

Blood Brothers Knowledge Organiser

Very Brief Plot Summary

Act 1: Mrs Johnstone finds out she is pregnant with twins. The wealthy Mrs Lyons, who employs Mrs Johnstone as a cleaning lady, suggests she gives her one of the babies, as Mrs Johnstone is worried about not being able to support them. Mrs Johnstone reluctantly agrees. After she hands over the baby, she is sacked by Mrs Lyons.

Seven years later, the boys, Mickey and Edward, meet and become 'blood brothers'. Mickey introduces Edward to his friend, Linda, and to his mum. Mrs Johnstone warns Edward to stay away from them. However, the two boys cannot be kept apart. Mrs Lyons becomes increasingly paranoid about the Johnstones. Mr Lyons tells Edward they are moving to the countryside for Mrs Lyons' health. Upset, Edward says goodbye to Mrs Johnstone. Shortly afterwards, Mrs Johnstone receives a letter saying her family can move to the countryside.

Act 2: Time has moved on. Edward and Mickey meet up again and recognise each other. They instantly resume their friendship. Mrs Lyons goes to see Mrs Johnstone and accuses her of following them to the area. She tries to bribe her to move away, then tries to stab her.

Linda and Mickey get together, get married and have a baby. Edward goes to university and falls out with Mickey. Mickey is made redundant, commits a robbery and is imprisoned. When he is released, he is addicted to anti-depressants. Linda asks for Edward's help and he gets Mickey a job. Brought together once again, Linda and Edward are attracted to each other and start an affair. Mickey finds out from Mrs Lyons and shoots Edward dead. He is immediately shot dead himself by the police.

Characters

Mrs Johnstone: A single mum, Mrs Johnstone has lots of children and looks older than she is. She works as a cleaning lady and is desperate to provide for her family, but often struggles. She is warm and caring, and spends her life regretting her decision to give away Edward.

Mrs Lyons: A wealthy, middle-class woman, Mrs Lyons is desperate for children. She is lonely because her husband is often away on business. She is cunning, as she hatches a plan to pass one of the twins as her own. She pays for her decision by becoming paranoid that the truth will come out, and increasingly jealous of Mrs Johnstone. She lacks maternal warmth.

Mickey: One of Mrs Johnstone's twins, his life is often chaotic. He is suspended from school, gets his girlfriend, Linda, pregnant, loses his job, goes to prison, becomes addicted to anti-depressants and eventually kills his own brother. Mickey shows us how the chances we get in life can define who we become.

Edward: The twin that Mrs Johnstone gives away, Edward is raised in a privileged lifestyle, with private school and a university education. He gets a good job and eventually wins over Linda. However, he never experiences the maternal kindness that Mickey experiences.

Linda: Boisterous and fun-loving, Linda falls in love with Mickey and is fiercely loyal to him. She stands up for him against teachers and against Sammy, but his eventual decline sends her into Edward's arms. She feels trapped by the life that has been created for her with Mickey.

The Narrator: The Narrator stays on stage throughout the play, commenting on and narrating events. He asks the audience to speculate about who is to blame for the events in the play, and often appears as a minor character to remind Mrs Johnstone of her guilt at giving away her son.

Sammy: Mickey's older brother is a violent bully who exhibits aggressive behaviour throughout the play. At first, Mickey looks up to him, but eventually he becomes a threat. It is Sammy who involves him in the robbery and who unwittingly provides the gun which Mickey uses to kill Edward.

Mr Lyons: A wealthy, middle-class businessman, Mr Lyons has no understanding of his wife's desperation for a baby, or her deep paranoia about Edward. He is dismissive about her worries. He also shows no care for his employees, whom he makes redundant in Act II.

Key Quotations

"As like each other as two new pins." Narrator, Act I.

"a mother, so cruel, / There's a stone in place of her heart." Narrator, Act I

"I believe that an adopted child can become one's own." Mrs Lyons, Act I

"I love the bones of every one of em." Act I, Mrs Johnstone

"Kids can't live on love alone." Act I, Mrs Johnstone

"if either twin learns that he was once a pair, they shall both immediately die." Act I, Mrs Lyons

"you know the devil's got your number" Act I, Narrator

"we always have to stand by each other." Mickey, Act I

"you're not the same as him. You're not, do you understand?" Mrs Lyons, Act I

"Make sure he keeps with his own kind, Mr Lyons." Policeman, Act I

"You've got to have an ending, if a start's been made. / No-one gets off without the price being paid." Narrator, Act II

"Everybody has secrets. Don't you have secrets?" Eddie, Act II

"You have ruined me." Mrs Lyons, Act II

"you've not had much of a life with me, have y'?" Mrs Johnstone, Act II

"it's just another sign / Of the times." Mr Lyons, Act II

"while no one was looking, I grew up." Mickey, Act II

"so I can be invisible." Mickey, Act II

"how come you got everything... An' I got nothin'?" Mickey, Act II

"I could have been him!" Mickey, Act II

"And do we blame superstition for what came to pass / Or could it be what we, the English, have come to know as class?" Narrator, Act II

Themes

Nature vs Nurture

- Splitting up Edward and Mickey at birth shows us how environment can have a huge impact on life chances.
- The boys continue to be drawn to each other, despite very different upbringings.
- Mrs Johnstone is shown as having a natural maternal instinct, while Mrs Lyons seems unable to show easy motherly love. This has an impact on the boys and ironically drives Edward towards Mrs Johnstone.

Violence

- Mickey is exposed to violence from a young age, in the games played by his friends and by Sammy.
- Sammy is frequently violent to others and it is his violent tendencies which lead to Mickey going to prison.
- Mrs Lyons resorts to violence when she threatens Mrs Johnstone.
- Mickey resorts to violence at the end of the play when he finds out the truth.

Growing Up

- Mickey and Edward's childhoods are juxtaposed throughout the play to show how childhood experiences can be very different and yet very similar.
- Mrs Johnstone and Mrs Lyons react to their children growing up in different ways.
- The montage in Act II shows the transition from childhood to adulthood.
- Mickey realises that some people have to grow up quicker than others, due to their circumstances.
- The play shows how two children with similar backgrounds (Sammy and Linda) can make different choices and take different paths in life.

Fate and Superstition

- We are told how the story will end at the beginning of the play – so there is no escaping the fate of the blood brothers.
- The play considers how one decision can decide a person's fate – Mickey realises at the end of the play that he could have had Edward's life if Mrs Johnstone had chosen differently.
- Mrs Johnstone is highly superstitious at the beginning of the play, and Mrs Lyons uses this to create the superstition about twins who are parted.
- Mrs Lyons becomes superstitious as her paranoia takes over.
- The Narrator asks us if superstition is to blame for boys' fate.

Class

- Willy Russell shows us the injustices of the class divide by juxtaposing the upbringing of Edward and Mickey.
- Accents, vocabulary and costume are used to show the class divide between the two boys and their mothers.
- Education is shown as a key factor in the class divide: Edward's education guarantees him university and a good job; Mickey's education is largely pointless and reduces his chances in life.
- The Narrator asks us if class is to blame for the boys' fate.

Friendship and Loyalty

- Edward and Mickey forge a friendship which bridges the class divide.
- That friendship is destroyed by Edward's inability to understand the pressures of money problems – ultimately the class divide comes between them.
- Linda shows loyalty to Mickey throughout her life, standing up for him against bullies. But when Mickey becomes unreachable, she betrays him.



Symbols and Motifs

Guns are a recurring symbol throughout the play. Firstly, they are shown as harmless toys, part of games that the children play. Then they become more mischievous, as Mickey, Edward and Linda play with an air gun and are reprimanded by the police. Finally, Sammy's gun in the robbery puts Mickey in prison and becomes the weapon that kills Edward. They represent violence, and the transition from childhood to adulthood.

Edward's locket is a symbol which represents secrets. Mrs Lyons wants to see the locket but the irony is that she is guarding a far bigger secret. The locket also represents the power of motherhood – Edward is drawn to Mrs Johnstone even though he does not know her relationship to him.

Marilyn Monroe is a recurring symbol within the play – Mrs Johnstone's husband was attracted to her because she looked like the film star, but when she starts to age he finds a replacement. A tragic figure, Marilyn Monroe is significant because she combined sexuality, vulnerability and secrets.

Context

Set in the 1970s and 80s, Blood Brothers shows the realities of life in Liverpool during the era. In 1979, Margaret Thatcher came to power as Prime Minister and privatised much of Britain's manufacturing industry. As a result, there was widespread unemployment; in Liverpool, up to 25% of the population were unemployed. This led to high levels of poverty.

The Johnstone family, and in particular Mickey's redundancy, show the real life impact of this. Russell uses the play to explore the consequences of poverty and unemployment. As a Liverpudlian himself, he was writing from first-hand experience.

Language and Techniques

- audience address
- chorus
- Colloquial
- contrast
- dramatic Irony
- emotive language
- foreshadowing
- irony
- juxtaposition
- metaphor
- refrain
- repetition
- rhyming Couplet
- song
- tragedy



Key Vocabulary

- act
- deprivation
- education
- inequality
- maternal
- nature
- nurture
- playwright
- recession
- social divide
- superstition
- stage directions

