

Unit written by Dr Pam Macintyre & Dr Susan La Marca

Butterfly **by Sonya Hartnett**

Years 10 -11

Background

Ariella (Plum) Coyle lives with her embarrassing parents, Fa and Mums, and her adored older brothers, Justin and Cydar, in a *'humiliating'*, rambling house filled with antiques, in the suburbs some time in the 1980s. Each family member lives their separate lives, and Justin and Cydar have secrets. Plum is about to turn fourteen, and is uncertain about her place in the world. In a briefcase under her bed, Plum keeps a collection of talismans – *'her most sacred things'* that, within her catty friendship group at school, she hopes will bring her power. Next-door neighbour, Maureen, takes Plum under her wing. Maureen has an often-absent husband and a four-year-old son, David, whom Plum occasionally babysits. While we know Maureen's motives are not as altruistic as they seem, Plum doesn't. As a result of Plum's catastrophic fourteenth birthday party, secrets and lies are uncovered that mark endings and beginnings.

Objectives

At Level 6, students read, view, analyse, critique, reflect on and discuss contemporary and classical imaginative texts that explore personal, social, cultural and political issues of significance to their own lives.

Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (2009) *VELS English Domain Level 6*. <http://vels.vcaa.vic.edu.au/vels/english.html>

Encountering literary texts and creating their own will engage students partly because of what they might learn about human experience and what they might learn about how language has been used and can be used by them, to create particular emotional, intellectual, or philosophical effects.

ACARA (2009) *The Shape of the Australian Curriculum: English*. (page 8)

Focus

Characters

Bildungsroman

While much of the fiction for adolescents falls into this genre, *Butterfly* is a particularly powerful example to look at because in Plum's story the author critiques as well as documents the shift from child to adult. Also offering students the opportunity to analyse and respond to a novel in terms of genre and structure can be a fruitful exploration

Characteristics of bildungsroman

Focuses on one central character

It is about the maturation and moral, intellectual, psychological development of that central character that is usually youthful, that is, Plum.

It is about growth to self understanding within a defined social order. In this book there are multiple social orders (Plum's family, Maureen's world, the bitch group at school).

- Map out and discuss these various social set ups. Are they all dysfunctional? What does this suggest about the author's view of the world in the 1980s? Do you think it is any different now?

At the heart of the bildungsroman are encounters with several problems.

- What are Plum's problems? Does she solve them?

The scope of the novel is limited by the close focus on one character's situation.

- Consider the few scenes in which the action takes place, such as Plum's house, Maureen's house, school, and the time period covered.

There is an emphasis on dialogue over plot development.

It involves an epiphany.

- What is the epiphany for Plum?

The book ends with an assessment by the protagonist of her new place in society, with this self awareness coming through relationships.

- What are Plum's new awareness?

Focus

The ending

*I write for people who like to think about what they're reading, so I litter the books with falsehoods and unanswered questions and minor suggestions of major events. I really hate the idea that I must tell the reader everything in clunking detail. The reader is part of the experience that is a book, and I like the reader to have some input into the creation of the work – to decide what happens in the end, if need be...Every thoughtful reading is a correct reading as far as I can see (Sonya Hartnett in *Readings Monthly* February 2009, page 8).*

Discuss interpretations of the ending.

- What significance does it have? Does it alter your view about the ideas in the book? About Maureen?

Trace David in the book.

- Are there any suggestions that the outcome for him was inevitable? For instance on page 21: Maureen says '*There's so much ... poignancy in the air. As if summer were a living thing that's drifting gently into death.*' The events are set at the end of summer: the season is transitioning to autumn; p65: '*These end-of-summer dusks never want to finish*'; page 84 Maureen thinks, '*it feels like something lovely is ending, and all that's coming is coldness...*' Does this sound like a premonition of death? The reference to 'cold' is used on the last page of the book.

How do you see its significance? Consider a different ending and what effect that has on the novel.

Assessment

Construct a character profile of Maureen and Plum and then write the next chapter in this story from Maureen or Plum's point of view.

- Use what you know about each character from the book to inform how each reacts and what decisions they make.
- Use Sonya Hartnett's descriptive style as a model for the writing – consider her use of simile, animal analogies.

Debate

'The tone of *Butterfly* is pessimistic. Hence the title is ironic.'

Two teams of three will debate the topic and the rest of the class will be adjudicators with clearly worked criteria for assessing the winner.

See <<http://www.eduplace.com/math/mw/wr/pdf/debate.pdf>> and <<http://www.horizons.govt.nz/horizons/Images/Tips%20for%20debating.pdf>>

Further Reading

Also by Sonya Hartnett

Of a Boy (Sonya says *Butterfly* could be called *Of a Girl* it is set in the same street)

Surrender

Sleeping Dogs

Thursday's Child

Limited adolescent view of the world

Barnes, Helen *Killing Aurora*

Fey, Tina *Mean Girls* (film)

Goldsworthy, Peter *Everything I Knew* (please note: this is an adult title and some content may be unsuitable for your school)

Hyland, M. J. *How the Light Gets In*

Kuijjer, Gus *The Book of Everything*

Moloney, James *Kill the Possum*

Rosoff, Meg *How I Live Now*