64), `God Almighty, what a day!' (64) uttered by Elsa are indicative of irreverence.

The rebel furthermore is a person who is `determined on creating a human situation where all the answers are human, or, rather, formulated in terms of reason' (Camus 1971:26), reason granting salvation from nihilism (Jaspers 1950:46). S/he is a humanist. (Christian) religion, by contrast, cannot be probed by rational understanding or contained within the limits of intellectual concepts (Grimsley 1967:36). For one, it is impossible to prove God's existence by

reason. The approach to God must be through faith, and this is a faith which flies in the face of all logic. Elsa's blasphemy betrays that she subscribes to Sartre's concept that the person alone is the creator and the law-maker; the latter is `the being whose project is to be god' (quoted in Yalom 1980:221) over a contingent and cruel universe (Yalom 1980:220) deprived of the guidance of an omnipotent and just force (1980:113).

Elsa, indeed, has a strong sense of justice. She declares that Katrina, the seventeen-year-old `Coloured' girl who visits Miss Helen from time to time, does have rights. Katrina has made an erroneous decision in marrying Koos Malgas, but as it was her choice, she can remake it. The teacher's ideal of self-sufficiency and freedom demands that the girl find `somebody who will value her as a human being and take care of her and the child' (22), instead of staying with her husband (as Miss Helen says she should) who subjects her to battery.[11] In Elsa's opinion, `there is nothing sacred about a marriage that abuses the woman' (22). In fact, by making a `subjective choice which has unconditioned validity for [her ...] own existence' (Grimsley 1967:33) and by confronting her destiny (Durbach 1987:4), Katrina can consolidate her individuality. That she does not do so, Cohen assumes is largely the point of the play but she can (1977:76).

So the position Fugard has Elsa take is that the girl is not to cling to the known by remaining a victim of existing power relations between men and women, but that she should advance into the unknown. This notion suggests that the teacher exemplifies the first principle of existentialism, which is that individuals are nothing else but what they make of themselves (Sartre 1948:28). Elsa, thus, deems every person to have the freedom to influence her situation; hence the person is accountable for her own choices, actions and ultimately the reality of her own life. Full responsibility for the existence rests on the person, and as Katrina should be allowed to make her own decisions, so the `Coloured' community of New Bethesda should not have theirs made for them by the white

[11] Koos Malgas, in real life, was the man who sculpted the statues in the garden at Helen Martins's prompting. Fugard excludes Miss Helen's `Coloured' worker not only from the artistic process but also from the text, referring to Malgas only as a wife batterer. This begs a few political questions.

minority.

On account of this conviction of hers, Elsa prods Miss Helen to stand on her own feet and fight for her rights. When Miss Helen beseeches the younger woman to speak on her behalf to the pastor on the subject of the old-age home,[12] Elsa retorts by asking her what *she* is going to do when he arrives (48). When the sculptress feels herself on the verge of capitulating to the will of the church and calls out: `Why don't you stop me, Elsa! I'm going to sign it' (61) (the application form for the Sunshine Home for the Aged), Elsa's advice is to hurry up and `dispose of [her] life so that [she, Elsa, and Marius] can get on with [theirs]' (61). She also demands of Miss Helen: `Why were you "crying out to me in the dark"? To be an audience when you signed away your life?' (61). When Miss Helen begs her friend one last time not to abandon her, the latter retorts, `You've abandoned yourself, Helen! You were the first to jump overboard ...' (64), so reminding her of her responsibility to her future.[13] Besides these rather brutal remarks, Elsa also informs the old woman in other, gentler ways that she does have options. She can at least say no, whereas others do not have that privilege. However, it is not Elsa's place to do this for her because Miss Helen herself is aware of what is best for herself (62).

One of the people who do not have the opportunity to say no is Patience, a young, homeless, black hitchhiker whom Elsa has given a lift en route to New Bethesda. Having lost her husband and being herself considered of no economic use and expendable (Bowker 1990:8) by the white `baas', her husband's employer, Patience has been forced to leave the farm on which he worked (Durbach 1987:3). The lot of this - possibly - `most exploited victim' of the South African situation (in the opinion of Bowker [1990:8]) has touched Elsa deeply, and she has given her some money. Yet she is aware of the fact that

[12] One could also debate that fashioning objects with her hands is Miss Helen's way of expressing herself whereas Elsa makes use of words. It is possible that the artist takes words to be meaningless, for at one stage she compares them to cold, little stones (70).

[13] Errol Durbach (1987:14) submits that it may be advisable at times for the existential idealist to wear the mask of cruel detachment.

what she has done for the woman will not alter her fate (`It wasn't a real contribution to her life and what she is up against' [22]), and this thought has been troubling Elsa. One may infer that Elsa has empathy with others, to the extent of entering their world and experiencing it (this certainly would explain her irritability). If one were to employ Ericson's classification, one may perceive the character of the teacher to be in the `generative state': her concerns are social, altruistic, philosophical and long term (Yalom 1980:440-1). She is interested in the welfare of all people, even those who do not serve a purpose for her, such as Patience and Katrina. She does not see others as sources of supply, but attends to them in a `need-less fashion' without expecting any reward. In other words, she involves herself with the `thou' of people (Yalom's phrase 1980:365), feeling, as Sartre puts it, that `the original relation of the Other and my consciousness is not the *you* and *me*; it is the *we* ...' (1958:246), with the `we' including the `thou' and neither one superior to the other. That Elsa is cognisant of the importance of love and the fact that it is not an exhaustible commodity is clear from her utterings: `That's the big [word] all right, and it's quite an event when it comes along' (31), and `I can see myself loving somebody else again' (31) (here pertaining to another man).

Elsa's sense of authorship, unlike that of the white inhabitants of New Bethesda and Cape Town, is not impaired by the crowd's convictions. As long as she is in this world she behaves as though she holds herself accountable for the activities of the human race in general. For this reason, she actively engages in the universe even if this distresses her.

Besides requesting her class to correspond with the State President and giving Patience a lift as well as some money, other examples of Elsa's social engagement are that she sends clothes for Katrina's baby, so that the child looks `as prettily dressed these days as any white baby' (22). She also plans on asking Gertruida, a neighbour of Miss Helen's, to take Helen to Graaff-Reinet, 54 kilometres south of New Bethesda, for a medical examination.

Someone who takes responsibility for others does not avoid accepting authorship for her own actions. Elsa gives the credit for this to Miss Helen who

challenges her `into an awareness of [her]self and [her] life, of [her] responsibilities to both that [she] never had until [she] met her' (66). It follows that Elsa has a firm sense of self: she is dramatised as being conscious of her own emotions and aspirations, and is capable of rational conduct (she makes the decision to terminate her affair with a married man). She does not doubt that she creates her own feelings and failures; everything, including her broken heart, is the product of her own decisions and actions;[14] she is no `innocent victim' of circumstances beyond her control. Neither does she transfer blame to other people. She remarks that she must not make David sound `like a complete bastard. He wasn't without a conscience' (30). Instead she chants an admission of guilt: `ding-dong, wrong-wrong, tolls Elsa's bell at the close of the day!' [30]). Someone who admits that she is the mistress of her own destiny is a person capable of change.

Accepting authorship may be accompanied by regret for wrongful doings, with aggression being the consequence of culpability (Yalom 1980:277, 320). Elsa's temper flares up on several occasions in the play as she attempts to displace her anger and grief to Miss Helen. Later, when she confesses to the cause of her exasperation, she adds that the illicit relationship has left her `with a profound sense of shame. [Of] myself' (29). She does not lie to herself about her liability, even if this means she is racked by remorse. She has learnt her lesson from a situation `rotten with lies and deceit' (29). In retrospect she refers to the affair as a `stupid mess' (29) and remembers that `before it all went wrong, there were a couple of times when [she] wasn't so sure [she] liked it' because she `knew that [they] were all going to get hurt ...' (30).

Elsa has insight not only into her own relationships, but also into Miss Helen's. She understands that Marius and the villagers do not think of her friend as a `harmless old lady' (65) and of the statues surrounding her decorated house as an innocent hobby. These statues not only proclaim their creator's individualism,

[14] However, there is one instance when Elsa intimates that it appears that people, including herself, do not have much choice in the matter of falling in love. This may once again be ascribed to Fugard's flair for characterisation: human beings change their minds and contradict themselves.

but are also seen as pagan and monstrous. Miss Helen's narrow-minded neighbours are both frightened by and jealous of her `beautiful, light-filled, glittering life' (69) which, in Elsa's opinion, is an expression of freedom (67) and indicative of her friend's having found meaning.

However, it is also possible to put a different construction on the character of Elsa Barlow as depicted by the dramatist. For one, she is faulted by the pastor for using Miss Helen to prove `some lunatic notion about freedom' (69). This censure is perhaps supported by Elsa's own testimony: `One dusty afternoon five years ago ... I met the first truly free spirit I have ever known'. According to the teacher, Miss Helen is not someone who talks about freedom; `she's lived it' (67). The `little wizard' (32), through her subversive and dissident, if not heretical vision of an `unchristian' Mecca and her spiritual revolution, has embraced a freedom that is even lonelier and more desolate than the `arid heartland of South Africa' (Fugard 1993:386) (the Karoo) - the freedom of thought and creativity - and has become to Elsa the embodiment of an artistic ideal. Her pursuit of her art is interpreted as the affirmation of `the vitality of Elsa's vision of the liberated woman' (Durbach 1987:12).[15] The artist, contrary to this view held of her, avers that she only obeys the promptings of some inner drive. And whereas Elsa describes Miss Helen's existence as `beautiful, light-filled and glittering' (69) and emphatically believes that the latter does not belong in a home for people who have come to the end of their lives, Miss Helen reckons that her life is at an end and she actually ponders terminating it herself. When she returns the application form to Reverend Byleveld without having signed it, Elsa looks upon this act as Miss Helen affirming her right as a woman (74), that is, she has broken a lance for womankind, and not for herself.

Elsa, thus, treads the stage imposing the demands of her own conception of

[15] The innocent interchange between the two women about one of the statues gains a whole new meaning seen from this perspective. To Elsa the half-cock, half-man creature is on the point of dropping his trousers. Miss Helen disagrees: `And I've told you before. He's not dropping his trousers, he's pulling them up' (36). Yet Elsa remains unconvinced: `Take another good look at his face. That's anticipation, not satisfaction' (36).

freedom upon others (Durbach 1987:14). Her liberal feminism and her view of the free woman make such extraordinarily difficult existential exigencies upon her friend, who, to her, is the paradigm of the ideal of freedom, that `freedom' itself becomes a burden (1987:14). The character allows no compromise, and human fallibility is construed as betrayal.

Despite Elsa's insistence on independent action, she herself has not been able to sustain the drive towards freedom. When she and David were still together she supposed herself to have discovered `the reason for being the person, the woman, [she was] for the first time in [her] life' (29). She found the fact that `another person could do so much to your life, to your sense of yourself' (29) disconcerting.

When the relationship foundered, she made the vow that she would never again trust anyone. Consequently, Elsa now holds herself in reserve. She informs Miss Helen that she has not `come up here to talk about [her]self' (27). There is to be no mutuality; the barriers of her own being will not be breached. Accordingly, Fugard has her eschew the singular first-person pronoun, especially in the subject position, and employ the second-person pronoun or, when she makes mention of herself, the plural first-person pronoun: `if you're going to make decisions which affect other people, you should find out what those people think' (25); and: `Let's face it, we've both still got a little girl hidden away in us somewhere' (18).

Even though Elsa has empathy with others, there are times that she does not wish to become immersed in others' troubles. She has not communicated with her friend in three months, even though she received one anguished letter after another from Miss Helen. She accepts the older woman's pat explanation for the burn scabs on her hands, though she cannot help noticing that `there seem to have been a lot of little accidents lately' (41). She is also only too ready to forget about the last letter (43). Elsa, finally, does not respond to Miss Helen's references to suicide, such as `I would rather do away with myself than carry on like this' (39), except to enjoin the latter to keep quiet (43) as she has `had it' and `it's too much for one day' (47). The solutions this character proposes to her

friend's problems are all practical and do not entail emotional involvement and exposure on her part. The sculptress is to see a doctor who is to prescribe a `little "regmaker"' (44) for her depression.

Though solicitous, Elsa also keeps her distance during the encounter with the black woman. This is noticeable when Miss Helen observes that her friend talks about Patience almost as if she does not care (22) and when Elsa confirms that her kindness was only `a sop to [her own] conscience and nothing more' (22). In her assistance she may well incline towards the homeless woman, but it is still her aid, and not herself, that she makes available. Her life does not open to another - as is the case in an existential relation (Buber 1947:170).

If Elsa holds herself in reserve during the first half of the drama, her exposing herself towards the end of it is incontestable. The dénouement takes place when she lays down the part of the strong and self-sufficient woman and owns up to her feelings of isolation, impotence and self-loathing.[16] Miss Helen is informed about the abortion, when Elsa put an `abrupt and violent end to the first real consequence [her] life has ever had' (75). The teacher further concedes that she envies the sculptress, because there is nobody who loves her as Marius loves Miss Helen; human connections are lacking in her existence. Durbach theorises that Elsa's character is delineated as `free, but abandoned - betrayed by life, by her lover, [even] by her own right as a woman to terminate her pregnancy' (1987:16). Moreover, she may have to share Patience's fate, a person with whom she strongly identifies and for whom there is no promise of a glittering Mecca (75), a heaven on earth, but just a plodding on `from nowhere to nowhere' (Durbach 1987:3) for the rest of her life. Yet the playwright has Patience have something which the other does not have. The black woman has found peace and she bears her lot with stoic resignation. In fact, Albert Wertheim (1986:24) imagines the black woman to be an allegorical figure of patience while Errol Durbach speculates that she is `the paradigm of woman's

[16] Wertheim thinks of Elsa as basically a weak woman. Her heart may be in the right place, but her habit of mind is to `wash away or to vomit up' the distasteful rather than deal with it (1986:20).

soul under the Afrikaner regime, incapable of resisting subjection' (1987:6). Patience's name brings to the rebellious Elsa's mind her own impatience with the South African government, Miss Helen's indecision and the charade of helplessness she puts on, along with the pastor's interference in the two women's relationship and in the affairs of his congregation.

The teacher eventually learns that nobody exists in a vacuum, and that women, in particular, are related. She establishes a figurative family with Patience (who is about her age) and Miss Helen (Durbach 1987:7), announcing that Patience's baby is hers and that `Patience is my sister, you are our mother' (77). Her `mother's' interest restores Elsa's trust in humankind and she implores Miss Helen to open her arms and catch her for she is going to jump (79); she is going to make the leap into complete commitment. The bond between the women has been tested, the test catalysed by Marius's harassment (Heller 1993:476) and although it has nearly been severed, it is stronger than ever after their reconciliation. `The last few lines of dialogue affirm the two women's love and trust in one another' (1993:4771). `To Fugard, it seems obvious that patient progress, love and trust are the non-violent elements that can effect change' in society (Wertheim 1986:25).

The function of the character of the Reverend Marius Byleveld of the Dutch Reformed Church in the play is, amongst others, to subject the relationship between the two women to trial (Heller 1993:474).

Marius Byleveld's first words are `Miss Helen! Alone in the dark?' (48). To the pastor, whose task it is to spread the light of Christianity to the conservative inhabitants of New Bethesda, Miss Helen's bizarre existence is a challenge. Ironically, though the minister is invested with great sympathy by the dramatist, the artist equates him with the repressive forces of darkness and death that stand in `opposition to her life, her art, her candlelit, illuminated vision of Mecca' (Wertheim 1986:22-3) - `the golden city, that other place, that extraordinary world we all want to reach' (Fugard 1993:386). He is, after all, the one who drew the curtains and closed the shutters (47) after having conducted her husband's funeral. And `all those years when [she] was working away, when it [statue after

statue] was taking shape, he was there as well ... Standing in the distance, watching and waiting' (46). With him around, there is an `odour of death' (71), as there was when she and he sat in the gloom and talked after her husband's funeral. Rejecting the vegetables he brings, which have been dug up from the darkness of the underground, Helen rejects Marius and what he represents for her.

Notwithstanding Miss Helen's view of Marius, the character may be read in another way. For one, the minister could be deemed the playwright's portrayal of an existential individual. He accepts responsibility for the fact that he gives meaning to life by his every act and decision (Coates in Bedford 1972:339). Although Marius Byleveld hoped that the harsh and forbidding Karoo village was going to be the place where he escaped from the `deep and very painful wounds in [his soul].... Wounds [he] thought would never heal' (53), that life had inflicted on him, it is here that he acquires the insight that the Almighty has ordained a coherent pattern to the universe. In this divine system suffering has significance: it has changed him for the better. Marius's `life-lie', if you like, is religious and he fulfils it by devoting himself to God, by living in harmony with and advancing the fullness and goodness of the creation on earth. This he does, for instance, when he works the soil and plants vegetables, such as potatoes, beets and radishes, in his garden.

On the whole Marius has a high purpose in life. According to Irvin Yalom (1980:460), those with a high purpose are usually conservative, idealistic, dedicated to a cause and involved in organised groups. There is no doubt that the pastor is conservative. He disapproves of Miss Helen's eccentric lifestyle. He is idealistic in believing he can `convert' her, being dedicated to the cause of spreading the Word of God and protecting people against themselves.[17] Then he is involved in an organised group, the church. The character has made the `leap into commitment', and is represented as rewarded by a sense of

[17] In essence, Marius and Elsa are two extremes. Elsa is rebellious, applauds Miss Helen's verve and emboldens the latter to act of her own accord. Thus, the artist has a character on either side of her - one the rebel, the other committed to the sacrosanct (to use Camus's classification).

meaningfulness (1980:481-2).

Marius - having discovered the significance of his existence - accepts without much difficulty that he is progressing into the future and nearing death. He has recently had his last will and testament revised and implores Miss Helen to do the same, since they are `at an age ... when anything can happen' (57). Psychologists posit that the perspective of one who considers death shifts from trivial matters to a higher mode of existence (Yalom 1980:31).

Consequently, the minister accepts authorship not only for himself, but also for Miss Helen and the `Coloureds' of the village (whom he views as the `white man's burden' as Durbach [1987:9] puts it). His mission in life is altruistic; it is his ambition to contribute to the development of his community. In his ardour, he is shown to use even his pulpit to impose his patriarchal discourse onto others in order to regulate their existences. He attempts to take charge of Miss Helen's life; it is `the sooner we decide, one way or the other, the better' (56), and not `the sooner you decide ...'. He also launches `into long monologues, giving [Miss Helen] very little time to respond to his scolding and cajoling' (Heller 1993:474). But in fairness, it is Marius's objective to have her spend the remainder of her days in comfort.

Unlike the sculptress, the pastor does not hide displeasing truths from others. He admits that he is frightened by what Miss Helen has done to herself now that `the humble potato has been crowded out by other things' (50), and that he is `bewildered and jealous' (69) since a handful of visits from a school teacher from the Cape Province count more to Helen than his friendship of twenty years. He also confesses that in the past he `had an actor's vanity' on the pulpit while listening to his `*Dominee*'s voice and its hoped for eloquence ...' (53).

On the other hand, there is the distinct possibility, again, of casting the character in another light - which further testifies to Fugard's ability to give human dimensions to the personae of his plays. The pastor, for one, allows himself to be led by appearances. By his own testimony he only began to feel uneasy about Miss Helen's `idle whim' (67) on the first Sunday she did not come to

church. As long as superficial, outward appearances are upheld, he lets himself be `lulled into a false sense of security as to the fundamental spiritual well-being' (Angove 1987:79) of his congregation. It is only after Miss Helen's house is visibly transformed into a `grotesque nightmare' from a Gothic tale that he makes an effort to rescue her from `heresy'.

Because of his attention to appearances, Marius Byleveld also wonders at how a white inhabitant of New Bethesda can be friends with `an `illiterate little Coloured girl and a stranger from a different world' (70), that is, people who are not from the same background, upbringing and race as she is.[18] Envious of her intimacy with Elsa, he treats Elsa as if she were an `ignorant and intrusive outsider who does not understand the Karoo' (Heller 1993:474) and the traditions of its people by constantly reminding her of her alien status. Angove (1987:82, 88) submits that this behaviour reveals the intractable Afrikaner's clinging to exclusivity - and consequent conformity. Yet, according to Marius, it is too late for him to change (52); he is too old to undertake the journey Miss Helen has travelled (73) and to commit the act of `cultural defection' (Durbach 1987:15) - as he sees it. He does not perceive that *Dasein* is not a substance which exists in a `passive "whatness"', but a `possibility' and a `project', continuously moving ahead of, outside itself, and directing itself upon the future to become what it truly is (Grimsley 1967:46).

The minister will not allow his nature to `"fall away" from conformity' (Durbach 1987:6) because he abhors freedom, as he himself professes. After fifteen years he still finds it mind-boggling that one of his parishioners could prefer the isolation of cement and glass to the company of her fellow-parishioners and God. The comparison of the concepts of `God', `Heaven' and `Hell' to inflexible, unaccommodating stones (70)[19] is beyond his ken. He `glories in the repressive

[18] Unlike Marius, Miss Helen is used to travelling to far-away places, if only in her imagination. This may be the rationale for her not looking upon people who are from the same country and who speak the same language as she does, as strangers.

[19] According to Elsa, the `small minds and small souls' (66) of New Bethesda throw stones at Miss Helen. `God', `Heaven' and `Hell' (70) could very well be

status quo and for [him] any act of enlightenment or freedom is a life threat' (Wertheim 1986:23). The character's rigidity is further reflected in the meticulousness with which he puts on his spectacles, opens his notebook and inquires into the details of Miss Helen's confirmation.

Perhaps the minister shudders at the thought of freedom because grasping it means foregoing the familiar security of the everyday world and being confronted with loneliness. Fugard's Marius has always longed for himself and Miss Helen to find `each other again and be together for what time was left to [them] in the same world' (74). But after the artist reveals her fulfilment to him, it dawns on him that he has lost her forever and that he will have to find a life to live by himself. Whether he will ultimately make a difference to his destiny, given his disposition, is doubtful. Nevertheless, by juxtaposing these two characters, the pastor and the artist, the playwright may intimate that the answers to South Africa's social problems, which are a product of conservative Afrikaner stubborn determination, might emerge `through marrying that very same Afrikaner stubbornness and tenacity to an inspired vision of freedom' (Wertheim 1986:18) as incarnated by Miss Helen Martin.

Yet, Miss Helen has not always been the embodiment of freedom. When she was married to Stefanus and when her imagination is devoid of images, she rejects the freedom of being the source of things and of accepting authorship for her choices and actions. Then society functions as an external locus of control and Miss Helen abides by its dictates.

When the candle of her creative power flares up again, Helen exists for her art alone. Her home and her garden become the centre of her universe and, in fact, who she is.

Miss Helen finally recognises that the human being is more important than the artist and that being in the world means to be related to objects as well as to others. Now she can brave darkness and discover a new motive for living.

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the `stones' they use.

Elsa is Helen's antithesis. Unlike her friend, Elsa strives against society's insistence to conform. She realises that the individual is the creator and lawgiver and that responsibility for the existence is incumbent on the individual. Elsa, like Miss Helen towards the end of the play, discerns that actualising the self goes hand in hand with loving others without need. In such an existential relation, mutuality is established and change becomes possible. And this, ultimately, is the case in *The Road to Mecca*.