Question: Literary works often show men and women struggling to resolve problems and not succeeding very well. To what degree do you find this to be true in at least two of the works you have studied?

‘Hedda Gabler’ is a play written by Henrik Ibsen in 1890. The play is set in Norway in a time when there weren’t as many options for women in society as there were for men. Henrik Ibsen was often considered a feminist by many, as a number of his works involved the struggles women faced in patriarchal societies. However, he never admitted to being a promoter of women’s rights, claiming he was a humanist, and focusing on human emotions and interactions in general. ‘The House of Bernarda Alba’ is a play written by Federico Garcia Lorca in 1945 about a woman who acts as a dictator to her daughters. Lorca may have drawn inspiration from aspects of his own life to write this play. He came from a wealthy family of land owners, but spent many summers in the villages of Andalucia. Despite coming from a wealthy family, he was very aware of the struggles of the poor. The theme of sexual repression in the play may have stemmed from his own sexual repression, as he was a homosexual in a time when homosexuality was not acceptable due to strong religious beliefs. Both writers focus on the struggles woman are faced with in different societies, and contrast this with the relative smaller struggles of men.

In ‘Hedda Gabler’, men have seemingly few struggles, or they are not revealed by Ibsen in order to focus on the protagonist, Hedda’s, struggles. The biggest struggle Hedda’s husband, Jorgen Tesman, is faced with is the news of competition for the professorship he is heavily reliant on being offered. However, his anxiety is put to the test when his competitor, Eilert Lovborg, assures him he does not intended on taking the professorship. By showing the extent to which Tesman worried about his struggle, and resolving it so quickly, Ibsen has made Tesman’s so-called ‘struggle’ seem trivial, possibly making Hedda’s struggles seem even greater. Similarly, in ‘The House Of Bernarda Alba’, the struggles of men are hidden, giving light to those of women. Lorca does this by allowing men never to be seen in the play. However, men are always made reference to throughout the play, showing they are a constant source of concern for women. Bernarda Alba’s daughters even express their jealousy of men, suggesting that they have more freedom or a more carefree life than women.

Ibsen and Lorca both use setting to represent problems the women in their play have. The problem facing Hedda in Ibsen’s play is one of identity. She has trouble adjusting to her new lifestyle and refuses to take on the roles of a married woman, trapped in a situation where she is unhappy. This captivity in her own life is made physical as the entire play takes place in two rooms: the living room and an inner room. So, setting is used to portray physical barriers to Hedda’s life, as her action is confined to those two rooms while Tesman goes out to meet people or attend parties. The two rooms, therefore, symbolise the expectations of women to stay at home and care for their house and husband. The inner room also acts as a symbol for Hedda’s own space and mind. As the play progresses, Hedda is present more and more in the inner room, depicting the gradual deterioration of her mind as she retreats into her own space, away from the outside world. Like Ibsen, Lorca uses
setting to fabricate the daughters’ repression by their own mother. The daughters’ main problem in the text is that they want freedom from their mother’s repression but they are trapped in lives controlled by their mother, unable to defy her because young women in society are expected to obey their mothers. The entire play takes place in the house, as after the funeral of the girls’ father, Bernarda announces that “not a single breath will enter” their house from the street. They are to remain in the house for eight years of mourning, a tradition upheld by Bernarda’s family when her father died. So, as in in ‘Hedda Gabler’, the house presents the physical limits of the girls. However, in ‘The House of Bernarda Alba’, the girls seem less able to resolve their problems as they are ruled by their mother, whereas Hedda’s captivity is self-inflicted as she would have the option to leave the house if accompanied by others.

Colour symbolism is used by both writers to portray the problems their female characters face too. In ‘Hedda Gabler’, the rooms are “decorated in dark colours”, possibly alluding to Hedda’s unhappiness with her situation in life. Although she is unhappy, she doesn’t seem to try to resolve it. Whenever there is light coming through the windows she draws the blinds or asks someone else to do it, adding to the darkness of the house. If the darkness acts as a symbol of her problems or unhappiness, then her drawing the blinds is a symbol of how her problems are self-inflicted. Instead of trying to be happy and resolve her problem of being bored with her life, she makes matters worse for herself by seeking short-term solutions in the manipulation of others, which seems to give some small amount of pleasure.

In ‘The House of Bernarda Alba’, Lorca uses colour symbolism to indicate the sexual repression of her daughters. Firstly, the girls are expected to wear black in mourning for their father’s death, but also of the loss of the daughters’ lives as a result of being trapped in their own home. When Adela wears her green dress, Bernarda commands her to take it off, symbolising Bernarda’s repression of her daughters as she is taking the joy of life away from them. As in ‘Hedda Gabler’, darkness used to portray the daughters’ unhappiness, as Magdalena complains that she would rather do “anything except sit day after day in this dark room”. Bernarda tells her that “that’s what women are for”. This emphasizes the fact that the girls are trapped due to their mother’s belief of what’s expected of women. In the house, “the walls are white”. ‘Alba’ has old meanings of white in Spanish too. The use of the colour white symbolises sterility and purity, purity that Bernarda desires for her daughters. In the third act of the play the walls have a “blue wash”, showing that the purity of the house has been tainted by Adela’s affair with Pepe El Romano, who is intended for Augustias. The blue wash, therefore, symbolises Adela’s sexuality, and that she resolved her problem of sexual repression by betraying her sister.

Characterisation is also used by both writers to show how some characters resolve their problems while others do not by contrasting the “successful” and “unsuccessful” characters. In ‘Hedda Gabler’, Hedda’s problem is that she is unhappy with her new married life despite her pregnancy, something that may have made a woman happy in that time. Her unhappiness is made evident through Ibsen’s use of stage directions. After Aunt Julie quickly guesses Hedda is pregnant, Hedda “crosses the room raising her arms and clenching her fists as if in fury”, but when Tesman goes over to talk to her she is “calm and controlled again”. Such wildly and quickly
fluctuating emotions are a sign of someone deeply unhappy, and it also reveals that Hedda is supressing her emotions rather than resolving them. The suppression of her emotions gradually elevates her unhappiness until she eventually commits suicide, her self-destructive way of resolving her problems. Ibsen contrasts Hedda’s self-destructive character with the proactive Thea Elvsted. Despite the possibility of scandal, Thea takes her life and happiness into her own hands when she finds she is unhappy in life with her husband. When telling Hedda she left her husband, Hedda is almost in a state of disbelief, asking Thea if she is afraid of “what people might say”. Thea confirms that she’s “never going back there to him”, showing that she was able to resolve her problem and is willing to deal with the consequences, unlike Hedda who is so afraid of scandal, she doesn’t even try to resolve her problems.

In ‘The House of Bernards Alba’, Lorca also contrasts two female characters with the same problems: sisters Martirio and Adela. Both girls have been sexually repressed by their mother, as they both desire Pepe El Romano, but Bernarda demands that they never even think about him because Augustias, their older sister is to be with him. So, their problems are that they are repressed by their mother, and that they can’t express their desire for Pepe El Romano. Martirio sneaks out of her room at night to see Pepe El Romano, but she does not do more than this to resolve her problem. Instead, like Hedda, she seeks short-term solutions, i.e. resolving her curiosity by just watching Pepe El Romano. Adela, on the other hand, is young and determined so she begins having an affair with Pepe El Romano, and gets around her mother’s sexual repression by going behind her back. So, Adela in some sense is the successful character. However, Martirio then sees Adela being with Pepe El Romano as her bigger problem and resolves it by telling Bernarda. Adela, being the more passionate of the sisters, breaks Bernarda’s cane, which was a symbol of Bernarda’s power throughout the play. Bernarda used that cane to silence the girls by beating it on the floor or to punish them by striking them with it. So, Adela breaking the cane is a symbol of her fighting against her mother’s power, attempting to resolve this problem.

The two writers use other symbols of the characters’ problems as well. Hedda Gabler’s problem is that she does not this new life as a woman. “General Gabler’s pistols” and his portrait are symbols of her trying to preserve his memory and holding on to her past life rather than moving forward and resolving her issue. Lorca uses the stallion as a symbol of the girls’ problem as it kicking against the wall is a symbol of sexual frustration but, unlike in the case of the girls, Bernarda tells the servant to “let it run free”, the ultimate resolution the girls desire but can’t have.

In conclusion, Ibsen and Lorca focus on the struggles of women to resolve their problems. They show this through their use of symbolism and characterisation to demonstrate how some female characters are successful in resolving their problems while others aren’t.