

KNOWLEDGE ORGANISER:

Blood Brothers (1983)



Context

- The play is a **social commentary** set between the late 1950s and early 1980s, when Britain was often in **recession**. This led to many industries (e.g. factories and docks) closing down and widespread **unemployment**.
- The **rise in unemployment increased levels of social inequality**.
- Liverpool**, Russell's home city, is the setting of the play – an industrial city in the north of England particularly affected by recession and unemployment.
- There were different types of secondary schools. Children who passed a test at the end of Year 6 (the '11-plus') went on to attend grammar schools; children who did not attend secondary moderns. Affluent parents could pay to send their children to private schools, including boarding school.
- Margaret Thatcher became Prime Minister in 1979 and was in power when Russell wrote the play. Her policies to improve the British economy led to further increases in unemployment in working-class areas in the early 1980s.
- Thatcher stated that anyone could achieve success through 'hard work'. Russell is critical of this: he believed people from poorer backgrounds had an unjust lack of opportunities compared to the middle class, which was more influential in how successful they could become than their work ethic.

Russell's Intentions

Russell wrote the play because he wanted to illustrate:

- how **social inequality** meant that **social mobility** was still difficult in 20th-century Britain [M]
- that the class system **determines a person's opportunities** in life, rather than **fate** [D]
- that **nurture** shapes individuals more than **nature** [N]
- how **society's attitudes** lead to people inevitably conforming to **stereotypes** [S]

Characters

Mickey Johnstone

- The biological twin of Edward (emphasising they have the same nature) whose experience of socialisation and nurture is very different due to his working-class upbringing. As an adult, he juxtaposes Edward completely.
- He is the play's **tragic hero**, creating paths for those who are stuck in an inescapable cycle of poverty due to the class system.
- As a youngster, he does not value education (at his secondary modern school) because he lacks aspirations. He is comical and endearing (creating paths for the lower classes) and dreams of freedom – ironic as he loses much of his freedom in adulthood because of social inequality.
- He has to mature quickly as an adult because of the pressure from society and his family (Linda and their daughter) to earn money as the male breadwinner. Despite working hard, he struggles with employment due to the recession and his lack of education.
- Out of desperation from his lack of opportunities, he turns to crime and violence as a means to gain money for his family, conforming to a young male lower class stereotype. He then suffers with his mental health.
- Like his mother, is a victim of prejudice due to his lower social status.
- 'fed up, desultory' (stage directions in his first scene – juxtaposes Edward) M D N S
- 'Suspiciously taking one' (stage directions when offered a sweet by Edward, then) 'Round here if y' ask for a sweet, y' have to ask about... twenty million times' M D S
- 'He's walking round in circles, He's old before his time, But still too young to know' (after losing his job) M D N
- 'But you're still a kid... while no one was looking I grew up.' (to Edward) M D N S
- 'That was all just kids' stuff, Eddie' (about being 'blood brothers') D N
- 'Mickey stands unable to move, tears streaming down his face' (stage directions during the robbery) M D N S
- 'That's why I take them. So I can be invisible.' (about his pills) M D N S
- 'How come you got everything... and I got nothing?' M D N S
- 'I could have been him!' (his **anagnorisis**) M D N S

Edward Lyons

- Shares Mickey's nature but has a contrasting experience of nurture and socialisation, as well as a contrasting experience of education (at an all-boys' private boarding school and then university) as he is raised by the middle class Lyons family. These privileges lead to him having many more opportunities in life and not having to worry about money as an adult.
- He has a benevolent nature, but is ignorant to the struggles of the working class and unemployed people.
- 'bright and forthcoming' (stage directions in his first scene – juxtapose Mickey) M D N S
- 'When I get home I'll look it up in the dictionary' A M D N S
- 'Why... why is a job so important? If I couldn't get a job I'd just say, sod it' D N S

Mrs Johnstone

- The twins' biological mother, who represents the hardship suffered by working-class single mothers – she is a stereotype of this role.
- She **works hard** for her children tries to nurture them, but her lack of opportunities and place in the class system make it difficult for her to raise them to be successful. She dreams of a carefree life and to be able to provide for her family, but can never truly achieve this.
- Superstitious and blames her misfortune on fate because she does not realise that her opportunities are limited due to the class system. She lives in fear due to these superstitions; Russell shows her fears are really due to her place in the class system and how vulnerable this makes her.
- 'the mother, so cruel, there's a stone in place of her heart' (Narrator – prologue) S

The Narrator

- A constant reminder to the audience of the characters' inevitable fates.
- Prompts the audience to realise that the class system is responsible for the inequality between characters and the play's tragic ending.
- Reminds the audience that they are watching a piece of fiction, to encourage them to think about how the play reflects real social issues.
- Is used as the voice of social prejudice and social conscience.
- 'did y' never hear of the mother, so cruel, there's a stone in place of her heart?' S
- 'The dealer's dealt the cards, and he won't take them back' (metaphor, used after Mickey accepts Sammy's offer to help with the robbery) M D N S
- 'And do we blame superstition for what came to pass, or could it be what we, the English have come to know as class?' (rhetorical question at the play's ending) M D N S

Mrs Lyons

- Conforms to stereotype as a middle-class woman who spends her time in the home. She dreams of having a child but is unable to, leading to her using her privilege to manipulate Mrs Johnstone into giving away Edward to her. This allows Edward to receive a middle-class upbringing with more opportunities than he would have received with the Johnstones.
- Turns to violence when she loses control, reflecting how violence is a result of desperation, rather than a trait of the poor.
- 'You're not the same as him. You're not, do you understand?' (to Edward) M D N S
- 'I don't want you mixing with boys like that! You learn filth from them and behave like this' (to Edward after he calls her a 'fuckoff') D N S

Linda

- Both Edward and Mickey are attracted to her, highlighting their shared nature. Linda is often placed between the twins to highlight the juxtaposition between them and their experiences of nurture.
- Subverts stereotypes as a young girl: she is a tom-boy. As she gets older, she conforms to stereotype and focuses on domestic duties, particularly after becoming pregnant at a young age and marrying Mickey.
- Her affair with Edward emphasises his privilege due to his social status, in contrast with Mickey who has become depressed and struggles to provide for the family, as a result of social inequality.
- 'There's a girl inside the woman who's waiting to get free, She's washed a million dishes, She's always making tea' (Narrator) N S

Sammy Johnstone

- Mickey's older brother and role model. The young Mickey looks up to Sammy as he wants to grow up and gain the freedom that he perceives his older brother has – this is part of Mickey's socialisation.
- Turns to crime as to make money after leaving school at the earliest opportunity. His lack of aspirations as a youngster, and desperation and lack of opportunities as an adult, lead to him conforming to the stereotype of young unemployed men engaging in violence and crime.
- 'I'm gonna get a real gun soon' D N S
- 'Fuck off. (He produces a knife. To the conductor) Now move, you. Move!' M D N S

Mr Lyons

- Represents stereotypical middle-class men: he spends much of his time at work. He seems ignorant to the suffering that will be caused when he makes his employees redundant during 'Take a Letter, Miss Jones'.
- 'I'm afraid we must fire you, We no longer require you, It's just another sign of the times' M D
- 'Many years of splendid service, Et cetera blah blah blah' M D

Other minor characters

- The **Policeman** is used to highlight prejudiced attitudes against the lower classes, in contrast to the respect he shows Mr Lyons.
- The **Milkman** emphasises how the Johnstones struggle to afford basic necessities. The milk itself is a symbol of financial security.
- The **Finance Man** and **Catalogue Man** show how Mrs Johnstone's desire to provide for her family leads to debt, highlighting her lack of privilege.
- The Johnstone 'Kids' emphasise the pressure Mrs Johnstone is under to provide for them. But however hard she works, she struggles to do so.
- 'Next week never arrives around here.' (Milkman after Mrs J promises to pay next week) M D S
- 'You know that if you cross your fingers, And if you count from one to ten, You can get up off the ground again, It doesn't matter, The whole thing's just a game' (Kids' game) D
- 'And he was about to commit a serious crime' (about Mickey) juxtaposed with 'It was more of a prank really' (about Edward) M D N S

Russell's methods

Motif of dancing: Dance is an expression of joy and freedom, so this is used to highlight characters' happiness, optimism and sense of free will. It symbolises hope. It can also be seen as a metaphor for life itself: a dance that we follow and one that cannot be escaped. Dancing is also a short-lived act of pleasure, so it is used to symbolise the transience of characters' happiness.

Dramatic irony is used throughout, including the twins being 'blood brothers'. The audience's knowledge that they share the same nature allows us to see how they develop into contrasting characters due to their different experiences of nurture and social inequality.

Mirroring: Many scenes and events reflect each other. This can highlight how characters change as a result of social inequality and the class system, or how they can't change and exist in the same cycles.

There are a range of **props** with significance, such as:

- The **bag of sweets**, highlighting Edward's privileges from a young age (and his benevolence) and how Mickey is opportunistic.
- The **glass of Scotch** that the Policeman has at the Lyons' house, emphasising the juxtaposition between his attitudes towards the different classes (and possibly another man, Mr Lyons), to highlight stereotype-fuelled prejudices that are ingrained in society.
- Edward's **locket**, a reminder of his shared nature with the Johnstones and his inescapable bond with them. Also a plot device to create tension & conflict between Mrs Lyons and Mrs Johnstone.
- Mickey's antidepressant **pills**, highlighting how his lack of opportunities due to his social status have led to mental health difficulties. They symbolise some of the severe consequences of his lack of opportunities, and how society's only response is to treat the symptoms of social inequality rather than the causes.

The **'bike with both wheels on'** is an important **symbol**. Mrs Johnstone agrees to give Edward away as he will have privileges like this if he is raised by Mrs Lyons; it **metaphorically** represents the ability of the middle class to smoothly ride through the journey of life due to the privileges and opportunities they have. It implies that the Johnstones **don't** have 'a bike with both wheels', so this reflects how social mobility is impossible for them. They will be stuck in the cycle of poverty, unable to escape this, no matter how hard they work (just as a bicycle cannot move without both wheels, no matter how hard you pedal).

The play has conventions of **tragedy**. Mickey's **hamartia** could be seen as his place in society or his ignorance to: his **peripeteia** is when he enters adulthood and has to deal with the consequences of social inequality, and his **anagnorisis** is his realisation that he could have been Edward at the climax of the play. Russell uses these features to demonstrate the impact that the unjust class system has on the lives of those born into lower class families. The **only restored order** at the end of the play is the idea that the class system will continue as it has before, so Russell uses the Narrator (as a form of chorus) to challenge the audience into considering whether this system should be challenged and reformed.

Motif of Marilyn Monroe: Monroe was a Hollywood icon who, despite her deprived background, became incredibly famous and was renowned for her looks. She is linked to Mrs Johnstone when she was younger and had the transient privilege of beauty. She represents Mrs Johnstone's hope when things seem to be looking up. However, Monroe's life ended early and tragically, as she struggled with mental health difficulties. In Act 2, she is linked to Mickey as his life also spirals into a tragic downfall.

Juxtaposition is used throughout the play, particularly to emphasise the differences between the working and middle classes. The Johnstone (working class) and Lyons (middle class) families are the main source of this **contrast**, emphasised through the twins, Mickey and Edward.

Applying A-level English Language theory:

Politeness theory, suggests we have **positive face** needs (the desire to be liked and appreciated) and **negative face** needs (the desire to be independent and not imposed upon). Consider where characters **threaten the positive/negative face** of others and why Russell makes these choices in their language. Also look out for **politeness strategies** and **face-saving** acts in speech where characters try to minimise the threat to the hearer's face; consider why these are included in the script.

The level of respect and status given to language varieties is called **linguistic prestige**. In most situations, using a **standard English register** carries **over prestige**, meaning it is often perceived as an expression of power and status. **Covert prestige** is when value is placed on non-standard language forms (e.g. dialect/sociolect/diolect), which is often to express a sense of group identity or solidarity, or a deliberate desire to show nonconformity. In some situations, this might elevate a person's status (e.g. with a peer group). Consider the registers of characters' speech and how this relates to linguistic prestige.

Plot

Act 1
The play opens with the final scene, and the Narrator reads the prologue. Mrs Johnstone, a single mother of seven children, is introduced. We soon find out she is pregnant with twins and struggling with debt. She works as a cleaner for Mrs Lyons and persuades her to give one of the twins to her. Mrs Lyons takes Edward and brings him up as her own, convincing her husband (who is often at work) that he is biologically theirs. Mrs Johnstone fusses over the baby while at work, leading to Mrs Lyons firing her. Aged seven, Mickey (the other twin) meets Edward and they become best friends: 'blood brothers'. They form a bond with Mickey's neighbour, Linda. The three get in trouble with the police for throwing stones at windows. Mrs Lyons convinces her husband to move her family to the countryside as she is worried about Edward and Mickey being close. Soon after, the Johnstones (and Linda's family) are rehoused nearby by the council.

Act 2
Aged fourteen, Mickey and Edward meet again and rekindle their friendship. Linda and the boys remain close throughout their teenage years. After finishing school, Mickey gets a job at a factory and finally tells Linda how he feels, while Edward leaves for university. Linda falls pregnant; she and Mickey then marry. Mickey is made redundant and, desperate for money, takes part in a robbery with his brother Sammy. He is sent to prison and becomes addicted to antidepressant pills. Edward is a councillor and helps Linda get a house following Mickey's unemployment and imprisonment. Edward and Linda have an affair, which Mickey discovers. He confronts Edward with a gun and accidentally shoots him dead; police marksmen then shoot and kill Mickey.

Key Vocabulary

Word	Meaning
anagnorisis	The tragic hero's discovery or realisation of their own circumstances.
aspiration	A hope or ambition of achieving something.
conform	To follow or agree with what is expected.
cynicism	The belief that people are only interested in themselves.
dialect	A form of language spoken in a particular area or by a social group.
domestic	Relating to the running of a home, house or family.
fate	A supernatural power beyond human control that determines what happens to a person.
hegemony	Leadership or dominance by one social group over others. (We see middle-class hegemony in Blood Brothers).
mirroring	When two events or situations reflect each other in a text.
nature	The characteristics a person is born with, which are genetically inherited.
non-standard English	Language that is not considered correct and is usually used informally.
nurture	The influence of the external environment on a person, e.g. through their upbringing and experiences.
opportunity	A chance to do something to better yourself.
perception	The way that something is viewed or thought of.
peripeteia	The tragic hero's reversal of fortune, brought about due to their hamartia.
privilege	Special rights or advantages that only one person or group has.
prop	A moveable object (not including furniture or costumes) used on the set of a play or film.
recession	A period when the economy is not doing well, affecting businesses and often leading to unemployment.
socialisation	The process during childhood where children learn the normal and expected behaviours of their society.
social class	The division of society based on social and financial status.
social mobility	The ability to change your status in society and social class.
status	A person's position in society.
stereotype	A common but often unfair belief about a certain type of people.
stigma	Negative and often unfair beliefs that society or a group of people share about something.
superstition	A non-scientific belief in how supernatural things can affect your luck or fate.
trivialise	To make something seem less important than it really is.
vulnerability	The state of being exposed to harm.

* Also revise and use key vocabulary from your other units!