

Controversy



UNIT A6

The unit gives suggestions for work on a text that is being widely used in years 9 - 11 and provides an example of a way of dealing with a controversial subject.

Whilst any subject may, in principle, be tackled in the classroom, some may be less suitable for Key Stage 3 than for Key Stage 4. Also, it is important to avoid subjects, pornography for example, for which the very treatment of them in the classroom could be seen as courting controversy and inviting misunderstanding. However, in the case of issues that are part of the regular experience of many young people today, it is important to provide approaches to suitable texts that will expose the problems that need to be faced, while offering at the same time clear moral guidance.

One such subject is drug addiction. To ignore the problem of drug addiction and its attendant pressures and pains may imply that we have nothing to say about it. It is preferable that we find a suitable text and an appropriate approach to dealing with the subject.

Junk by Melvin Burgess is a text that deals with teenage drug addiction. First published in 1996, it is widely used in schools, both as a text for GCSE and Key Stage 3 English and as support material in PSHE lessons. It also offers a clear moral framework for the consideration of an issue that is unquestionably controversial, but one that is to the fore in the daily lives of many of our pupils.

Whether or not you tackle such a text with a Key Stage 3 class needs to be your decision based on your knowledge of the sensitivities and susceptibilities of your students. If you are already using this text, we hope that this unit will prove helpful. Should you decide not to use this particular book with your pupils, we hope that, nevertheless, the approaches suggested will furnish ideas for exploring the spiritual and moral dimensions of other controversial texts.

This unit affords abundant opportunity for cross-curricular co-operation with colleagues in RE and PSHE.

Other contemporary texts dealing with such controversial subjects include *Stone Cold* by Robert Swindells and the novels of Robert Cormier, especially: *The Chocolate War*, *I Am the Cheese* and *Heroes*. Examples from pre 20th century literature include the 19th century social novels of Dickens, Mrs Gaskell and Kingsley.

Aims

- To provide an example of a way of dealing with a controversial subject.
- To explore through literature moral and spiritual dilemmas posed by drug dependence, and the consequences of dislocated and damaged relationships.
- To assist pupils in the discernment of lasting qualities and values in society.
- To consider our responsibilities towards ourselves and others.

Controversy



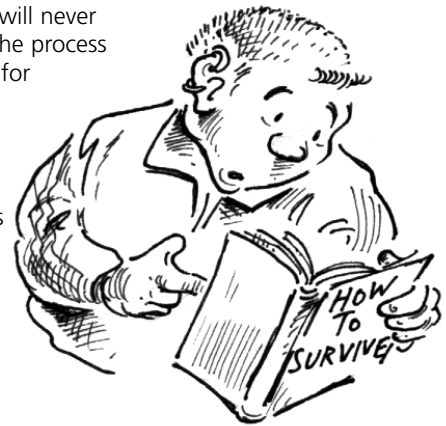
UNIT A6

6.1

What does it feel like?

- Imagine that you are interviewed after you have just done one of the following:
 - scored a goal in the Cup Final;
 - lost your sight as the result of a road accident;
 - become a grandparent for the first time;
 - discovered that your best friend is terminally ill.
- How would you feel? What would you say?
- Role play these situations with the person next to you, taking it in turns to be the interviewer.

We don't have to go through a situation ourselves to understand something of the joys and the sorrows, the pleasures and the pains involved. Literature can help us to experience, at second hand, situations that we will never ourselves face. In the process we gain sympathy for others and learn important lessons. Through reading, we can experience the thrills and spills of someone else's adventure. We can also learn from others' misfortunes and mistakes.



6.2

Read all about it

- Can you think of examples of situations that you have learned about entirely through your reading or from films or television?
- Discuss them with the person next to you.

In *Junk*, Melvin Burgess provides us with an opportunity to learn about drug addiction through the stories of Gemma, Tar and their friends - to discover for ourselves without having to experience for ourselves the anguish they go through.

6.3

Discussion

- Do you think that a book about drug use should be studied in school?

Consider the dangers:

- it could be glamorizing drug taking;
- it might encourage young people to experiment;
- it might be misunderstood by parents.

*How might you defend the use of a book like *Junk* in your class?*

Is ignorance bliss?

Character Work

6.4

Snap-shot portraits

Gemma

- What do you think Gemma is like? From your impressions of her, try to produce some 'snap-shot portraits' in words of her:
 - as she might have been at eleven;
 - at fourteen when she left home (chapter 2);
 - in her punk 'party clothes' (chapter 8);
 - back home (chapter 30);
 - as she might be at twenty-one.

For each 'portrait', try to include some idea of her thoughts and feelings at the time.

You could use some quotations from the book to get you started.



6.5

For my picture album

- Try a similar technique of producing portraits in words with other characters from the book.
- Or, for variation, you may prefer to create a spider chart of Tar, Richard and Vonny, or Lily.



6.6

Will the real Gemma Brogan stand up please?

Gemma changes rapidly as the story continues, especially once she has started to use heroin (chapter 13). A gap opens up between what she pretends she is like and the reality. She deceives herself that she is in control ('If you're in control, then it's okay'). She relies on what she feels rather than on reality ('You can just sit in a sewer all day and be soooo happy and feel soooo good').

- Write down some of the important events in the account of Gemma's life. For each one, say briefly what Gemma thinks of herself at that point. Next to it write what is actually happening to her. You can do this in columns so that it will look something like this:

| Event | Gemma's version | Reality |
|----------------------------|---|--|
| The stick-up (chapter 7) | This is a really wild time. What great people. | She is getting involved in vandalism and is first introduced to drugs. |
| Trip to Wales (chapter 20) | We're just going to stop drugs together and it'll be alright. | She is the only one who tries to stop and she can't! |
| | | |

6.7

Group work: Tar in the hot seat

• Choose one person to take the part of Tar. That individual then has to answer, in character, questions put by the rest of the group. Choose significant stages in the development of the story to ask questions about. The whole group can help 'Tar' to prepare by discussing together important points about his character, how he would react and so on. Thought needs to be given to how addiction will affect his answers. As the author, Melvin Burgess, himself put it, 'By the end of the book, good, honest Tar couldn't tell the truth from a pound of sausages'.

Remember that the object of the exercise is to get him to talk, not to try and trip him up.

Possible questions to consider might include:

- How do you feel about your home now?
- What made you start taking heroin?
- Why didn't you and Gemma stay together?

• Now try putting another character in the hot seat.

**Family relationships**

6.8

Parents

• What are Gemma's parents really like? Until the closing chapters, we see them - and their faults - only through Gemma's eyes. Perhaps they aren't the monsters that she thinks them to be. To what extent are they to blame for their daughter's leaving home and subsequent slide into addiction? What is it that Gemma finds so hard?

Discuss this with the person next to you.

• Now turn the spotlight on Tar's parents. What has gone wrong there? List the similarities and the differences between the two sets of parents.

A comparison of Emily Brogan's account of her reunion with Gemma in chapter 28 and Tar's Dad's self-pitying tone in chapter 31 will help you here.



6.9

How to survive

• Gemma produces a *Practical Handbook to Running Away From Home* (chapter 2). Write a similar *Teenager's How to Survive at Home*.



This can be done individually or in pairs.

6.10

Substitute Parents

In many ways Vonny and Richard take the place of parents for Tar and Gemma, as Gemma herself comments on more than one occasion. They allow the two fourteen-year-olds much more freedom than would their real parents, but it is when Gemma and Tar slip out of their care and control that the problems begin to become serious.

- Write down all the examples you can find of Vonny and Richard acting and speaking like parents.
- 'As parents they were perfect', says Gemma, although she resents their interference. How good do you think they were as parents?
- List all the good points about Vonny and Richard as 'parents'.
- Now list all the ways in which they were inadequate 'parents'.

6.11

Freedom?

Gemma and Tar's next 'family' consists of Lily, Rob and the others in their squat. The claim here is that 'everything is free'. But is it?

- Rob's Mum is held up as 'really great' (chapter 15), the ultimate permissive parent. What do you think of such parenting? Discuss this with the person next to you, or in a small group.
- Work together to draw up a list of do's and don'ts for parents.



6.12

Unconditional Love

At the end of the book, Gemma is back where she began, with her family; and that is largely because she has parents who do care and are ready to take her back. They welcome their lost daughter with the same unconditional love that the father showed to his son in the story that Jesus told about the 'Prodigal Son', recorded in the Bible:

"While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'

But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fatted calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.'"

(Luke chapter 15 verses 20-24)

- Using chapter 28 of *Junk* as a basis for your work, role play in pairs the meeting between Gemma and her parents. (One of you can take the part of Gemma and the other either her mother or her father.)
- Alternatively, act out in pairs the events of the chapter as a series of conversations between Gemma's Mum and Dad.



Drug Addiction

The central theme of *Junk* is a close examination of the horrors of drug addiction and what can lead up to it. The use of junk and the plight of junkies are too familiar features of our contemporary culture for us to ignore the warnings, as the following article from *The Times* reminds us:

Just another upper class junkie . . .

Heroin is a powerful lure to those who appear to have everything, says former addict Sean Thomas.

Walk down the King's Road or Ladbroke Grove and you will see them: moneyed junkies wasting trust funds and legacies, estates and inheritances, on class A drugs. Some are genuinely aristocratic, some are merely rich; some of them have famous parents, some are infamous themselves. All lead desperately limited, desperately repetitive lives - mostly spent sitting by the phone in squalid flats waiting for their dealers to return their calls, or trying to locate Daddy to arrange another loan so as to afford the next quarter of an ounce.

I well know this type, the upper-class junkie, because for several years, I was also a heroin addict in London and I ran into more than a few of them. It is impossible not to. Central London's hard drug scene (and by hard drugs I mean primarily cocaine and heroin) is like a small town within a town, a hidden and incestuous village, a tightly knit network of dealers, contacts, clinics and 'well-known addresses'.

The drugs underworld is surprisingly egalitarian: the need for drugs is a great equaliser. Thus it is possible for the crackhead from Hoxton to use the same dealer as the junked-up ambassador's daughter from Kensington, or the poor little rich coke-snorter from Belgravia to end up sharing a needle with the homeless Glaswegian car thief. Upper-class junkies hate to feel alone in their vice, and doing heroin can be the most desperately bleak, sad, Godless, solitary existence imaginable.

Why, then, with all their chances and opportunities, with the best educations and circumstances that money can buy, do so many rich and well-born people fall prey to hard drug addiction? It is easy to understand the appeal of a powerful analgesic such as heroin to someone stuck on the seventh floor of an inner city tower block. It is easy to appreciate how you might want to numb your mind and senses if all you could see ahead of you was another week on the dole. But why would an Eton-educated millionaire, heir to a Caribbean villa and a castle in Scotland, want to do the same?

The answer is that the two ends of the social spectrum share one curse: unemployment. People who are rich already have little to do except to make more money. Second (and third, and fourth, and fifth) generation rich people have even less to do: their money and status are taken for granted. Ennui and boredom are therefore the most feared enemies of the poor little rich girl or boy. And you can only have so many "cars, helicopters and yachts" before even cars and helicopters and yachts start to pall.

On heroin, time ceases to exercise its grip. Hours, days, lives can fly by and all you have done is to sit in your flat and dribble. Weeks can pass and all you have done is repeat the endless cycle of the drug addict's life: score, consume, get stoned, score, consume, get stoned. For people with no job, who do not need a job, who would never conceive of demeaning themselves with something as common as a job, heroin addiction is a job. It gives shape and purpose to otherwise shapeless, purposeless lives. For those stupid enough, like me, to try heroin in the first place, it exercises an allure because it is seen as somehow chic, as amusingly antisocial and transgressive. And it's so easy. If you want people to see you as sophisticated and daring, but you are too lazy or dim to do anything serious about it - like become a soldier, or train to be an artist - how much easier simply to take heroin.

This spurious attraction of heroin as a short cut to 'coolness' is assisted by the fact that the drug reinforces the addict's self-esteem, by paralysing any self-critical faculties that might lurk in the psyche. Thus the painfully anorexic junkie sees herself as fashionably thin; the desperately boring addict sees himself as suavely aloof.

The upper-class junkie might seem a modern phenomenon, but there are historical parallels. Consider the obsession with duelling in the 18th and 19th centuries. Here was another dangerous, possibly fatal, certainly pointless activity condemned by polite society but indulged in certain upper-class circles. Like heroin, duelling had glamour; like heroin, it relieved the awful boredom of the leisured life. The French toffs of *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* would, these days, be smoking freebase in Cadogan Square instead of slaughtering each other with sabres.

Lest I seem to be glamorizing heroin myself, however, I should add that there is one big difference between the two upper-class vices. When 18th century aristos were not murdering each other at dawn, they were running the world and discovering vaccines and writing *Don Juan*. When modern upper-crust junkies are not doing junk, all they are doing is trying to find more junk so they can do more junk so they don't have to go out and find any more junk for a while. Cocaine and heroin are, in truth, about as glamorous as meths. Only more expensive. And more moronic. And more pitiful.

Sean Thomas

Sean Thomas/*The Times*, 13th January 1999
(Photocopying allowed for classroom use only)

6.13

Understanding the passage

- Read the article from *The Times* carefully and answer the following questions:
- Why is Sean Thomas specially qualified to write such an article?
- Which group of addicts is he particularly writing about?
- Yet, he says, all addicts are basically the same. Why?
- He suggests several reasons why people take drugs in the first place; name some of them.
- He compares drug taking with duelling in the 18th & 19th centuries. How, according to him, are they similar? How do they differ?

6.14

So, what's wrong with it?

Both Lily and Gemma claim that they have a perfect right to take drugs if they want to. Lily says, 'You can be anything, you can do anything. Listen to the magic'. Gemma says, 'Look, drugs are fun. They make you feel good, that's all. Sure they're powerful, that's why they're dangerous. So's life. If you're in control, then it's okay.'

Yet what they go on to experience proves how wrong they are!

- What arguments would you use to try to convince them that they have got it wrong?



6.15

Look after your body

The Bible says that people should look after their bodies because the 'body is a temple of the Holy Spirit', and that people should 'honour God' with their body.

- How does the thought that people have a responsibility to look after their bodies help in an decisions they might be faced with about drug taking? Discuss this with the person next to you.
- Draw up a list of suggestions of ways that we should look after our bodies.

6.16

No man is an island

- *Junk* shows how one person's actions can affect another. Would Gemma have run away from home if Tar hadn't done so first? Would Tar have started on hard drugs if it hadn't been for Gemma? Can you think of other examples?

One difference between the first squat that Tar and Gemma go to and their next is the sense of responsibility for each other that Richard and Vonny have but which Lily and Rob lack.

Whether we like it or not, we have to recognise that what we do affects other people.

- Write about an occasion when you were kept from doing something by the thought of what effect your actions might have on others.

This could be anything from not wanting to upset your parents to deciding to avoid something because of the harm that you think it would cause someone else.

6.17

But we all do it!

One way in which Gemma and her friends try to justify their heroin habit is by arguing that we are all dependent on 'drugs' of one sort or another. For some it is tobacco or alcohol, while others depend on medication, or music, even - according to Lily 'music's the only drug'. It just happens that their preference for heroin is socially unacceptable. (See *Junk*, chapter 15.)

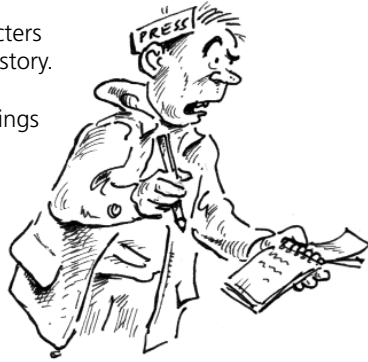
- But are they right about that? Write an extra chapter in which Gemma, a year or two older perhaps, goes to a school or a youth group to talk about her experiences.

What arguments relating to drug use would she use?

What particular memories would it be important for her to mention?

Style

In *Junk* several characters take turns to tell the story. This means that we always hear about things from an individual's point of view. It is difficult to know if they are telling the truth, especially Gemma and Tar, the main narrators, as they become increasingly addicted. They try to deceive themselves that everything is alright, when in reality it isn't.



6.18

To tell the truth?

- The story would have sounded very different if it had been told by other characters. Try writing one of the following accounts:
 - Gemma leaving home, as told by her father (chapters 2 & 6 will help you);
 - Richard's account of the party (chapters 9 & 10 will help you);
 - The report by one of the policemen of Tar's arrest (chapter 23).

Remember that the point of view of the person writing the account will affect how he or she tells the story.

Imagery

6.19

Symbols

- Daisies, and especially dandelions, are regularly used as symbols by Tar and Gemma. See how many references to dandelions you can find. What does Tar use the symbol of a dandelion to represent?

There are many answers to this - how many can you think of?

- The clothes that are worn at different times by various characters help us to understand something about them too. Write down a description of Gemma's party outfit (chapter 8) - draw a picture of it, if you wish.
- Why does she choose punk gear?

Look at what Gemma herself has to say about it. Her choices are quite deliberate.

6.20

Lily

- Do we ever meet the real Lily? Every time she appears it is as seen through the drug affected eyes of her companions or of herself, although the mask slips briefly for Gemma in chapter 26. Yet the clothes that Lily wears (or doesn't wear!) give important clues to what she is really like. Choose two occasions when Lily's clothing tells us something about her and try to explain what it represents.

Summing up

6.21

What happens next?

- Write an additional chapter explaining what you think happens to Gemma and to Tar.

There are important clues to take note of:

- Gemma has a purpose in her life (Oona, her baby) and she has the support of her family;
- Tar's future is much more uncertain;
- This is no romantic 'happily ever after' story: drugs and their consequences belong to harsh reality.

6.22

Why was it written?

- Why do you think Melvin Burgess chose such a lurid subject to write about?
- Write a letter to your local library recommending *Junk*. Explain why you think it should be on the shelves and say who you hope will read it.