

Suggested responses: 'Brown Sugar'

1. Listen to the track once without paying attention to the lyrics. What feelings does the music evoke? (Consider style/tempo/tone/etc.)

Upbeat, fast-paced, rocky, repetitious, lively, jubilant, resounding, cheery, bright, bold.

2. Verse one alludes to the enslavement and rape of 2,000 African people in New Orleans. In what ways does this jar with the musical arrangement?

The track is very upbeat and enjoyable to listen to, which makes it easy to assume that it is about a light-hearted subject matter. However, the lyrics contain references to trading enslaved people, raping women and racism, which completely contradicts the happy-go-lucky feel of the music. This suggests that the subject matter is being treated frivolously.

3. 'Brown sugar' is slang for an attractive Black woman. What does this suggest about attitudes towards women and Black people in Britain?

That women are being referred to in this dehumanising manner implies misogynistic attitudes towards women and women of colour. It suggests that women and Black people can be treated as commodities, in much the same way as enslaved Africans were treated in the historical period alluded to in the first verse.

4. Read verse two; what evidence can you find that the singer is still singing about enslavement and rape? Highlight this.

'English blood runs hot' / 'Wonderin' when it's gonna stop' / 'he's doin' all right' / 'should have heard him, just around midnight'

5. Some people have suggested that 'brown sugar' could refer to the drug heroin. Reread the lyrics with this in mind. What does this suggest about the culture of the 1960s?

'Brown sugar' could reflect the increasingly open attitudes towards drug-taking in the 1960s. The fact that the lyric is repeated in each chorus emphasises the allure of drugs for some performers during this period.

6. Verse three takes place in the present day and continues to refer to the sexual gratification of the singer by a Black woman. What does this suggest about attitudes towards women and Black people in the 1960s?

The song shows the singer moving from the role of an observer of sexual exploitation to an agent. The upbeat nature of the song and repetitive chorus insinuate that the male singer is not doing anything wrong. This suggests that some people promoted attitudes towards women allowing them to be treated as second-class citizens or commodities for the sexual gratification of men. This is even more disturbing when you consider the racial element of this song and suggests that the enslavement of Africans is comparable to this type of behaviour seen in the 1960s. If the listener sees these two cases as being comparable, it indicates that the treatment of and attitude towards Black people had not seen much change between these periods.

7. In 1995, Mick Jagger said, 'I never would write that song now.' Based on your knowledge of 1960s culture and society, highlight three lines that Jagger is referring to and explain how attitudes have changed.

'Brown sugar' is dehumanising, racist and misogynistic. It also implies that males can treat females as commodities for their own sexual gratification.

'Just like a young girl should' indicates that it is part of the role of the female to sexually satisfy their male partner.

Verse one does nothing to condemn the work of slavers. Instead, the chorus seems to legitimise the actions of these men.

8. To discuss in class: How does the fact that this is a pop song affect its usefulness to you in analysing 1960s society?

The fact that the song was written indicates that some people shared these attitudes towards both women and Black people in 1960s Britain. The purpose of the song is unclear as, under different circumstances, it could be used as a method of highlighting outdated racist attitudes and campaigning for change. However, it seems that the Rolling Stones did not approach the song in this way, meaning that it is unclear whether or not they were promoting these ideas. The fact that the song was one of their most popular but has since been seen as controversial indicates that there have been significant changes in attitude since it was written.