

THE JEWEL, BOOK GROUP QUESTIONS

1 In her 1930 biographical novel about Burns, Catherine Carswell described Jean as a 'homely and hearty heifer'. How did your view of Jean (if you had one) change as you read the novel?

2 Why do you think that a pregnant Jean felt that she must go to Paisley when her parents forced her? What was it like for women at the time? What kind of resources would she have had?

3 Why do you think Burns got so very angry with Jean for her supposed 'betrayal' of him. What does that tell us about his feelings for her and his general mental state at the time?

4 The so called 'horse litter scene' is very controversial now, especially given that Burns wrote about it quite graphically to a male friend afterwards. It was very hard to tackle in the book. What did you feel about it, were you able to imagine yourself back to that time? And did you believe his subsequent bragging, or do you think he was feeling guilty about it and trying to justify himself?

5 The poet was, by all accounts, a 'hands on' and loving father. It is clear that a great many babies in rural Scotland were born out of wedlock at that time, and that the kirk's main aim was to get fathers to acknowledge and support their babies – a kind of social control that was actually quite good for mothers and children. Why do you think all this changed during the Industrial Revolution, so that for working women, pregnancy outside marriage was seen as disastrous?

6 When the Mauchline minister 'Daddie Auld' wrote that it is 'aye the poor who maintain the poor in this parish' what do you think he meant? What does it tell us about him? What do you think the author felt about him?

7 Highland Mary was much lauded by the Victorians. Why? Some of this still spills over into the present day, yet the evidence is that she wasn't quite as saintly as later commentators and the poet himself made her out to be. What was it that was so appealing about her?

8 How do you think Jean contributed to Burns's work, and do you feel this comes over in the book?

9 Did you get angry with Burns while reading the novel, or did you manage to maintain a soft spot for him? Did you understand why Jean fell for him? Do you think that if you were an 18th century woman, you would have felt the same?

10 Jean continued to lead a very full and contented life for many years after the poet's death. She even had tea with Clarinda. She had several offers of marriage. Why do you think she turned them all down?