Reflective Statement: Harry Mulisch's The Assault

In our interactive oral we discussed the cultural and contextual considerations of Harry Mulisch's The Assault. During our discussion we covered the role of history and Dutch culture in this novel as well as the differences between the ways in which our relatives deal with their war memories and Mulisch's protagonist, Anton, deals with his.

Through our discussion, we came to a general consensus that although this novel was written for Dutch audiences, it resonates with people of other backgrounds and generations. However, it was brought to our attention that historical specificities are rather important in terms of the authenticity of the novel. Therefore, since the novel was written initially for Dutch readers of Mulisch's generation, certain allusions to Dutch history such as the provos, the Dutch peace movement and the Dutch colonies in Indonesia, resonate with the actualities and make the novel more engaging.

From our discussion, we established the idea that by having the novel jump back and forth in time, Mulisch suggests that individuals cannot have their own identities without incorporating the positive and negative aspects of their pasts.

By discussing the historical allusions in this novel we came to the conclusion that Mulisch draws attention to the role of coincidence and chance in history rather than cause and effect. However, Mulisch illustrates the idea that despite the role of chance in history, there are often parallels in history repeating itself.

We agreed that it is easy to understand the desire for Germans to forget but also make sense of the happenings of World War II by accusing Hitler of being the devil and putting the country under a spell. However, Mulisch believes that one should avoid making such simple moral justifications of the past and come to terms with it instead. Furthermore, we found it difficult to understand how a peaceful cause such as that of the Resistance fighters can be associated with violence. Thus, Mulisch introduces us to the idea of moral complexities by demonstrating that our preconceptions of what went on in the war are not necessarily correct.

I think the most useful part of our interactive oral was finding that our own family members, who have lived through WWII or other wars such as the Iran-Iraq War, do not repress their memories of the war but prefer to learn from them and pass their stories on to later generations.
Session: May 2013

Reflective Statement
Hedda Gabler – Henrik Ibsen

My knowledge of the Norwegian social and cultural situation in the late 19th century was very limited prior to the interactive oral. Consequently my understanding of Hedda Gabler (Henrik Ibsen) was equally limited.

As a result of the discussion of social classes in 19th century Norway, the reasons behind Hedda’s marriage to Tesman (someone she outranked socially) were debated. Did she want a relationship in which she could dominate or was Tesman her last chance of pursuing the lifestyle she had enjoyed as the daughter of a general? Furthermore this analysis of social class helped define the purpose and function of each character in the play (such as Lövborg who symbolizes the undefined social delimitations in Norway at the time subsequent to the abolishment of nobility) as well as the relationship Hedda shares with different characters. For instance, she envies Mrs Elvsted because the latter embodies the freedom Hedda longs for. Furthermore her relationship with Brack is one in which the gender and class distinctions overlap. Although the two are social equals; he can manipulate Hedda due to his advantage over her as a man. This highlights the fragility of Hedda’s position in the play. As the relationships between characters are equally defined by gender; the discussion of this topic clarified the social expectations of women and consequently also Hedda’s marriage to Tesman as well as her desire for the power to which men were entitled to. She subjects herself to a miserable life, married to George Tesman, and refuses to “step outside” of her comfort zone (as Mrs Elvsted has done) because to do so is unthinkable to her. As a result it is necessary to consider whether she is constrained by her gender or her personality. This pushed me to exhibit a sympathetic approach when analyzing Hedda’s character and circumstances.

The interactive oral was an indispensable experience, without which I would never have fully understood the social and cultural obligations that dictated Hedda’s life and from which she so desperately wanted to escape.

Word Count: 335