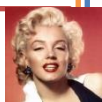


Writer: WILLY RUSSELL



- Born near Liverpool in 1947
- Left school at 15 without any academic qualifications
- He was part of a troubled, working-class family and had a variety of jobs such as a hairdresser and a school teacher
- He eventually became a writer, working on a mixture of songs and plays

2.2 Cultural context



- Marilyn Monroe was a famous Hollywood actress, seen as a 'perfect', glamorous figure. The reality was very different as she needed anti-depressants and died from an overdose. Mickey's demise mirrors hers, as she is referenced throughout the play.
- In the 1950s society went through massive changes. As a result of young people gradually having more money, popular culture (music, TV and film) flourished. Even working class families had access to cinema and clubs for dancing.
- Characters in Blood Brothers are influenced by music, film and, especially, fantasy. Mr. Johnstone's attitude toward his wife is based on her likeness to Marilyn Monroe. Mrs Johnstone's love of 'dancing' is a love of escape from her everyday life. The boys' love of playful but 'violent' games, playing at cowboys and gangsters is influenced by films.

3.2 Mrs Lyons

- She is a lonely housewife with a cold character. She and her husband are unable to have children naturally and her husband spends long periods at work away from home. She is wealthy, but dependent upon her successful businessman husband's income. She doesn't work or do the housework. She hires Mrs Johnstone to do the cleaning for her, while she shops for expensive things. Russell creates this character as an inconsiderate, pampered but dependent individual.
- She is a self-centred character who uses others for her own gain. Once Mrs Johnstone has handed over Edward, she no longer needs her and cruelly discards her, manipulating her through preying on her uneducated and superstitious mind.
- She is an over-protective mother, who is always anxious about Edward, and tries to keep him in the house or garden away from Mickey because she doesn't want him 'mixing with boys like that'.

2. Context:



2.1 Social and political context

- Blood Brothers was completed in 1981 and first performed in 1983
- Conservative Margaret Thatcher was Prime Minister at the time
- Some of her policies had a negative impact on British manufacturing industries and this caused unrest amongst the working classes
- Unemployment rose, especially in industrialised, working-class areas in the north (such as Liverpool) and problems such as poor social housing and drug use became common
- Thatcher believed that if people worked hard, they would be successful. Russell contradicts this in the play by showing a divide between the opportunities for the working and middle classes.

3.1 Mrs Johnstone



- 25 years old and has seven children at the start (maternal, caring, but also hints at religious rulings on use of contraception)
- Impulsive and makes rash decisions without thinking about the consequences (such as buying items from the catalogue)
- She refuses Mrs Lyons' attempts to bribe her showing that she values people above money, yet she does agree under extreme pressure to give Mrs Lyons one of her children. This seems unselfish as she wants a better life for him.
- She has a fatalistic attitude: 'what will be will be'. She does not really concern herself with causes or explanations of the events in her life, instead accepting them as they happen, such as their relocation.
- She is naturally a kind and loving mother and finds it hard to discipline her children and keep them under control. When Sammy burns the school down instead of scolding him she casually jokes that it was the school's fault for letting 'the silly gets play with magnesium'. She is poor and trapped by poverty. This makes it very difficult for her to care for her children and is ultimately the reason that she gives Edward away to Mrs Lyons. Russell suggests that she is old before her time (remember that she is only in her mid-twenties at the start of the play) and has had to sacrifice any youthful enjoyment for the life she has.

Quotes

- "You never put new shoes on the table"
"They say I should put them into care, but... I love the bones of every one of them."
"This means we're blood brothers and that we'll always have to stand by each other."
- "(Screaming) You! Why couldn't you have given me away?" A very different response to Mrs. Johnstone at the end of the play.
- "I could have been him!" Mickey's final words are almost certainly true!





3.3 Mickey

- He looks up to his older brother Sammy and often feels like a cast-off in comparison to him. He feels the need to impress Sammy and finds it hard to say no to him. Later in the play this will influence him into helping in Sammy's crime.
- He is very shy about his emotions and takes years to ask Linda out even on a date. He finds it hard to tell Linda that he loves her. He tries to prove himself to her through working hard but becomes even more withdrawn after becoming unemployed.
- He likes Edward's generosity and, in turn, enjoys being able to show him new things. Edward gives Mickey a chance to shine and be a leader and escape the oppression he feels from his brother, school and general poverty.
- He becomes a victim of class divide and working-class struggle as he suffers unemployment and depression.

3.4 Edward

- A friendly, generous character. He searches out Mickey to play with and perhaps naively offers him sweets in an attempt to impress him. He joins in with Mickey and Linda's games and unselfishly tries to get Mickey to express his love for Linda.
- He is raised in a middle-class home and is educated at a private school. He feels restricted and this is one of the reasons he likes the company of Mickey. He revels in Mickey's liveliness, bad language and risky games.
- He seems to lack compassion and does not sympathise with Mickey's plight. Instead, he tells Mickey to use his dole money to live like a 'Bohemian'. Later, he arranges for Mickey to have a job, but does so condescendingly by keeping it secret.

3.5 Linda

- A naturally kind and compassionate character. She comes to Mickey's aid both when he is suspended from school and when he is mocked by the other children.
- Strong-willed and very supportive of Mickey. She tries to protect him and keeps pushing him to give up his drugs.
- Her lack of education and money allows her no real chance of happiness once Mickey becomes a depressed drug addict. As a last resort, she asks Edward for help before having an affair with him. Her betrayal of Mickey suggests that she is in some ways untrustworthy; but this is also her only chance to escape from the circumstances that have trapped her.



3.6 Minor Characters

- **Sammy:** Mickey's elder brother. Aggressive, threatening and a bad influence.
- **Mr Lyons:** A distant figure of a wealthy businessman who heartlessly send Mickey a redundancy letter.
- **Narrator:** Acts like a 'chorus' from a Greek tragedy, casting judgements on the action and providing warnings. Links the play to the themes of fate, destiny and superstition throughout.

4.2 Fate, superstition and destiny

Each of the major 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.

THEMES

4.1 Nature vs Nurture

The boys are identical twins and so the difference in the way their lives turn out must be a result of their different upbringings and social positions. Russell persuades us that attitudes in society influence people

4.3 Friendship and growing up

Mickey and Edward become friends easily despite social differences. However, in the adult world, Russell suggests friendship relies on shared experiences and they become too different to maintain their friendship.

4.4 Education

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 to a factory job making boxes.

4.5 Money

Russell's play has money and materialism as a theme. 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.

KEY TERMS: Learn DEFINITIONS and SPELLINGS

- | | | |
|--------------------|-----------------|-------------------|
| ✓ Act | ✓ Working class | ✓ Materialism |
| ✓ Scene | ✓ Privilege | ✓ Popular culture |
| ✓ Dialogue | ✓ Dialect | ✓ Depression |
| ✓ Action | ✓ Thatcher | ✓ Superstitious |
| ✓ Stage directions | ✓ Social unrest | ✓ Nature |
| ✓ Prologue | ✓ Aside | ✓ Nurture |
| ✓ Characterisation | ✓ Humour | ✓ Empathy |
| ✓ Emotive language | ✓ Sound effects | |
| ✓ Social class | ✓ Context | |
| ✓ Middle class | ✓ Society | |