

GCSE (9–1)
Teacher Guide

DRAMA

J316
For first teaching in 2016

Blood Brothers – **Willy Russell**

Version 1



Blood Brothers

by *Willy Russell*

Content

Brief Synopsis

The story 'Blood Brothers' tracks the lives of twins Mickey and Edward. The play is divided into two acts, and has many songs. A narrator speaks to the audience at the beginning and throughout the play, commenting on the action and setting the scene.

Mrs Johnstone, who has been abandoned by her husband, already has five children and is expecting twins. She works as a cleaner for childless Mrs Lyons who offers, unofficially, to adopt one of the babies. Mrs Johnstone reluctantly agrees as she is concerned that she can't afford to bring up two more children and, due to Mrs Lyons wealth, knows that the child will be afforded a good chance in life. There is a prophesy that twins parted at birth will die when they discover the truth so both mothers do their best to keep the twins, Mickey and Edward, separated.

Edward goes to university, while Mickey starts work in a factory. After marrying Linda Mickey loses his job. He turns to crime but gets caught and goes to jail. After his release he becomes dependent on tranquilisers. Linda turns to Edward, now a councillor, for help. Edward gets Mickey a job – and a house.

Mrs Lyons tells Mickey that Edward is having an affair with Linda and Mickey goes after Edward armed with a gun. He finds him at a meeting but feels unable to shoot him. Mrs Johnstone bursts in and tells them the truth. Waving his gun around in frenzy it goes off. Mickey accidentally kills Edward and in turn is shot by the police.

Characters

Leading characters

- Mrs Johnstone
- Mrs Lyons
- Mickey
- Edward
- Linda

Supporting characters

- Narrator
- Sammy
- Mr Lyons

Minor characters

- Policeman
- Milkman
- Judge
- Teachers

Brief guide to the playwright

Willy Russell was born in 1947 into a working-class family near to Liverpool. He left school at 15 without academic qualifications and became a hairdresser. By the age of 20 he felt the need to return to education and, after leaving university, he became a teacher at a comprehensive school in his home city.

During this time Russell wrote songs for performers and radio shows. One of his early plays was about Liverpool pop group The Beatles. He has a love of popular music and this can be seen in many of his plays, especially *Blood Brothers*.

Willy Russell originally wrote and presented *Blood Brothers* as a school play in 1982, in conjunction with the Merseyside Young People's Theatre. He then wrote a score and developed the musical for a production at the Liverpool Playhouse in 1983.



Exploring the Play

Outline of subject content from the specification.

Students should be aware of characteristics of their studied text including genre, structure, characters, form and style, dialogue and stage directions. They should understand the social, historical and cultural contexts of the text. They should have an awareness of the theatrical conventions of the period in which their text was set. They should have considered how meaning is communicated through use of: performance space and special relationships on stage, relationships between performers and audience, design (set, costume, lighting and sound), actor's vocal and physical interpretation of character and performance conventions including the configuration of the theatre space.

Students should explore and identify the characteristics of the text through practical preparation work and be able to explain the impact they have on the text. They should be able to select examples from their own practical study which demonstrates knowledge about characters from the text. Also, students should be able to define how the social, historical and cultural factors have an effect on the performance text, and identify how meaning is communicated within the performance text. They should be able to evaluate the roles that theatre makers have on developing, performing and responding to a theatre text.

Key themes of the play

Social Class

The contrast between two different social classes forms the heart of the play. The leading characters can be seen to be social stereotypes, presented dramatically in order to emphasise certain important differences in social class. Russell does this to show the unfairness that it results in.

Education

This theme is linked to social class. Russell shows that wealth brings different educational opportunities and these lead to very different lifestyles. Eddie and Mickey are educated differently. One goes on to university and a successful career in politics, the other takes on a factory job making boxes. Redundancy and lack of opportunity then lead Mickey to crime, drug addiction and depression. Without a better education Russell is saying that Mickey had few options, and so we are asked to see Mickey's mistakes in a sympathetic light.



The effects of education shape the lives of the women in the play too. When Mrs Johnstone loses her husband she falls into poverty, from which her lack of education has provided her with no easy means of escape. She can only acquire unskilled work and has to rely on the State for housing. Compare her with Mrs Lyons who similarly, despite presumably a middle-class education, is not self-reliant. In this case Russell is suggesting perhaps that the traditional lives the women lead have less freedom, even when they are educated.

Nature vs. Nurture

The 'nature versus nurture' debate is exemplified through Mickey and Eddie. They are twins and so the difference in the way their lives turn out must be a result of their different upbringings and social positions. Russell uses the concept of twins to persuade us that attitudes in society influence peoples' lives more than their individual efforts at wanting to do well. Russell's play is deliberately objecting to a view of Margaret Thatcher's right wing conservative government, who claimed that everyone who wanted to work hard could be successful.

Fate and destiny

Each of the leading characters is presented as being trapped and plagued by various kinds of misfortune and bad luck. Russell seems to be asking us to consider whether there really is such a thing as fate or destiny or whether life pans out because of natural rather than supernatural reasons, because of the way we are educated and live.

Growing Up

Life, for the children, is shown to be a carefree game in Act One. However the pressures of growing up in different backgrounds and educational systems are shown to bring problems later on.

It is the different experience of growing up that ends the friendship between Edward and Mickey. For example after Mickey loses his job Edward tries to be positive about his situation but Mickey tells Edward that he cannot understand living on the dole. He says that Edward hasn't had to grow up like him, to face the difficulties of the adult world and that they don't have anything in common any more.





Men and women

The three leading female characters in the play (Mrs. Johnstone, Mrs. Lyons and Linda) suffer at the hands of the men in their lives – they are either let down by their husbands or receive no affection from them. Russell presents a world where the roles of women and men are sharply separate, as a result of the roles given to men and women within their social classes. The female characters tend to be more passive, the male characters are shown as being active and macho.

Money

Mrs. Johnstone's life in debt, buying things on the 'never-never', leads to problems but Mrs Lyons' wealthy existence fails to bring her contentment and happiness either. Money controls the relationship of Edward and Mickey too – once Edward returns from university as a wealthy man, Russell suggests that his friendship with the penniless Mickey can no longer be the same, as he cannot appreciate Mickey's reaction to being jobless and nor can Mickey's pride allow him to accept financial help from Edward.

Performance characteristics

Blood Brothers was written to be performed as a piece of musical theatre. It is ultimately a tragic story but is interspersed with comedic elements, mainly focused around the childhood and teenage years of Mickey and Eddie. The play starts by revealing the ending of the story and after this it follows a chronological structure. It spans three decades from the 1950s - 1970s, picking out significant periods in the two brothers' lives.

Staging requirements

The play was written to be performed on a Proscenium Arch stage but students could experiment with performing it using different types of staging. If performed, as originally intended, in 1950s-70s Liverpool, then this should be conveyed through design elements such as set, costume and music. The decision could be made to set it in a different time and/or place, finding parallels with the theme of social class in different locations or historical eras.

Common misconceptions or difficulties students may have

If we have read the play do we need to explore it practically to complete a written exam?

The text is not to be studied as a piece of literature but as the basis of a theatrical performance to an audience. In order to be successful in the written paper the practical experience of bringing it alive from page to stage must be able to be expressed in the answers given.

Is it important to use a Liverpudlian accent?

The setting is integral to the intentions of Willy Russell. Although a lot of the themes and issues are universal, he based the play in his home city in order to express his experience of growing up there and situations that were unique to Liverpool at that time. The use of the Liverpudlian accents for the Johnstones and Linda is part of the presentation of their social class.

So the Johnstones are poor and common and the Lyons are rich and posh?

The characters are stereotypically representative of the two contrasting social classes. However, to view and portray them as just a stereotype, rather than developing them further, would be to miss out on their intricacies. It is important that the audience can believe in them in order for them to empathise and understand the decisions they make.

Why is the ending different to the one I have read/seen?

There are two different scripts, the original non-musical schools version and the final musical version. The storyline and characters are the same but there are some slight variations in scenes and the non-musical version has an alternative ending.



Suggested activities

Preparation

A good starting point is to read the full text as a class. Whilst doing this you can pause to discuss or ask questions based on characters, style, structure etc. so that the students are already beginning to consider these characteristics.

You may want to show a filmed version to assist the students understanding. There is an argument against this however as their views will then be influenced by another director's interpretation and the students' practical work may not be as imaginative or creative.

It is important that the students understand the social, historical and cultural contexts of the play. It may be that you present them with this information or that you ask them to research specific topics such as Margaret Thatcher, 1950-70s Liverpool or Marilyn Monroe. This could be done before or after reading the text and students questioned to link this information to the events of the play.

Themes of the play should be identified and explored, possibly by recreating images from the play which represent them.

Below are a selection of practical activities that could then be undertaken to enable the students to gain a deeper understanding of aspects of the play:

The Narrator

Students can explore the role of the narrator within the play through the use of non-naturalism, drawing on Greek Theatre techniques. This allows them to gain a greater understanding of the style of the play and how mood and atmosphere is created.

Read through the prologue as a class and discuss what its purpose is, introducing the idea of dramatic irony. Divide students into small groups and give each a section of the prologue to work on. Ask them to try and create an opening scene which would engage an audience. They could experiment with choral speaking and movement, use of voice and the effect of lighting or costume.

The Johnstones and the Lyons

Students can explore the contrasting lives of the Johnstones and the Lyons through off-text improvisation work. This allows them to develop their characterisation skills and gain a deeper understanding of the context of the play.

Divide students into small groups and ask them to create an image of the Johnstone family at the pub with their friends before Mr Johnstone left – including both parents, Sammy, some of the older children and their friends. Then ask them to create an image of the Lyons family having a dinner party – including both parents, Edward and the guests. Students should now recreate the image of the Johnstones and begin to improvise a scene based on this. When 'change' is said they should recreate the image of the Lyons and begin to improvise a scene based on this. They will then continue to switch scenes each time 'change' is shouted, continuing from where they left off.

Following this choose four students to portray Mr and Mrs Lyons and Mr and Mrs Johnstone and hotseat them.

Gun motif

Students can explore the use of the gun as a motif throughout the play. This allows them to consider semiotics and structure.

Ask students to find and highlight any moments in the play where guns are referred to or seen. Discuss how the gun is used as a motif throughout the play. Students should recreate the image of the final scene of the play and then portray a series of other images from the play to demonstrate through the motif of the gun how the brothers lives and their relationship develops, finally returning to the image of the final scene of the play.

Design

Students can explore how design elements can aid the effectiveness of the play.

Set up a series of design stations for the students to experience; e.g. costume, set, lighting and sound. Divide students into small groups, the same number of groups as there are design stations and send each group to a different station. Allow each group an allocated amount of time at that station and then rotate them round; continue to do this until each group has visited each station.

An example of the task for each station would be to show them exemplar material of that design element e.g. pictures of costumes from a stage production or playing them an appropriate piece of music from the 60s; then ask them to create a design based on this e.g. draw a set to represent the Lyons house or complete a lighting cue sheet for the opening scene of the play.



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