

**GCSE ENGLISH
LITERATURE
SUPPORT PACK**

**Willy Russell's
Blood Brothers**

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Context

Plot summary

Key characters

Themes

Important quotes

Essay questions

Context

- Play set 1960s-1980s
- Poverty – rising unemployment, recession
- Youth Culture- fashion, music, hobbies, interests, mass advertising (exposed people to films etc) = freedom and potential
- Male gaze – feminist idea of how women were viewed (Marilyn Monroe)
- Family still traditional – nuclear family
- Social laws = homosexuality became legal, divorce became easier
- Most families were patriarchal
- 1970s – industry was in decline = recession and unemployment. Prime minister closed down industries in the UK as it wasn't economically viable. Working class communities particularly affected. Liverpool affected – docks closed
- Benefits/dole = increase in depression and crime rates
- Council houses were over-crowded and poor in quality – new homes built
- Strong class divide

Plot Summary

Act 1

The musical *Blood Brothers* begins as its Narrator tells the audience about the Johnstone twins, Mickey and Edward, who were separated at birth and died on the same day. We next meet the twins' mother, Mrs. Johnstone, a lower-class woman who was abandoned by her husband after giving birth to five children, and while pregnant with another. She reminisces about the days when she used to go dancing with her husband, who made her feel like Marilyn Monroe. Now, however, her life is a never-ending cycle of unpaid bills and hungry children. She works at the house of Mrs. Lyons, a wealthy woman who longs for a child of her own. Mrs. Johnstone is devastated to find that she's carrying twins. There's no way she can afford to feed two more mouths. An unlikely solution presents itself, however, in the form of Mrs. Lyons, who pleads to take one of the twins—but only if Mrs. Johnstone swears, on the Bible, never to reveal the truth of their bargain. The Narrator warns that misfortunes will follow. Soon after, Mrs. Johnstone gives birth, and as Mrs. Lyons takes one of her twin boys away, the poorer woman laments all the debts she's had to pay. When she goes home, she lies to her children, telling them that one of the twins has died. After Mrs. Johnstone returns to work, Mrs. Lyons grows jealous and suspicious, believing that Mrs. Johnstone is paying too much attention to the new baby. She proceeds to fire Mrs. Johnstone—and when the cleaning lady tries to take her baby back, Mrs. Lyons, knowing Mrs. Johnstone to be superstitious, comes up with a fatal lie. She tells Mrs. Johnstone that if two twins, separated at birth, ever learn the truth about their origins, they will die on the spot. Horrified, Mrs. Johnstone agrees to keep their secret. The Narrator warns that one day the Devil will come to punish the two women.

Seven years pass, and Mickey, the twin who stayed with Mrs. Johnstone, grows up in a rough-and-tumble environment. Edward, who grew up believing Mrs. Lyons to be his mother, matures in the lap of luxury. When still boys, the two meet by chance, and become fast friends. When they find that they share a birthday, they agree to become "blood brothers," allying against Mickey's bullying older brother, Sammy. When Mrs. Johnstone realizes that the two have met, she is horrified, and sends Edward away. Mrs. Lyons reacts even more violently, and contemplates uprooting her entire family in order to escape. Despite their mothers' disapproval, Mickey and Edward continue to see each other, and we witness a series of children's games (many involving guns), as the two boys play with their other friend, Linda. The trio gets up to various pranks, eventually drawing the attention of the police, who threaten Mrs. Johnstone while flattering Mr. Lyons. Mrs. Lyons takes this moment to move her family to the country, despite Edward's lack of enthusiasm. Before Edward leaves, however, Mrs. Johnstone gives him a locket with a picture of herself and Mickey, so that he can always remember them. The boys are lonely without each other, but the first act ends on an optimistic note: Mrs. Johnstone's family is

being relocated to the country as well, a move that she hopes will remove her children from a life of crime and squalor, and will help her to forget the sins of her past.

Act 2

As Act Two opens, seven years have passed, and the boys are now fourteen. Both have become interested in girls, but feel awkward and unsure. Mickey and Linda, meanwhile, clearly have romantic feelings for each other, but Mickey's lack of confidence has thus far kept them from any real connection. A moment of violence ruins this relatively calm beginning, as Sammy, now a full-fledged juvenile delinquent, attempts to rob a bus. Mickey and Edward both struggle at school, with Mickey insulting a teacher, and Edward refusing to take off the locket despite his posh boarding school's dress code. When Mrs. Lyons learns of his disobedience, she's appalled, and she becomes even more upset when she sees the contents of the locket. The Narrator returns once again to remind Mrs. Lyons, and us, that the devil will be coming eventually. After a failed romantic interaction with Linda, Mickey spots Edward, wishing that he could be suave and cool like "that guy." Edward, meanwhile, longs for what he sees as Mickey's freedom. The two meet, and after a moment, joyfully recognize each other. The two decide to see a porn film together, and set off for Mrs. Johnstone's house together so that Mickey can get money—unaware that Mrs. Lyons is following them. Mrs. Johnstone is shocked but delighted to see her long-lost son. After the boys exit, Mrs. Lyons emerges. She accuses Mrs. Johnstone of stealing Edward's affection, and claims that her son was never hers. She becomes violent, and attacks Mrs. Johnstone with a kitchen knife. Although eventually disarmed, she curses Mrs. Johnstone, calling her a witch, before exiting. The boys meet up with Linda and experience yet another scrape with the police, before deciding to spend the summer together. An idyllic sequence follows, in which the trio transitions from fourteen to eighteen, glorying in the joys of youth and summer, even as the Narrator warns that soon, both their joy and their childhood will end.

At eighteen, Edward—who has developed feelings for Linda—is going to university, while Mickey is working in a factory. With some encouragement from the self-sacrificing Edward, Mickey asks Linda to be his girlfriend, and she enthusiastically accepts. In October, Mickey gives Mrs. Johnstone news: Linda is pregnant, and the two will be getting married. Their wedding, however, coincides with a severe economic downturn, and Mickey is fired. By the time that Edward returns for the Christmas holiday, his friend is downtrodden and careworn. Mickey tells Edward that he is still a child, and doesn't know anything about life, claiming that the idea of blood brothers was just "kid stuff." A rejected Edward meets up with Linda and confesses his love to her, but leaves after finding that she has married Mickey and is pregnant. Mickey, impoverished and desperate, agrees to participate in a burglary with Sammy. The crime goes awry, and Sammy murders someone; he and Mickey are sentenced to jail. Imprisoned, Mickey becomes depressed, and is prescribed addictive antidepressants. After he's released, he

continues taking the pills, despite the pleas of his mother and his wife. Eventually, a desperate Linda asks Edward, now a city councilman, for help finding an apartment and getting Mickey a job. After Mickey reacts with anger at her efforts, the devastated Linda seeks comfort with Edward, and begins an affair with him. As the two carry on their affair, Mickey resolves to stop taking his pills, for Linda's sake. He's derailed when Mrs. Lyons—fully unhinged—reveals Linda and Edward's affair. The enraged Mickey finds a gun and sets out to confront Edward, followed by a distraught Linda and Mrs. Johnstone. The Narrator warns that the devil has arrived. Finding Edward in the town hall, Mickey accuses him not simply of the affair, but of secretly fathering his child, which Edward denies. As Mickey continues to threaten Edward with the gun, Mrs. Johnstone bursts in and tells the young men the truth: that they are twins, separated at birth. This revelation completely unhinges Mickey, however, as he realizes that he could be the one living Edward's life. As he gesticulates wildly with the gun, he accidentally shoots and kills his twin, and is immediately shot and killed by the police in turn. The play ends with this horrific and bloody tableau, as the Narrator wonders what really killed the twins: superstition, or the British class system.

Characters

Narrator



The Narrator is a **choric character**.

The Narrator is the first character, in fact the sole character, we see on the stage at the start of the play. He enters and exits the stage frequently, highlighting points of tension and serving as a point of transition between the scenes. When he appears and sings verses from 'Shoes Upon The Table' ('You know the devil's got your number'), the audience knows that another piece of the action has just fallen into place to lead to the tragic end. He is there when Mrs Johnstone agrees to give one of the twins to Mrs Lyons and comments that they've 'overlook[ed] the fact' that 'a debt is a debt, and must be paid' and he's there when Edward becomes friends with Mickey and Linda. As the bus conductor, he reminds Mrs Johnstone that 'no one gets off without the price bein' paid' and he's there when Sammy and Mickey commit their robbery. Towards the end of Act II it specifies in the stage directions that he '*watches LINDA*' when she telephones Eddie; this draws attention to this moment as being the turning point that precipitates the chain of events that lead to the inevitable end.

Some productions have the Narrator observing the action from the side or above on a balcony, making him a constant, foreboding presence. He is typically dressed in a dark suit making him seem like an undertaker, which adds to the atmosphere of tragedy. He could be seen as the devil of his song, or symbol of the devil, a bogeyman, that is going to exact the final price.

The Narrator also takes several small parts in the action including: the milkman; the gynaecologist; the bus conductor; the teachers and different roles during the three friends' teenage summer together. This fits with the ensemble style, typical of work written for and at The Playhouse Theatre, as well as lending a threatening presence to these otherwise more comical scenes.

Characterisation is the ways in which the traits of the characters are conveyed to the readers or audience.

Choric character – a choric character comments on the action and usually doesn't take much part in the main action. The idea of a chorus (a group of performers) comes from Greek tragic drama where they could take part in, comment on or provide the poetic or musical parts of plays.

Ensemble style – where different members of the cast play many parts.

Mrs Johnstone

At the beginning of the play Mrs Johnstone is a single mother of seven children who is described in the stage directions as '*aged thirty but looks more like fifty*', although in her opening song Mrs Johnstone describes herself as 'twenty-five' but looking 'forty-two'; either way she is young but her life has aged her prematurely.

At the beginning of the play the Narrator says that the story is of 'a mother, so cruel, | There's a stone in the play of her heart' and invites the audience to judge her for themselves. Mrs Johnstone is depicted as a tragic figure through her comparison to Marilyn Monroe; her **tragic flaw** is perhaps her gullibility but she could also be seen as the victim of her circumstances, a single mother with little money who tried to give one of her children the chance of a better life.



Tragic flaw – a defect or fault within the character of a hero or heroine that leads to their failure or disastrous end.



Mrs Lyons

Mrs Jennifer Lyons is the middle-class contrast to Mrs Johnstone: she has a big house, plenty of money, a husband but no children. Mrs Lyons' vulnerability is revealed through her verse in the song 'My Child' in which she confesses her dreams of having her own child.

She is presented as quite manipulative, asking her husband for a substantial sum of money which she says is for things for the baby and nursery, and then using the money to pay Mrs Johnstone to leave. She then threatens Mrs Johnstone with prison and when that does not seem to work, makes up the superstition that twins 'secretly parted' will 'immediately die' if they ever learn that they are a twin.

She is portrayed several times as violent. When Mrs Johnstone says she will take Edward, Mrs Lyons '*roughly drags her out of the way*'. She hits Edward '*hard and instinctively*' when he swears and tries to attack Mrs Johnstone with a kitchen knife when she refuses to leave Skelmersdale.

Mrs Lyons' mental state is shown to gradually disintegrate during the play. One key way this is conveyed is through the way she reacts to superstitions. At the beginning of the play she laughs at them but then as she becomes more desperate about losing Edward, she starts to believe them. She is referred to as a 'mad woman' by kids' voices (offstage) in a chant just after she threatens Mrs Johnstone.

Mr Lyons

Mr Lyons is distant from the most of the domestic scenes in the play. He always seems to be rushing off to work, the stage direction when we first meet him just after the twins have been born has him '*glancing at his watch*' and then saying 'I've got a board meeting. I really must dash'. He is traditional about the division of their responsibilities, feeling that the decisions about their home are his wife's 'domain'.

Unlike Mrs Johnstone, Mr Lyons is treated with respect by the policeman, who calls him 'sir' and the two men are able to resolve Edward's 'prank' over a drink. Mr Lyons' final scene is as a managing director who is making lots of workers, including Mickey, redundant. He sings 'Take A Letter Miss Jones', which takes quite a cavalier approach to laying people off, blaming 'the times', 'the world situation' and 'the recession'.

Throughout the play Mr and Mrs Lyons represent a comfortable middle class, who are never troubled by money troubles or financial insecurity. Edward inherits this secure existence, enabled by his private school and university education.



Mickey

Mickey (Michael) Johnstone is the twin that stays with his mother Mrs Johnstone. He is the youngest of the Johnstones and seems to suffer at the hands of his older brother Sammy. At seven Mickey is streetwise, shown through his knowledge of swear words and the fact that he has a penknife, but when playing with the other kids Mickey gets singled out and has to rely on his friend Linda for protection and comfort.

Mickey at fourteen is presented as a typical teenager, self-conscious about his appearance and starting to be interested in girls. The scenes on the bus and in the classroom show that Linda is still supporting and defending him. When he leaves school his narrow range of job opportunities is represented by him having a boring factory job making cardboard boxes, which disappears when the economy turns bad. The effect that losing his job has on Mickey is presented by his aggression towards his blood brother when Edward returns from university. This turns to depression after his involvement in the robbery, when Sammy shoots the garage worker, as he is described in the stage directions as having '*tears streaming down his face*' and is '*silently crying*' when he is arrested and continues crying when he is in prison.

While in prison he is compared to Marilyn Monroe because she struggled with depression and was prescribed medication. Mrs Johnstone's song continues to narrate his release from prison but describes him as looking 'fifteen years older' and having slow speech, presumably the effects of the medication he is taking.

Mickey could be seen as the tragic hero of the play, his disappointment with his life leading to his plan to shoot Edward for taking Linda. The real tragedy happens, however, when Mrs Johnstone arrives, Mickey has just said that that he couldn't shoot Edward and that he wasn't even sure if the gun was loaded when his Mum tells them that they are twins. Mickey's fury at this, his rage that if he had been given away instead of Edward then he would have had a better life, causes his gun to go off, killing Edward.

Edward



Edward is the twin who is taken by Mrs Lyons to bring up as her own. Mrs Johnstone, Mickey and Linda all immediately shorten his name to Eddie, which shows us the more informal life he would have had if he had stayed with Mrs Johnstone.

Edward's social status or class is represented by the way he speaks, especially when compared to Mickey. His accent and his higher level of vocabulary represent his middle-class upbringing. When the twins meet aged fourteen Edward says 'shag the vicar' and Mickey laughs at his 'posh voice'. Edward is presented as more confident about expressing himself than Mickey as, due to his superior education, he has a wider, more mature and more expressive vocabulary; he is able to create a parody of romantic clichés about how to speak to girls because he's 'read about it', saying 'my loins are burning for you' and describing Linda's imagined reply as a 'husky ... be gentle with me, be gentle'. Edward appears more confident overall, he is the one who suggests they go and watch '*Nymphomaniac Nights* and *Swedish Au Pairs*' and who dances around shouting 'tits, tits, tits' in the street afterwards, and who jumps around the lamp post and says 'Adolf Hitler' to the policeman. He also orchestrates Mickey and Linda finally getting together just before he goes off to university, despite the fact that he loves Linda too and is able to articulate his feelings much more eloquently than Mickey when he sings 'I'm Not Saying A Word'.

Although *Blood Brothers* purports to be 'the story of the Johnstone twins' more of Mickey's story is told than Edward's. Edward's more privileged upbringing is there to serve as a contrast to Mickey's working-class life and to demonstrate the sort of life Mickey could have had if he had the same opportunities. Still, Edward's life is not presented as perfect: his dad is absent a lot as he is at work; he is teased by other students at school and bullied by his teacher; his relationship with Mrs Lyons is sometimes difficult; and he loses the girl he loves to Mickey.

Discuss...

Why does Mickey wish he could have been Edward?



Linda

Linda is the same age as Mickey and Edward and lives close to Mickey. She comes across as feisty and confident, unafraid to stand against the larger groups of older kids in defence of Mickey. Linda receives the ultimate compliment a seven-year old-boy can give from Mickey when he introduces her to Edward saying 'she's a girl but she's all right', and she turns out to be a crack shot with Sammy's air gun, hitting the Peter Pan statue every time.

During the 'Summer Sequence' there is a premonition of what is to come when the scene freezes as she is between the two twins playing piggy-in-the-middle as the narrator says 'who'd tell the girl in the middle of the pair | The price she'll pay for just being there'. Here Linda is presented as an innocent victim caught up in the tragic story of the twins.

After Mickey comes out of prison Linda's physical appearance and demeanour has changed. The stage directions describe how she '*is weighed down with shopping bags and is weary*' and her renewed contact with Edward is described by the Narrator, at the beginning of 'Light Romance', as her trying to rediscover the 'girl inside the woman'.

At the end of the play Mrs Johnstone retakes the central position between the two boys that had been occupied by Linda.

Sammy

Sammy is Mickey and Edward's older brother, Mrs Johnstone's seventh child. When he is ten Sammy cuts a very impressive figure, according to his younger brother. Mickey admires him for having 'two worms and a catapult | An' he's built an underground den'. Other attributes include spitting, playing with matches, going to bed late, drawing 'nude women' and weeing through next door's letter box. There is already, however, a slightly darker side to Sammy, even at ten - he takes Mickey's toys, including his gun and his car, which he breaks, and Mickey says that 'y' have to be dead careful if our Sammy gives y'a sweet' because 'if our Sammy gives y' a sweet he's usually weed on it first'. Mickey also tells Edward that when Sammy was little and had been left in the care of his big sister Donna Marie, he 'fell out the window an' broke his head' which meant that he had to have a plate put in it (this would be a metal plate put in to replace a broken or missing piece of skull). Sammy takes a lead role in 'Kids' Game' in the opposite gang to Mickey and Linda and tends to come out on top, producing a '*bazooka*' when faced with a gun and making a bomb as Professor Howe. Linda is the only one who gets the better of him when she threatens to tell her mother 'why all her ciggies always disappear when you're in our house'.

Unfortunately the move to the country doesn't seem to improve Sammy. We learn from Mrs Johnstone's opening in Act II that 'our Sammy burnt the school down' and then he robs the bus conductor at knifepoint. The character Sammy is always hovering in the background of Mickey's life as a warning of the road he shouldn't take; both Linda and Mrs Johnstone warn Mickey not to be like Sammy.

Sammy is aligned with guns from the start of the play. He steals Mickey's toy gun and it is Sammy's air gun that the twins and Linda use to shoot at Peter Pan and it is the gun that he hides after the garage shooting that Mickey fetches when he goes after Edward at the end of the play.



Did you know? – In the touring production of *Blood Brothers* Linda is made to stand out from the other children because her dress is bright red.



Policeman

There is a policeman in a few key scenes. It does not really matter if the same actor from the chorus plays all the policemen each time or if different actors do, as it is the role which is important rather than whether or not it is the same person. The first policeman, who appears when the children are seven, is used to demonstrate how the Johnstones and the Lyons are treated differently by someone in authority. A policeman is also there to celebrate at the end of Act I when the Johnstones are moving away because he feels that will be 'a sharp drop in the crime rate' when they're gone. After the cinema trip their run-in with a policeman shows that Edward, Mickey and Linda have grown up a bit as they are now able to give him the slip. There are two policemen at the very end of the play who are used to create an authentic crisis situation by entering through the auditorium. It is police guns that kill Mickey.

Donna Marie

Donna Marie is older sister to Sammy, Mickey and Edward. She is there really to remind the audience that there are older siblings than Sammy and Mickey living with Mrs Johnstone. The only other time Donna Marie is mentioned is to indicate how much time has passed between the acts as Mrs Johnstone says that her older children have left home and that Donna Marie already has three children of her own.

Perkins

Perkins is one of the students in Mickey's class in the school scene. He is a keen student and is eager to answer the question about the Boro Indians. The teacher's rude and dismissive response, he says 'shut up Perkins, y' borin' little turd', illustrates the dire atmosphere in the school.

Miss Jones

Miss Jones is Mr Lyons' secretary at the factory and is writing the letters that are laying the workers off. The irony of the song is that eventually she gets one of the letters herself.

Sarah Johnstone


Sarah is Mickey and Linda's daughter; she never appears on stage but Linda checks that Mrs Johnstone has picked her up from school ('did y' get our Sarah from school') and so illustrates that five or six years must have passed while Mickey was in prison.

Themes

Class

At the end of the play, straight after the twins die, the Narrator asks two questions:

‘And do we blame superstition for what came to pass?
Or could it be what we, the English, have come to know as class?’



Class – a group of people who share a social and economic position in society.


Willy Russell is quite clear, in the extract from his letter to Chris Bond, reprinted in the Methuen Edition of the play (pp. 95-96), that he wanted to show that ‘class splits these two brothers, that class keeps them apart, that class killed them’. Mickey’s cry, when he finds out that Edward was given away; ‘I could have been him’ conveys his anger at the circumstances of his own life. Edward’s middle-class upbringing has given him a better education and a secure job and Mickey is angry that his working-class upbringing gave him none of the same opportunities but instead offered him insecure employment and exposure to crime and criminal behaviour. Mickey’s lack of opportunity, compared to Edward, means that he ended up spending many years in prison, has become dependent on drugs and thinks that he has lost his wife. It is the chronic unfairness of this, when both brothers started off in life exactly the same, that leads to their tragic ends when the gun in Mickey’s hand explodes.

The play does not, however, present a simplistic view of class where the middle-class way of life is better than the working-class one. Edward’s private school is not perfect, he is teased and suspended for having a locket and Mr Lyons sometimes seems more interested in work than his family. Despite being deprived of financial security and educational and work opportunities, Mickey does have the love and support of his mother and Linda and, while ‘Kids’ Game’ does show that the working-class kids are a bit rough, it also looks great fun. Mrs Johnstone may be old before her time but she is shown to be happy with her life in Skelmersdale when she rejects Mrs Lyons’ offer of more money to move.

By portraying both positive and negative sides to middle-class and working-class life neither is shown to be better than the other, instead it is the inequality of opportunity that is to blame.


Superstition

Belief in superstition is seen, at the beginning of the play at least, as an indication of being working class. Mrs Lyons laughs at Mrs Johnstone for being superstitious and then tells Edward that the 'bogey man' is something a 'silly mother' might tell her children about, but her fragile emotional state is demonstrated when Edward is missing by her suddenly pushing the shoes that Mr Lyons has put on the table to the floor. Edward mentions the superstition about magpies just after they move to the country to show that, despite Mrs Lyons' hopes, he hasn't lost his connections to the Johnstones and their beliefs just because they've moved away.



Superstition is an irrational belief based on things such as omens or charms or luck.


The Narrator refers to other superstitions in the song 'Shoes Upon The Table' straight after Mrs Lyons makes up the superstition about twins separated at birth, and superstitions are repeated at key points during the play to build tension. The link between the Narrator and superstition makes him a kind of bogey man in the play and so superstition serves as a useful means of creating a sense of threat and tension, and in the end Mrs Lyons' made-up superstition about separated twins dying comes true.



Did you know? – Malevolent spirits such as bogey men, sprites and goblins are prevalent in folklore and in folk songs so Willy Russell would have been used to having these kinds of devices in songs he heard, sang and wrote. Examples of traditional ballads can be found at: www.contemplator.com/folk.html

Nature versus nurture


The use of twins being separated makes the nature vs nurture question more prominent than if it had been just siblings or friends who were being brought up in different types of homes. Nurture is made the focus because the two boys had an identical starting point (nature). Edward's confidence, eloquence, education and success are clearly portrayed as being down to class rather than any innate qualities. In the same way Mickey's unemployment, involvement in crime, depression and then violence are laid at the door of his class (nurture) rather than a character flaw (nature).



Nature versus nurture is the question of which is more significant – an individual's innate or natural qualities or abilities (nature) or the external opportunities or circumstances (nurture) of their experience.

Fate


The twins' tragic fate is set from the very beginning of the play in the prologue when the narrator says that they 'lay slain'. Like in all tragedies there is no sense that it is ever possible for them to escape from this end, the only question is how events will unfold to lead them there.



Fate means that the course of events and their ending are inevitable or predetermined.


Debt/repayment

Mrs Johnstone seems to be perpetually in debt to finance companies and catalogues for all her possessions. At the beginning of the play she is unable to repay what she owes so her things are repossessed.



Debt – an amount of money or an obligation that has to be paid or performed.

This idea of living with debt and the need to pay for what you have is extended into the rest of her life too. She describes her relationship to the twin she is going to give away as being on 'borrowed time' in the song 'Easy Terms'. As soon as she agrees to give away one of her twins the Narrator describes it as a 'reckoning' and the phrase 'a debt is a debt, and must be paid' is repeated through the play.



Reckoning – calculating the total or paying a bill.

The twins' death is the price that Mrs Johnstone and Mrs Lyons have to pay for the secret deal they make about separating them, and Linda has to pay the price for loving them both by losing them both.

Escape

Despite the inevitability of the tragic end of *Blood Brothers* the theme of escape is present in places. Mrs Johnstone justifies giving away one of her twins by imagining that she is allowing him to escape from the grinding poverty of her life because he 'wouldn't have to worry where his next meal is comin' from'. Mrs Johnstone dreams of escaping to somewhere where she can 'start all over again' and this comes true, to a certain extent, when they move to Skelmersdale at the end of Act I. Linda's affair with Edward is seen as her trying to escape from her hard life as Mickey's wife. The Narrator says:

*There's a girl inside the woman
Who's waiting to get free
She's washed a million dishes
She's always making tea.*

But he also warns there is a 'price' for 'letting the young girl out' as her affair with Edward leads to Mickey coming after him with his gun.

Motherhood

The contrasting characters of Mrs Johnstone and Mrs Lyons raise the theme of motherhood. Mrs Johnstone has a large chaotic brood and can't offer them financial security, the most basic of material possessions or control them all, but does say she 'loves the bones of every one of them'. While Mickey's life chances are nothing compared to Edward's he does seem to enjoy a warm relationship with his mother; Edward comments 'she's fabulous your ma'. When Mickey and Linda need somewhere to live after they're married Mrs Johnstone does not hesitate to let them stay with her.


While Mrs Lyons is able to offer Edward 'a bike with both wheels on' and dreams of caring for a child, in reality there is not the same closeness between them as there is between Mrs Johnstone and Mickey. She says to Mrs Johnstone 'I never made him mine' and Edward seems naturally drawn to the Johnstones.

While nurture might seem to win over nature when it comes to education and job opportunities, the link between the biological mother and her biological child is presented as stronger than the one between the adoptive mother and child. Or could it be that the working-class family is being presented as closer than the middle-class one?

Ideas and Messages

Fairness of opportunity

The twins' story illustrates the ways in which the working class are deprived of the same choices and chances that the middle class enjoy. Russell highlights the differences in their experiences of education, the way they are treated by the police and the job opportunities that are available, or not available, to them.



The **ideas and messages** of the play are the meanings that are inherent in the story, the significance or purpose of the play to the author, readers and audiences.

The Narrator's question to the audience at the end - about whether it is superstition or class that is to blame - is designed to draw our attention to the different opportunities that different class backgrounds have offered them, and it is clear from Mickey's anguished final cry 'I could have been him!' that Mickey blames his environment.

Crime and punishment

Mickey, as a working-class boy, is shown to be far more vulnerable to harsher treatment by the police, the courts and the penal system, than Edward. Mickey's desperation for money when he is unemployed is something that Edward, a middle-class boy, never experiences and so the temptation towards criminal behaviour is something that only the working-class twin even encounters.

Violence

Violence permeates both families in the play and runs as a threatening undercurrent from the very beginning. This is presented through the use of the guns and also the knives. It is not just Sammy who uses violence but also Mrs Lyons, who hits Edward when he is a small boy and then attacks Mrs Johnstone with a knife when the boys are teenagers. Although Mickey kills Edward, the police then kill Mickey, which means that the fatal violence at the end is enacted by both the working-class man and figures in authority. The violent acts and violent ends cut across the class barriers both in those who perpetrate them and those who are the victims.

Key Quotations

GCSE Literature Knowledge Organiser: Blood Brothers	
<p>Key Quotes</p> <p>“the mother, so cruel, there’s a stone in place of her heart” Mrs Johnstone, motherhood,</p>	<p>“Do we blame superstition for what came to pass? Or could it be what we, the English, have come to know as class?” superstition, social class</p>
<p>“never put new shoes on a table” Mrs Johnstone, Mrs Lyons, superstition</p>	<p>“By the time I was twenty-five, I looked like forty-two” Mrs Johnstone, social class</p>
<p>“Mrs Lyons shows the Bible to Mrs Johnstone” Mrs Lyons, Mrs Johnstone, superstition</p>	<p>“If my child was raised in a palace like this one” Mrs Johnstone, Mrs Lyons, social class</p>
<p>“You do know what they say about twins, secretly parted” Mrs Lyons, manipulation, superstition</p>	<p>“a debt is a debt, and must be paid” Narrator</p>
<p>“pissed off” / “you say smashing things... I will look them up in the dictionary” Mickey, Edward, social class, childhood, education</p>	<p>“the devil’s got your number” Narrator</p>
<p>“The whole thing’s just a game” childhood, violence</p>	<p>“the bogey man” / “the sort of thing a silly mother might say” Mrs Lyons, superstition</p>
<p>“it was more of a prank, really” Edward, power/authority</p>	<p>“he was about to commit a serious crime” Mickey, power/authority</p>
<p>“take a flying fuck at a rolling donut” / “it’s borin’” Edward/Mickey, power, education</p>	<p>“bright new day, we’re goin’ away” Mrs Johnstone, hope, social class</p>
<p>“I’m coming too” Linda, education</p>	<p>“Gis a sweet!” “Gis a ciggie?” Edward/Mickey, social class</p>
<p>“workin’ overtime” / “I go away to university tomorrow” Mickey/Edward, education</p>	<p>“it’s a sign of the times, Miss Jones” Social class</p>
<p>“If I could stand inside his shoes I’d say, How can I compare thee to a summer’s day” Edward, relationships, education</p>	<p>“there’s a girl inside the woman waiting to get free” Linda</p>
<p>“I’d crawl back to that job for half the pay and double the hours” Mickey, class</p>	<p>“I grew up. An’ you didn’t, because you didn’t need to” Mickey,</p>
<p>“You sorted it out. You and Councillor Eddie Lyons” Mickey, Linda</p>	<p>“It’s just a light romance” Mrs Johnstone, Linda</p>
<p>“How come you got everything... an’ I got nothin’?”</p>	<p>“I could have been him!” Mickey, social class</p>

Essay advice

You should spend 45 minutes on this section.

You are given a choice of 2 different questions. One will be on theme, and one on character but examiners expect to see knowledge of themes and characters in any response. Students should plan responses to essay questions on any theme or main character.

You should try to memorise 15 quotes in total and ensure they are taken from each key character from various points in the play. You should try to use between 5-7 quotes in your response.

What the examiner wants to see:

‘A candidate’s response is likely to be a critical, exploratory, well-structured argument. It takes a conceptualised approach to the full task supported by a range of judicious references. There will be a fine-grained and insightful analysis of language and form and structure supported by judicious use of subject terminology. Convincing exploration of one or more ideas/perspectives/contextual factors/interpretations.’

- There is an assured personal response, showing a high level of engagement with the text and discerning choice of references to the text.
- A critical style is developed with maturity, perceptive understanding and interpretation with discerning choice of references to the text.
- The understanding of relevant contexts is excellent.
- Understanding of the relationship between text and context is integrated convincingly into the response.
- Analysis of the writers’ methods and language used

Subject terminology to use for AO2:

- **Foreshadowing** – warning, hinting at events to come later in the play
- **Antithesis** – a person or thing that is the direct opposite of someone or something else.
- **Rhetorical question** – asking a question designed to encourage thinking.
- **Characterisation** – The way a character is presented to us
- **Stage Directions**
- **Dramatic Irony** – When the audience is aware of something the characters are not

- **Language choices** – What vocabulary does Priestley choose to use?
- **Dialogue** – Words spoken by the characters. How do they respond and react to each other?

Blood Brothers exam questions

1. How does Russell use the characters of Mickey and Edward in Blood Brothers to explore ideas about class?

Write about:

- **how Russell presents Mickey and Edward**
- **how Russell uses these characters to explore ideas about class.**

2. How does Willy Russell present violence in Blood Brothers?

Write about:

- **the ways violence escalates as Mickey and Eddie grow up**
- **how Russell presents violence up by the ways he writes**

3. How does Russell present the character of Mrs Johnstone as a mother in Blood Brothers?

Write about:

- **how Russell presents the character of Mrs Johnstone**
- **how Russell uses the character of Mrs Johnstone to explore ideas about motherhood**

4. How does Russell present the character of Mrs Lyons as a mother in Blood Brothers?

Write about:

- **how Russell presents the character of Mrs Lyons**
- **how Russell uses the character of Mrs Lyons to explore ideas about motherhood.**

5. How does Russell present superstition in Blood Brothers?

Write about:

- the ideas about superstition in Blood Brothers
- how Russell presents these ideas by the ways he writes.

6. What do you think is the importance of secrets in Blood Brothers?

Write about:

- how different characters create and react to secrets
- how Russell uses the secrets to explore ideas about society and people in Blood Brothers.

7. How does Russell use the characters of Mickey and Eddie to explore ideas about friendship in Blood Brothers?

Write about:

- how Russell presents Mickey and Eddie
- how Russell uses these characters to explore ideas about friendship.

8. How does Russell use the characters of Mickey and Sammy to explore ideas about crime?

Write about:

- how Russell presents Mickey and Sammy.
- how crime is presented in the play.

9. How does Russell present his ideas about poverty in the play?

Write about:

- How poverty is presented.
- How poverty affects the characters in the play.

10. How does Russell use the characters of Mickey and Eddie to explore ideas about nature vs nurture?

Write about:

- how Russell presents Mickey and Eddie
- how the characters are affected by their environment.

11. How does Russell present ideas about family in the play?

Write about:

- how family life is portrayed.
- The characters' ideas about family.

12. How does Russell present Mrs Lyons as a manipulative character in Blood Brothers?

Write about:

- What Mrs Lyons says and does
- How far Russell presents Mrs Lyons as a manipulative character.