

Teachers Notes (Secondary)

by Michelle Prawer

My Big Birkett

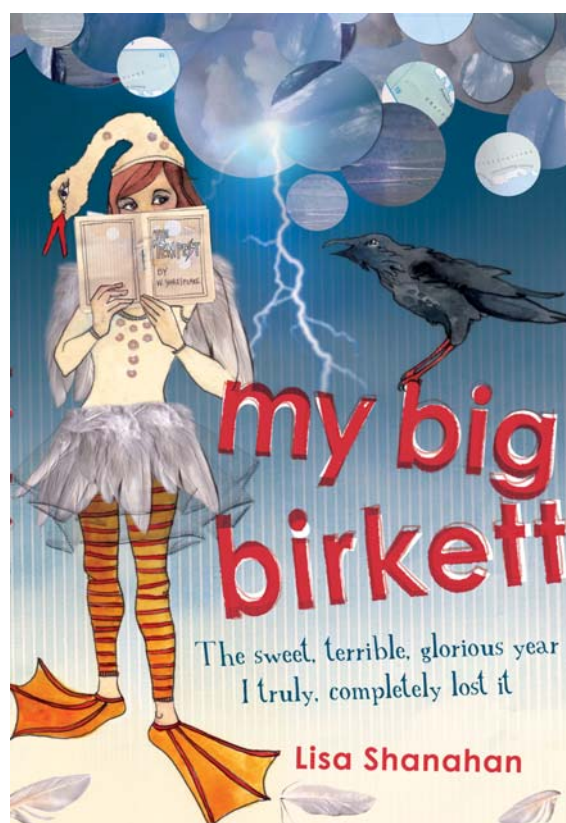
Lisa Shanahan

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Recommended for ages 11-15

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INTRODUCTION

Closely intertwined with Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, *My Big Birkett* introduces Gemma Stone, a high school student struggling with typical girl issues of appearance, popularity, school work and boys. When Debbie, Gemma's sister, announces her engagement to the son of a man obsessed by all things military, the family is turned upside down. Gemma is subjected to bridal exhibitions, a 'meet the in-laws' dinner, choosing the flower girl outfit as well as her sister's many tantrums, fondly known as 'birketts'.

Running parallel to this plot line is the story of Gemma's growth as she makes her own major discoveries while trying to forge a place for herself in the world. Joining the school drama group, ostensibly to snare the school's sought-after young man, and having been cast as Miranda from *The Tempest*, she finds herself falling in love with the school outcast, Raven De Head.

Raven and Gemma develop a friendship which is genuine and meaningful and while she is often ostracized for her connection with Raven, and struggles with the idea of 'being seen' with him, Gemma learns that judging people by their background or by the home in which they live, or even by their looks, is a superficial way of surviving in this world. As humour turns to tragedy and one of Raven's brothers dies in a prank gone wrong, Gemma is able to see the power of love and is clearly able to distinguish the need to see beyond the superficial when making judgements.

The wedding proceeds in spite of set-backs and Gemma emerges a richer, more appreciative individual having learned to value an honest and genuine response to life.

This book is funny and readers may indeed find themselves laughing out loud, giggling at the humour evident in the relationships as well as the situations where Gemma and her girlfriends are trying to fit in and appear popular. But the seriousness of this story becomes evident in the latter part of the book as the issues of judging others, society's tendency to condemn people if they do not fit into the norm, and the need to live up to the expectations of others are explored in a poignant fashion. The idea of the 'haves' and 'have-nots' is explored, as well as the difficulty of breaking out of these confines. The difficulty of forging a new place for yourself is explored through Shakespeare's *The Tempest*.

In addition, the book explores the idea of making political mileage out of communal causes and questions the integrity and motivation of those who do so. This book could be taught to both lower and middle years high school children.

Before studying this text, students are encouraged to analyse the front cover and anticipate the direction of the story. Teachers should draw attention to the birds on both the front and back covers, the character dressed like a swan/duck with webbed feet and the text of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. The origami birds that appear at the head of each chapter could also be incorporated into a discussion which aims to predict the way in which all these might connect. After studying the book, students could examine why all the De Head children are given the names of birds. Look at Mrs De Head's comment on p.190, "Wouldn't it be wonderful to be as carefree as a bird?"

CONNECTIONS WITH SHAKESPEARE'S *'THE TEMPEST'*

Explore the storyline of the play, *The Tempest*. Teachers could consider:

- Studying Shakespeare's text as a class text

- Reading an abridged version (see bibliography)
- Exploring the story through a picture book or cartoon version (see bibliography)
- Watching the movie or seeing the play in performance
- Students could also read some film and play reviews of past performances (available on the Internet through Google or similar search engines)

When discussing the play through any of the above methods, particular attention should be given to the characters of Miranda, Prospero and Caliban. Students should produce character studies of each and write about the relationship between all three. Focus on power and control in this discussion of relationships.

Then, when discussing *My Big Birkett*, the teacher could guide students through the following questions:

Why is Raven initially angry at being given the part of Caliban? Discuss the concept of 'type-casting' Explain this in relation to Mrs Highgate's comment and Raven's response on p.199 and also in relation to Gemma's response on pp.231-2 to Prospero's 'Abhorred slave' speech:

And the rage that simmered under the surface of Mrs Highgate's cultivated niceness gushed out like from a wound. "You're behaving like a savage!" "Don't you call me that!" said Raven. He kicked the stage so hard a panel cracked. "See!" said Mrs Highgate "Julie" said Mrs Langton. "Stop it!"

"It wouldn't matter who said them. They were ugly and harsh. They were destroying words. I hated them because even as they came out of Nick's mouth, I couldn't help wondering if they were true - the savagery, brutishness and vileness of that night at Raven's house; the tornado of violence, spinning in the air between us."

Why is Miranda pleased to be playing the role of Prospero's daughter?

What are the parallels between the role Nick plays in his own family and in the community of Buranderry and the role he plays of Prospero in the play? Focus on the concept of power and influence in your answer.

Why does Prospero's speech to Caliban on pp.231-2 cause Raven so much distress?

How are the roles of Prospero and Caliban played out in the world of the story beyond *The Tempest*? Again, focus on power and the role of these characters within society.

EXTENSION ACTIVITY - WIDER READING

Both *Undine* by Penni Russon and *In Summer Light* by Zibby O'Neal, use *The Tempest* as a significant strand for telling a modern-day story. Read one of these books and explain why you think *The Tempest* is used and how it enriches the contemporary story. A comparison amongst all three texts would make a fascinating study.

Teachers could approach the study of *My Big Birkett* thematically, as well as using an in-depth, chronological chapter analysis.

A thematic approach could look at some of the points raised in these notes.

THEMES

SUPERFICIALITY AND THE JUDGEMENT OF OTHERS

This book directs young readers to see two approaches to life: that of artifice and moulding oneself to be accepted by others and that of the more challenging one of being true to oneself even if it means going out on a limb. There is the world of Debbie Stone, Gemma's sister, whose wedding preparations focus on make-up, clothing, ice sculptures and themes as well as the world of Nick who uses others to climb the social and political ladder. In contrast, there is the world of Raven who refuses to put on appearances to gain the acceptance of others and ultimately, Gemma, her friend Jody and her sister-in-law (to be) Jackie, who all decide to peel away the artifice and stay true to themselves.

A. The following questions could be used to guide students to an awareness of this key theme in the text.

1. What is the text teaching us about judging others by their appearance, their background, their socio-economic status?

Look at the passage on p.295 and draw students' attention to the way the De Heads are judged by others in Buranderry. Pay attention to the way in which Egg seeks community approbation when he makes his derogatory comments and the way in which others see this as an opportunity to vent their own prejudice:

"They're friggin' losers," said Egg. "The only thing they ever bought from me was mince. Cheap mince that I wouldn't even feed to me friggin' dog if I had one." He gazed around at the crowd in mock horror, checking to make sure that he still had them on-side. "They wouldn't know a friggin' piece of rump steak if it upped and bit them."

There was a smattering of laughter. And then everyone began to speak at once.

"Crow, the older one," said a woman, with curlers wound tight like cocoons. "He stole my sister's Subaru."

"I hate the tall skinny one," said a girl with sleek, dark hair puffing on a cigarette. "The one with the dragon tattoo."

Students should find the many other references to this prejudice embedded in the text.

2. By the end of the book, what has Gemma learned about appearances and reality?

3. To what extent does society allow us to grow and develop beyond its expectations of us? Is it easy to break away from expectation? Look at Jackie and her family's expectation of her. Students should try to find examples from their own lives.

B. Gemma struggles between her desire to be accepted by Nick, and her genuine feelings for Raven. Many times during the book she chooses to be with Nick and lies to Raven. Look at some of these occasions and comment on the way the lie makes Gemma feel.

p.154 *"But no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't shrug off how one tidy lie could make me feel as hollow as an ice cream cone with the bottom bitten off, the goodness slowly dripping out onto the cement."*

p.171 *"After all, aren't you good friends with Raven De Head? And we know how he feels about the shopping centre." "I wouldn't say a good friend," my mouth tasted greasy.*

p.189 *"I'm glad he has you as a friend," said Mrs De Head. I thought about the night before and felt sick all over again."*

The following passage from p 102-3 can be used for in-depth textual study as an insight into Gemma's struggle with her own conscience and her desire to be accepted by others.

Everyone at drama was pleasant to Raven. But it was the condescending politeness some people show the disabled. When Raven walked by, they leapt out of his way as if they had to make way for his wheelchair. If he cracked a joke, everyone laughed like hyenas, even if the joke was only mildly funny.

On Thursday, when Raven and I rehearsed our audition scene, I caught their expression when they thought we weren't looking - their raised eyebrows and their tight sneaky smiles. They made me mad. They didn't know him. Their sophistication was artificial, as brittle as a shell.

And yet I knew I was like them.

As Raven and I rehearsed, I found myself wanting to stand far away from him. I wanted to keep a distance between us. I wanted it to protect me. Because even as I despised the way most people treated Raven, I still wanted to be saved from their snide condescension.

Teachers should remind students that the previous chapter focused on the superficiality fostered by the bridal fair. Both Gemma and Jackie agree that "If one tenth of this money was spent on the poor, we could erase world hunger!" (p.96). Immediately following this chapter, we are presented with Gemma's recognition of the superficiality of those around her in judging Raven simply by his looks and while she recognizes her own tendency to do so, she continues to be attracted by the artificial Nick.

Teachers could ask the following questions:

- Explain what is meant by "the condescending politeness some people show the disabled"
- Explain how "sophistication" can be "superficial"
- Why is the sentence, "And yet I knew I was like them" isolated in a paragraph of its own?
- Demonstrate that Gemma is aware of her own hypocrisy.
- Gemma characterizes the loathing that she feels for herself thus: "It rolled and it churned. It lathered and thickened, the dirty grey foaminess of its swelling, rising filling me up." Explain this image.

C. Chapter 13 provides examples of the way in which even decent and thoughtful citizens of Buranderry judge the De Heads in spite of their actions.

Draw the students' attention to the thoughtful behaviour and interest displayed by Thea towards the girls (p.114). Contrast this to the rude and discriminatory way in which she deals with Maggie. Look at the manners demonstrated by Maggie in this chapter. Explain the word 'pathos' and use it to focus on the closing image of the chapter in which Maggie is alone in the park (p.119).

Discussion

Statistically, crime rates are higher amongst low socio-economic groups. The class should consider the following two contradictory statements and examine them in an Oxford Debate¹:

That society is to blame for the high crime rate amongst those in the low socio-economic bracket.

"But we've got to be answerable for our actions." (Mr Stone, p. 30)

LOVE

My Big Birkett explores the nature of love from superficial teenage infatuation, to committed adult love.

Love is explained by Mrs. Stone as being willing to clean the dog poo from the shoe of the one you love (p.112). Explain what this means. Ask students if they agree.

What is the difference between Gemma's eventual feelings towards Raven and her attraction to Nick earlier on in the book? Look at her thoughts on p.302:

And I couldn't help feeling it would be easier to love like Nick, dumping all your affection into a charity bin, than to face the large sprawling, aching, messy catastrophe of loving people up close.

Look at her thoughts expressed at the funeral of Maggie (p. 321):

I found myself wanting to turn and run. To bolt at top speed. To get out of the church... to seal myself up. To seal my heart away from love. Because no one who loves is immune from its fire.

In what way can true love be considered to be painful?

HUMOUR

Humour is a significant element of this book. In order to understand how it is created, teachers might like to focus on chapters 5 and 6 that describe the visit to The Websters'; chapter 10 at the Buranderry Bridal Fair; chapter 30, kitchen tea; and chapter 42, the wedding, as an exploration of the comic techniques at play.

Teachers could divide the class into smaller groups and allocate a chapter to each group. Students should first focus on the similes used in their chapter and discuss the way in which humour is heightened by this technique

¹ An Oxford Debate is an impromptu debate which involves the entire class. A proposition is put forward and students stand to the left of the classroom if they disagree with it and to the right if they support it. Comments pass across the room as students attempt to persuade others to cross the floor.

Students should list the humorous events in their particular chapter and, for each event, identify the source of the humour. Teachers could direct students using the following questions:

- Is the language original/ironic/rude/a play on words?
- Are the characters at odds with one another/ridiculed/exaggerated/mockered?
- Is the situation ridiculous/uncharacteristic/typical?
- Does the narrator convey cynicism/mockery?

Together with the Art department, students could develop a comic strip of their chapter and share it with other students. A display of these in the library would be a nice touch.

In addition, these chapters could be turned into scripts for a play and the scenes performed for the class or indeed for other classes.

TRAGEDY

While there is the tragedy of Magpie's death, the poignant sadness of this book stems from the home life of both Nick and Raven. An in-depth study of chapter 26 (Raven's home) and chapter 20 (Nick's home) reveals difficult and troubled home lives. The teacher could divide the class into groups and distribute the following questions for discussion on each of the chapters. After students have answered their set of questions, they could team up with another group and compare the two households.

Chapter 26

1. Compare the meal eaten at the De Heads with that eaten at the Lloyds in chapter 20.
2. Comment on the language used in general conversation amongst the De Heads. Provide examples.
3. Comment on the way Mr. De Head speaks to his children.
4. Comment on the table manners evident at the De Head household.
5. Compare the different ways in which Mr. and Mrs. De Head speak to their children.
6. Discuss the dynamics between Crow and his father.
7. Look at Maggie's reaction to his father's violent blow to Mrs. De Head. What does this tell you about Maggie's character?
8. Mrs. De Head soothes Gemma and puts her arms around her. Examine Mrs. De Head's behaviour during the entire episode and comment on her character.
9. Prove that Mrs De Head is both a loving and loved mother.

Chapter 20

1. Comment on the external appearance of the Lloyds' house. How is this wealth evident in the internal décor as well as in the lifestyle they lead.
2. The Lloyds have a library with books chosen by a designer... "But we don't read the books." How is this an accurate reflection on the Lloyd family?
3. Examine the way in which Nick talks to his mother. What does this indicate about their relationship?

4. Examine the way in which Nick and his father treat Mrs. Lloyd in ch.38, p.291. Compare their relationship with Mrs. Lloyd to that of Mrs. De Head and her family.
 5. After the dinner/campaign event, Mrs. Lloyd asks Gemma, "Tonight went well. Didn't it?" (p.170). Why is this so important to her?
- Which family would you rather live in and why?
 - Why could each family be termed tragic?

ACTIVITIES

BURANDERRY

Buranderry is a divided town with a clear delineation between the 'haves' and the 'have nots' (p.23).

- Write an entry for a travel guide, 'Towns in Australia' which characterizes the essence of this town. Refer to all of these references about Buranderry:
 - p.2 "O'Reilley's is the only supermarket..."
 - p.23 "That afternoon I caught the Buranderry bus..."
 - p.25 "Everything that's ugly in our town..."
 - p.32 "The Websters live in Buranderry East..."
 - p.35 "Buranderry High is built on reclaimed swampland..."
 - p.140 "Buranderry...Friendliest River Town..."
 - p.159 "Buranderry Heights..."
- Discuss the concept of 'small town mentality'.

Students who come from small towns might share the advantages and disadvantages of close living.

NEWSPAPER ACTIVITY

The following newspaper tasks could be divided amongst the class for the production of the *Buranderry Voice*.

- Write a front page article for the *Buranderry Voice* reporting on the explosion of the fountain and linking this explosion with the one organized by Mr De Head several years earlier.
- Write an opinion piece by the town mayor expressing his view.
- Write some letters to the editor which reflect community opinion. Write them in the name of characters in the text such as Egg Tuffy, Mrs Highgate, Jody and perhaps the principal of the school.
- Additional articles on the link between poverty and crime could also be included as news items. Students should research this and explore the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) website: <http://www.abs.gov.au> .

- Write two obituaries for Maggie: one written by the paper as a local correspondent and one written by the family. Alternatively, write the eulogy referred to on p.307. As a member of the De Head family, what would you say?

WHAT'S A "BIRKETT"?

Direct students to the references within the text that explain a 'birkett': p.5-7, p.21, 29, 31, 50, 63, 223, 231,325.

Students can then write an expanded dictionary definition for the word 'birkett'. This should include definition, etymology, usage etc. This is an opportunity for the teacher to explain the elements in a typical dictionary entry.

In addition, students could share their own family's personal vocabulary. They could investigate the origin of these words. Do they stem from mispronounced words said in childhood? Do they relate to experiences shared by the family or individuals in the family? Do they relate to a family tradition? Students can then compile their own family dictionary and share this with the class.

This idea of original vocabulary can be expanded to include the ways in which new words enter the language. Students can investigate the origin of words such as:

- Clayton's
- Texta
- Muggle
- Lunatic
- Big Brother
- Abracadabra

Students are often fascinated to learn of the origins of words that they believe are 'modern'.

Students could share SMS vocabulary and other more recent additions.

This study could involve a research project on word origins and a look at language abuse as discussed in Don Watson's *Death Sentence* and *Weasel Words* and also in *Unspeak* by Steven Poole.

CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT

Shanahan ensures that readers respond in a particular way to the two main male characters.

A. Divide students into two groups and give each group one of the blackline masters (see BLM1 & BLM2 at the end of these notes) for the study of the character of either Nick Lloyd or Raven De Head.

After looking in detail at the references given at the top of the BLM, students should try to answer the questions below them. The teacher should appoint a group coordinator to direct discussion.

Students will thus trace the way in which reader sentiment is manipulated.

The teacher should then draw both groups together and, dividing the board in half, develop a set of dot point answers that clearly highlight the different aspects of the boys and the ways in which readers' expectations are directed.

This could lead to a class **debate** on the topic: "That clothes maketh the man." (Polonius in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*)

B. In order to fully understand Raven, it is necessary to look at his home life. Read the text of chapter 9 out loud to students and focus on the following areas of interest:

- Examine the physical detail of the home.
- Write an in-depth description of the house for an article in *Renovator's Delight*. Base the description directly on what is revealed through the text.
- Demonstrate that poverty is a significant factor in the home life of the De Heads.
- Explain the presence of a new television amidst the abject poverty.
- Comment on the relationship between Mr. De Head and Maggie. Include evidence from the text.
- Using only this chapter, demonstrate that Raven is somehow more sophisticated than others in his family, and that he is aware of the sensitivities of others.
- What preconceived ideas does Gemma have of this family?
- How does she judge the De Heads? Use the text to demonstrate her disappointment in her own reaction to the family.

C. In chapter 15, p.131, "There was no Nick to compare Raven to..."

- Why is Gemma able to see admirable qualities in Raven when Nick is not present?
- Look at p.133 and see what we learn about Gemma's honesty with herself in this chapter.

THE SHOPPING CENTRE CAMPAIGN

Using the arguments presented in chapter 16, students can write two campaign speeches, one which urges the building of the shopping centre and one which argues against it. Deliver these speeches as an MP for Buranderry or the local mayor as well as the project manager or the financial backer of the shopping centre.

Look at the text of p.136. Note the way in which one person's blessing may be another's curse. What advantages do the De Heads hope to gain from the building of the shopping centre and what will the Lloyds lose?

Appoint several class reporters who can write an opinion piece for the *Buranderry Voice* at the conclusion of the campaign.

Extension Work

Scan the local papers for an issue of community interest and cut out the letters to the editor and editorials which argue the case. Involve students in this issue and invite the local MP to address your class. Students should be prepared with questions. Students could also prepare campaign speeches for and against the proposal.

CONCLUSION

To conclude the study of this text, the following essay topic would bring together many of the strands:

- “One minute you feel confused and then it’s like a mist lifts and everything’s clear.” (pp.148-9) This sentiment is expressed by Nick during rehearsal for *The Tempest*. At the end of the book, the mist lifts for Gemma and she sees Nick as he really is.
Discuss the journey of her discovery.

RESOURCES AND FURTHER READING

NOVELS FOR YOUNG ADULTS THAT USE THE THEME OF *THE TEMPEST*

Russon, Penni, *Undine* (Random House, 2004)

O’Neal, Zibby, *In Summer Light* (Viking Press, 1992)

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES FOR TEACHING *THE TEMPEST*

Burdett, Lois, *The Tempest for Kids* (Firefly Books, 1999). This book tells the story in detail using effective poetry and introduces most of the characters from the play

Messer, David, *The Tempest*; complete text with explanatory notes in comic book format (Random House, 2005). This is useful for students who struggle with Shakespeare’s language.

Page, Philip and Pettit, Marilyn, *The Tempest* (Hodder, 2006). A comic book approach but an abridged version

OTHER BOOKS

Poole, Steven, *Unspeak* (Little Brown, 2006).

Watson, Don, *Death Sentence: the decay of public language* (Random House, 2003).

Watson, Don, *Weasel Words* (Random House, 2004).

FILM

The BBC Shakespeare, *The Tempest*

ABOUT THE WRITERS

LISA SHANAHAN

Lisa Shanahan trained as an actor at Theatre Nepean, University of Western Sydney. Whilst studying, she taught drama and wrote plays for children. After completing her degree she undertook a Writing for Children course with Libby Gleeson where she discovered a great passion for writing stories for children. Her books include *Sweetie May*, *Sweetie May Overboard!*, *What Rot!*, *Bear and Chook* and two picture books with Allen & Unwin: *Gordon’s Got a Snookie* and *The Postman’s Dog*, both illustrated by Wayne Harris.

Lisa and her husband, Keiran, live with their sons Bryn and Riley in Sydney. Lisa continues to teach drama and write books and feels very lucky that she is able to do both. This is her first novel for an older age group.

MICHELLE PRAYER

Michelle Prayer is a librarian specializing in young adult literature at Leibler Yavneh College in Melbourne. She is also Head of English and teaches English to middle and senior level students. Michelle is an active member of the Children's Book Council of Australia and is a convenor for the 2006 Crichton Award. In 2006 she was also appointed Victoria's judge for the Eve Pownell award. Michelle reviews young adult fiction for the journal *Viewpoint*. She is the mother of 7 delightful children who are all keen readers.

Nick Lloyd

Character Study

Read the following references to Nick in *My Big Birkett* and then discuss the questions below.

p.15 "Nick Lloyd, the best actor in our school, has a face that could be minted into an old Greek coin..."

p. 19 "he was smiling at me and his skin had that glow, that special olive confidence..."

p. 22. "Nick wore his school uniform with the easy grace of a fashion statement. All the creases and folds lined up right..."

p. 23 "And the thought of Nick holding my hand made me dizzy. My stomach fizzed as if a large aspirin had been dropped in it..."

p.60 "Nick was mobbed. Girls dived at him from all over the room. It was as if he was a dangling leg in a piranha-infested river."

Questions for discussion

What factors make Nick attractive to the girls?

What is his appeal to the general student body?

Why do you believe that the teachers like him?

What is revealed about Nick through the political meeting to which Gemma is unwittingly invited?

What do we learn about his relationship with his parents? What is therefore revealed about him as a human being?

What expectations does Gemma have based on the luxury of Nick's home?

What qualities of Nick are revealed during the rehearsal and performance periods?

What does Gemma learn about Nick from his behaviour at the after party?

Raven De Head

Character Study

Read the following references to Raven in *My Big Birkett* and then discuss the questions below.

p.17 "Raven is basically the delinquent of our year too. He's been suspended at least three times, but it never makes much difference. He's always the same after suspension – probably worse..."

p.54 "The door banged and Raven slouched in... 'I'm here for the play.' 'For the play?'... 'Why wouldn't I be?' asked Raven.

Ms. Highgate took another deep breath. It was clear that her notions of egalitarianism were now in fierce conflict."

p.56 "Raven was hopeless...."

p.69 "He's a thug," she hissed."

72, "The only reason I was going to Raven's house was because I felt guilty and sorry for him."

Questions for discussion

What factors make Raven unattractive to the girls?

What factors ensure that Raven will remain unpopular with the general student body?

Why do you believe some of the teachers dislike him?

What is revealed about Raven when Gemma is invited to share in a family meal?

What do we learn about his relationship with his parents? What is therefore revealed about him as a human being?

What hardships must he endure?

What expectations does Gemma have based on the low socio-economic environment of Raven's home?

What qualities of Raven are revealed during the rehearsal and performance periods?

What does Gemma learn about Raven from his behaviour at the after party?