

BLOOD BROTHERS: NOTES FOR REVISION

Characters and their relationships within 'Blood Brothers'

Observing and discussing individual characters and their relationships with other characters is vital when gaining a thorough knowledge of a text.

Seeing the characters brought into realisation on the stage is an excellent way of gaining familiarity with these characters – and unlike many other film or stage productions, Blood Brothers has not been altered by the adaptation process, as it was written as a musical by Russell.

There are two main character relationships within the text where we can note a contrast between two characters. We of course see the immediate bond between Mickey and Eddie, and the notable differences between their separate upbringings. We also witness the turbulent relationship of Mrs Johnstone and Mrs Lyons, and here we can compare and contrast two very different characters.

Mrs Johnstone and Mrs Lyons

A large part of the tension throughout the text hangs on the superstition that Mrs Lyons uses to trap Mrs Johnstone into silence; that should Mickey and Eddie discover their brotherhood, they will both die.

Throughout the play we see the huge contrast between Mrs Lyons and Mrs Johnstone. At the beginning of the play, the Narrator describes Mrs Johnstone as 'the mother, so cruel' – but is this what we are led to think of Mrs Johnstone?

For instance, how do we react to the scene where Mrs Johnstone allows the boys to go to the cinema to watch the 'Swedish Au Pairs' film? We know that Mrs Lyons would not be as liberal. We see that Mrs Johnstone has a better understanding and acceptance of the fact that young boys will be sexually curious and she does not try to suppress their curiosity.

We see her as down-to-earth and the more approachable mother – she of course wins instant credibility with her two sons. This moment is also an example that indicates that happiness during upbringing is not assured by social status or wealth.

Rather than viewing Mrs Johnstone as a cruel character, we tend to sympathise with her dilemma. We see her handle her house full of children with endless patience and tenderness. Despite being trapped by her social position and her lack of funds, she is down-to-earth and does not see money as the answer to all of her problems. We see her refuse money from the desperate Mrs Lyons –

MRS LYONS: Thousands... I'm talking about thousands if you want it, and think what you could do with money like that.

MRS JOHNSTONE: I'd spend it. I'd buy more junk and trash; that's all. I don't want your money. I've made a life here. It's not much of one maybe, but I made it.

In contrast, Mrs Lyons is very conscious of her social position and the above scene indicates that she sees money as a solution to the problems of Mrs Johnstone. Mrs Lyons is also portrayed as a cold woman who doesn't show much emotion. She is very over-protective of Eddie and fears his bond with the Johnstones. Later in the play this fear becomes more evident and she appears as a neurotic, obsessive character who appears to be losing control – this is evident when she attempts to attack Mrs Johnstone with a kitchen knife.

Mrs. Lyons: She is a good woman, though she is made out to be mean. As her adopted child grows up, she gets increasingly paranoid that her secret will be found out, and she tries to control Eddie. The fact that she is not in control of this one situation in her life, takes over everything else in her life.

The challenging part in playing this role, is the fact that Mrs. Lyons is not on stage that much. So to portray her going from a genteel woman to an absolute psycho, effectively, while not being on stage too much, is pretty tough.

She's a very messed up woman, but of course it's the circumstances of the burden she has to shoulder on her own, that drives her to this. The paranoia of her secret being revealed, drives her completely nuts, and she is the one who actually, perhaps not expecting such a drastic outcome, causes the ultimate tragedy in the story.

Mrs. Johnstone: She's down and out with life, but has a great relationship with her children, and though life is very hard for her, finds a reason to smile.

Mickey and Eddie

For the reader/audience, the delight of watching Mickey and Eddie's friendship blossom is the knowledge that they are brothers, the fact of which they are unaware. This sense of dramatic irony is a point of humour throughout the play, but also a reminder of the superstitious curse that Mrs Lyons has inflicted – and the foreknowledge of what is going to happen.

In the first half of the show, Mickey appears as a childhood ringleader, and a hero-figure for Eddie, who is in awe of Mickey's unrestrained energy. We watch as their natural bond unfolds, and as their inhibitions fall away, we notice that they appear more alike.

In contrast, we see Eddie becoming the role model towards the end of the show. We appreciate him more for his foundations – he holds a good job and is considerate of Linda when Mickey rebukes her. We see the brothers grow apart again, as Eddie prospers and Mickey faces imprisonment and falls into depression.

Mickey: Low class, soft-hearted, good natured and easily influenced.

The life of Mickey's character starts getting very hard, with him being married at 18 or 19, his wife expecting a child, and to make things worse, he realises that he knowingly or unknowingly is dependent on his best friend Eddie, for almost everything in his life, This, tied up with a few more unfortunate incidents, eventually pushes him into depression.

From this absolutely bubbly kid with no care in the world, to a completely broken person.

Eddie: The other Johnstone twin, who is given away by his mother, and who grows up in the privileged Lyons household, is a very proper, sheltered, inhibited boy. But in reality, he wants to break away from his inhibitions and lead a life like Mickey's. In the first half of the play, his role is played almost to the point of caricature.

In a way, they both want to be like each other, but for very different reasons. While Eddie wants everything Mickey has, that money can't buy, Mickey on the other hand wants the material aspects of Eddie's life.

Class differences:

Work on **contrast** between Eddie's schooling & Mickey's.

1. Mickey and Edward are twins. Why do you think there are such differences between them?
2. How do you think a director might portray the differences between Mickey and Eddie on stage? Try to comment on the whole character and not just their appearance.
3. Both Eddie and Mickey fancy Linda. What is different in the way they show their feelings for her? Why do you think this is?
4. Why does Linda marry Mickey? How might things have been different if Eddie had proposed to her instead?
5. The relationship between Eddie and Mickey gradually turns sour as their different lives take them in different directions. Write about the events that make them fall out. Who is most responsible for the breakdown of the friendship?

Quotations: Edward

From the 6 quotes following, select the 3 which tell you most about the character of Edward, and analyse them to suggest WHAT they tell you.

1. EDWARD: Hello, Mrs Johnstone. How are you?
MRS JOHNSTONE: You what?
EDWARD: I'm sorry. Is there something wrong?
MRS JOHNSTONE: No, I just ... I don't usually have kids enquiring about my health. I'm alright. An' how are you, Master Lyons?
EDWARD: Very well, thank you.
MRS JOHNSTONE: Yeh. You look it. Does your mother look after you?
EDWARD: Of course.
2. My best friend, he could swear like a soldier.
You would laugh till you died all the stories he told you.
He was untidy from Monday till Friday
I wish that I could be like
Kick a ball and climb a tree like
Run around with dirty knees like my friend.
3. If I was him I'd bring you flowers and ask you dance.
We'd while away the hours making future plans
For rainy days in country lanes and trips to the sea
I'd just tell you that I love you if it was me.
But I'm not saying a word...
4. EDWARD: What's wrong, Mickey?
MICKEY: Nothin'. How's University?
EDWARD: Mickey, it's fantastic. I haven't been to so many parties in my life. And there's just so many tremendous people, but you'll meet them, Mickey, some of them - Baz, Ronnie and Clare and, ooh, lots of them. They're coming over to stay for the New Year, for the party. Ooh it's just ... it's great, Mickey.
5. Why is a job so important? If I couldn't get a job, I'd just say, sod it and draw the dole, live like a bohemian, tilt my hat to the world and say 'screw you'. So you're not working, Why is it so important?

6. MICKEY: How's University?

EDWARD: I thought we were always stuck together. I though we were ... blood brothers.

MICKEY: That was kid's stuff, Eddie. Didn't anyone tell y'? But I suppose you still are a kid, aren't y'?

EDWARD: I'm exactly the same age as you, Mickey.

MICKEY: Yeh, but you're still a kid.

Quotations: Mickey

From the 6 quotes following, select the 3 which tell you most about the character of Mickey, and analyse them to suggest WHAT they tell you.

1. My best friend always had sweets to share he

Knew every word in the dict-i-on-ar-y.

He was clean, neat and tidy from Monday till Friday

I wish that I could be like

Wear clean clothes, talk properly like,

Do sums and History like my friend.

2. EDWARD: Mickey, what's wrong?

MICKEY: You - you're a dick head! There are no parties arranged. there is no booze or music. Christmas? I'm sick to the teeth of Christmas an' it isn't even here yet. See, there's very little to celebrate, Eddie. Since you left I've been walking around all day, every day, lookin' for a job....

EDWARD: What about the job you had?

MICKEY: It disappeared. Y' know something, I bleedin' hated that job, standin' there all day never doin' nothin' but cardboard boxes together... But after three months of nothin', I'd crawl back to that job for half the pay and double the hours.

3. EDWARD: I'm exactly the same age as you, Mickey.

MICKEY: Yeh, but you're still a kid. An I wish I could be as well, Eddie, I wish I could still believe in all that blood brother's stuff. But I can't, because while no one was looking I grew up ... In your shoes I'd be the same, I'd still be able to be a kid. But I'm not in your shoes, I'm in these lookin' at you. An' you make me sick, right? So just take yourself away. Go an' see your friends an' celebrate with them. Go on ... beat it before I hit y'.

4. MICKEY: Get dressed up. I'm takin' y' out. We're goin' dancin', right?

Then we're goin' for a slap-up meal an' tomorrow you can go into town an' get some new clothes.

LINDA: Oh yeh? Where's the money comin' from?

MICKEY: Look, stop arguin' will y'? I'm doin' some work an' then I'm takin' you out.

SAMMY: Mickey!

LINDA: Is that your Sammy?

MICKEY: Now shut up Linda. Right? Just make sure you're ready at eight...

LINDA: Mickey... Mickey... No!

5. LINDA: What are y' doin'?

MICKEY: I'm takin' me tablet ... I need to take them ... The doctor - he said, about me nerves. An' how I get depressed an' I need to take these because they make me better...

LINDA: I get depressed, but I don't take those. You don't need those, Mickey.

MICKEY: Leave me alone, will y'? I can't cope with this. I'm not well. the doctor said, didn't he, I'm not well ... I can't do things ... leave me alone.

6. I didn't sort anything out, Linda. not a job, not a house, nothin'. It used to be just sweets an' ciggies he gave me, because I had none of me own. Now it's a job and a house. I'm not stupid, Linda. You sorted it out. You an' Councillor Eddie Lyons.

Now give me the tablets ... I need them.

Where are the fathers?

Russell, despite being male, does not show great support of the father figures within Blood Brothers and instead shows more sympathy for the role of motherhood and the notions of tenderness and nurturing. Mr Lyons plays a relatively small part in the show, often away on business, whilst Mr Johnstone appears at the beginning of the performance as a womaniser who leaves Mrs Johnstone in the lurch with children in tow.

In regard to parenthood and brotherhood, can we assume that Russell views the bond of brotherhood to be inseparable, and that nature and truth will out?

Notes

Tragedy

A play in which the central character (the tragic protagonist or hero) suffers some serious misfortune which is connected with the hero's actions, but which is generally undeserved with regard to its harshness. Tragedy stresses the vulnerability of human beings whose suffering is brought on by a combination of human and divine actions.

Monroe – a symbol of tragedy

📌 **Prologue:** Sets forth the subject and provides the background necessary for understanding the events of the play.

Prologue – BB:

In verse form: why?

Would it be as effective if in prose?

What then, is the effect of verse?

Passes on information about plot / character / theme

Acts as a commentary: allows author to convey relevant information

Challenges the audience to consider particular issues

Encourages audience to watch with certain expectations

Introduces *dramatic irony*: the audience are aware of where all the events lead whereas the characters are not.

Key Issues and Themes

- Studying characters and relationships within the text
- Childhood and adolescence, considering ideas of heredity, friendship, background education, identity, etc.
- Nature or Nurture? Is your identity formed by the way you are brought up, or does it run deeper?

- The social class system
- Surrogate parenthood
- Superstition
- The voice of the author and attitudes within the text
- Consider the importance of social, historical and cultural contexts – what events have built a foundation for the time and place of the text?
- Also consider the concept that Russell constructed the text to be performed as a piece of musical theatre.

Themes:

The social class system and inequality:

The grouping of people by occupations. The different positions represent different levels of power, influence, opportunity and wealth.

BB:

In this country, class effects how people are able to live their lives and the situations they are in; this class divide was perhaps more pronounced in previous decades. Russell believed that the class you belong to determines - to a large extent - your chances in life. In *Blood Brothers*, these differences are extreme, and Russell describes them very dramatically. In the play, class is an active and destructive force, infiltrating and perverting at least Mickey's life, and eventually destroying both brothers. Russell does not deal crassly with even this great force in his characters' lives; there is insight and true-life complexity in his treatment of the issues, and both brothers long for *aspects* of the other's life - 'I wish that I could be like my friend'. But the class divide wins out in the end and destroys them both.

• In 'Blood Brothers' Mrs Johnstone lives in a poor end of Liverpool, struggling to bring up eight children on her own and is forced to give one away to keep the others clothed and fed well enough, whereas Mrs Lyons, whom she works for, lives in a large house, very comfortably in a nice part of Liverpool, she wants children but is unable to have any, even though she is rich, unlike Mrs Johnstone.

We see social class as a conflict, mirroring the battle between the two mothers. We also see Mickey and Eddie overcoming the class boundaries to secure a bond of friendship and affection. On stage there are several indications of the class separation that cannot be made as apparent in the text.

- The use of **costume** immediately causes us to make an assumption about each character. Eddie appears with his clothes neatly pressed – Mickey appears as if he has just been 'dragged out of a hedge backwards'.

- On the stage, the **accents** can also be brought to life, again reminding us of the conflict between the classes. Eddie and the Lyons are well-spoken, traditional of the middle and higher classes – suggesting a good education and elocution lessons. The Johnstone family share a broad Liverpoolian accent, suggesting the lack of a 'proper' education and implying a connotation of 'commonness'.

Nature vs nurture:

The relative significance of a person's inborn individuality, which is considered as "nature" versus individual experiences, which is "nurture", in shaping or causing differences in physical and behavioural character.

BB:

How much does the debate of Nature vs Nurture feature in Russell's depiction of the

brothers? Do we think that an individual's identity is formed by the process in which they are nurtured, or raised, or does Russell suggest that heredity (nature) influences an individual's identity and ingrains a sense of belonging that runs back to your roots?

We see that Eddie has been nurtured into a well-spoken, middle-class boy, whereas his twin remains a working-class ruffian. However, when Eddie returns to the Johnstone household we see a change that suggests he is going back to his roots.

It is also possible to suggest that fate and heredity are working together to bring the brothers back together.

Surrogacy:

The practice of carrying a foetus to full term for another woman

BB:

Throughout the play we view the idea of surrogacy as a dangerous concept. We see from the very beginning that Mrs Johnstone is reluctant to give away her own child, and in turn we witness Mrs Lyons' manipulative nature as she coerces Mrs Johnstone into parting with her son. Again, we encounter the idea of 'Nature or Nurture?' Mrs Lyons tries her best to make Eddie her own, bringing him up the way she desires; however, Eddie still finds his way back to his roots. Mrs Lyons suffers a dreadful insecurity as a consequence of this, revealing herself as an obsessive and quite aggressive character.

We know from the beginning that Mickey and Eddie's separation is going to end in tragedy, so we always foresee their parting as a bad idea. Despite this, we are encouraged to question the ethic and moral issues surrounding the idea of surrogacy.

Superstition:

A belief resulting from ignorance, fear of the unknown, trust in magic or chance, or a false conception of causation.

BB:

The superstition imposed upon the play by Mrs Lyons – that should either Mickey or Eddie discover that they are one of a pair, they both will die – becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy – we are reminded constantly of this curse by the Narrator's repetition of the song, 'Shoes Upon the Table'.

How does the theme of superstition affect the pace of the text/play?

Love and Superstition

•Love is a theme, shown by the two women who love their sons but show it in completely different ways. Along with superstition, this is the basis of the whole story and is a theme that continues throughout the whole play, the consequences of most of the happenings can be traced back to superstition.

•It is also the reason for the tragic end of the play.

Guilt:

Mrs Johnstone is fulfilled with the theme of guilt through out most of the play because of giving her son Edward away to Mrs Lyons, but also Mrs Lyons feels guilt because she has lied to everyone about Edward being her own son, she lied to her husband, friends, family and even Edward himself. Mickey also becomes to feeling guilt because he is so depressed he cannot support himself or his family (Linda and their child) and he has to rely on Linda and Mrs Johnstone to actually support him.

Issues to bear in mind:

The role of the narrator:

Is he sympathetic but detached?

Is he an evil or a good character?

He appears dressed in a black suit: we cannot identify anything about his character, thus giving him a neutral status and a sense of anonymity.

Other characters do not acknowledge him: this gives him a ghost-like quality.

His main role throughout the show is to act as a constant reminder to us of the brothers' tragic fate – exemplified in the musical number 'Shoes Upon the Table', which is repeated throughout both acts of the show. It is also notable that as the show commences with the scene of the finale, his attire is like that of somebody who is attending a funeral – and it seems that he is dressed for such an occasion throughout the entire play.

Often, the Narrator can also be read as the voice of consciousness for both blighted mothers. He knows what will happen in the end, because he starts the show by telling us and reminds us constantly throughout that something terrible is imminent.

His words are riddled with references to ancient folklore: they centre around superstition and the idea that fate alone control destiny.

- Greek chorus offers a variety of background and summary info to help the audience follow the performance and comment on main themes.
- Also expressed what main characters could not say (fears / secrets)
- Usually communicated in song form / sometimes spoke their lines
- In later Greek drama – served as an omniscient commentator and switched between role of commentator and character.

Childhood and Adolescence

Through Russell's depiction of childhood in *Blood Brothers*, we witness two brothers experience very different upbringings. The contrast between the two brothers, who meet and become friends, brings humour to the first half of the performance.

Eddie seems to have suffered from a lack of childhood, as even when we first meet him as a child, he is very adult in his mannerisms and is polite and contained. We sense that Mrs Lyons has been overprotective and has not allowed her young son to interact with other children in messy, noisy childhood games.

So it is with awe that Eddie learns from Mickey who is totally untamed; whilst Eddie rides his imaginary horse with the graceful air of a dignitary, Mickey's horse is wild and foaming at the mouth.

In *Blood Brothers* Russell explores the ideas of fate and destiny and creates dramatic irony through the audience's foreknowledge of the twins' grim fate, whilst the brothers remain ignorant of their demise. This accentuates the sense of childhood innocence in the first half of the performance.

We see Mickey and Eddie indulge in childhood games of gunfights, which we find more poignant as we already foresee their death-scene. This also brings a bitter taste of irony to Mickey's involvement in a shooting later in the play. This in turn leads to his incarceration, depression and the desperation in which he pulls a gun on his best friend and brother.

How much does the debate of Nature vs Nurture feature in Russell's depiction of the

brothers? Do we think that an individual's identity is formed by the process in which they are nurtured, or raised, or does Russell suggest that heredity (nature) influences an individual's identity and ingrains a sense of belonging that runs back to your roots?

We see that Eddie has been nurtured into a well-spoken, middle-class boy, whereas his twin remains a working-class ruffian. However, when Eddie returns to the Johnstone household we see a change that suggests he is going back to his roots.

It is also possible to suggest that fate and heredity are working together to bring the brothers back together. The bond of their friendship disregards childhood fickleness and has a true air of sincerity.

A play with music – why?

The songs carry the narrative forward / the music heightens the atmosphere.

The voice of the author / attitudes within the text

It is important to be aware of the voice of the author

Also, the different attitudes in the text: a spectrum of attitudes represented by different characters.

Additionally, we need to be aware of our own attitudes to the text. How does the text make us feel and what are our opinions?

Importance of social, historical and cultural contexts

Monroe:

She suggests an era for the play: the late 50s/early 60s: it is important to understand the stigma and boundaries that surrounded the social classes at that time.

Economic climate:

Second half: Russell targets unemployment: Liverpool had one of the highest levels of unemployment in the developed world – 25% of the workforce out of a job.

Margaret Thatcher - the unnamed character

Margaret Thatcher does not appear in the play, but you could suggest that she is the most important character in it!

Margaret Thatcher became Britain's first woman Prime Minister in 1979. But if some people hoped that 'a woman's touch' would lead to more caring policies, they were very much mistaken.

Thatcher's basic premise was that working Britain had got lazy. British industry, she said, needed to face the chill wind of foreign competition. She confronted the Trade Unions and reduced their power - notably during the Miners' Strike of 1984-5. Meanwhile, to combat inflation, she raised interest rates and reduced government spending. The result was a severe economic depression. Manufacturing output fell by a fifth, and unemployment rose to over 3 million. At the same time, however, people dependent on the Welfare State (especially single mothers) were stereotyped as scroungers and spongers. One Tory minister told them to 'get on their bike' and go and find a job. For the poor, therefore, the 1980s were a time of great hardship.

It is possible to see *Blood Brothers* as an attack on Thatcherism, particularly in the cruelty of how the secretary 'Mrs Jones' loses her job (she is forced to type the letter to herself announcing her own redundancy), and in the destructive effects of unemployment on Mickey's life. It is unemployment which reduces him to despair, throws him into the bungled robbery,

and then keeps him on the pills. These effects were all too common in the 1980s, when Russell was writing his play. Mickey's depression is arguably a metaphor for the state of Britain in the 1980s.

So, in a very real sense, it was not Mrs Johnstone, the curse of the separated twins or even 'class' which killed Edward and Mickey - it was Mrs Thatcher.

Contrastingly, while the poor struggled in Thatcherite Britain, there was plenty of money sloshing around for the rich 'yuppies' who were exemplified in Harry Enfield's comedy persona 'LOADSA' money!' Thatcher sold off the nationalised industries to private shareholders, reduced income tax and Council tax, and sold Council houses to their owners. During her time as Prime Minister, the gap between rich and poor widened significantly, and it is tempting to see the gap between Edward and Mickey in Willy Russell's play as reflecting this difference in British society.

Motifs

The 'never never' (you have to pay in the end).

Marilyn Monroe (a symbol of tragedy)

The use of the iconic status of Marilyn Monroe – used as a kind of timeline that parallels the rise and fall of events. At the beginning of the play, Mrs Johnstone is younger and as yet without an extensive family; she compares herself to the young rising star of Marilyn Monroe. Towards the end of the performance, Marilyn Monroe's demise reflects the sad change in events within the play.

Dancing (a metaphor for fun).

Dramatic devices

Poetry:

Improvise the opening of the play so that the narrator speaks in prose.

Is it as effective?

Discuss the differences between prose and poetry and why Willy Russell uses this device.

Think about the rhythm / pace / tempo / atmosphere.

FINAL THOUGHTS:

Through Blood Brothers Russell encourages us to challenge the assumption that money = happiness.

We sympathise with Mrs Johnstone and grow to understand that despite her background and lack of money she is the better parent. This challenges any assumptions that suggests wealth would afford a better, happier upbringing.

Throughout Blood Brothers, the audience's sympathy lies with Mrs Johnstone – we know that she gives her own son away, but we see that it is with good intentions, and despite her lack of money and her numerous children, we feel she could give Eddie a happier, more loving childhood.