Your notes

GCSE English Literature: revision notes

# Blood Brothers

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## Plot

- In Liverpool, Mrs Johnstone, a poor mother of seven whose husband has left her, is expecting twins. Her wealthy employer, Mrs Lyons, who can't have children, persuades her to give her one of the babies. Mrs Lyons then invents a **superstition**: twins separated at birth will die if they learn the truth.
- At seven, Mickey (raised by Mrs Johnstone) and Edward (raised by the Lyons family) meet, become best friends and swear to be blood brothers. Frightened, Mrs Lyons moves her family to the countryside.
- The Johnstones are rehoused nearby, and the boys meet again as teenagers, along with their friend Linda.
- Edward goes to university. Mickey works in a factory, marries Linda when she becomes pregnant, then loses his job. He takes part in a robbery with his brother Sammy in which a man is shot, and is sent to prison, where he becomes depressed and dependent on pills.
- Linda turns to Edward, now a councillor, for help, and they grow close. Mrs Lyons tells Mickey. He confronts Edward with a gun, Mrs Johnstone reveals that they are twins, the gun goes off, killing Edward, and the police shoot Mickey.

## Themes

- Social class, fate and **superstition**, **nature and nurture**, friendship, childhood and growing up, and violence.

## Context

- Willy Russell wrote it as a school play (1981), then as a **musical** (1983). It is set in Liverpool from the 1950s to the 1980s, a time of high unemployment and deep class division, when Margaret Thatcher was Prime Minister.

## Dramatic methods

- The **Narrator** acts like a **chorus** in a Greek tragedy, reminding the audience of fate and **superstition**. The play begins by showing the twins' deaths, so the audience watches knowing how it will end.
- Songs, repeated **motifs** (such as **superstitions**, the locket and guns) and adult actors playing children all shape the audience's response.

## How to get top marks

- Have a big idea: Russell suggests that class, not **superstition** or luck, decides what happens to Mickey and Eddie.
- Remember it's a play with music. The **Narrator**, the songs and the repeated phrases are methods, so write about them.
- Use its structure: we're shown the ending first, so the whole play becomes about how it could happen.

## Key terms

| | |
|---|---|
| **Narrator** | A character who comments on the action and speaks to the audience. |
| **Chorus** | In Greek tragedy, a group who comment on the action. |
| **Superstition** | A belief that certain actions bring good or bad luck. |
| **Foreshadowing** | Hints about what will happen later. |
| **Nature and nurture** | The debate over whether character comes from birth or upbringing. |
| **Motif** | A repeated image or idea, such as guns in Blood Brothers. |
| **Musical** | A play in which songs are an important part of the story. |

## Quick questions

Cover the answers and test yourself: remembering is what makes it stick.

1. Where is Blood Brothers set?
2. Why does Mrs Johnstone give away one of the twins?
3. What superstition does Mrs Lyons invent?
4. What do Mickey and Edward promise when they are seven?
5. Why does Mrs Lyons move her family away?
6. How do Mickey's and Edward's adult lives differ?
7. What does the Narrator do?
8. How does the play begin?

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## Answers

1. Liverpool
2. She is too poor to raise another child, and Mrs Lyons persuades her
3. Twins separated at birth will die if they learn the truth
4. To be blood brothers
5. She fears Edward will learn the truth
6. Edward goes to university; Mickey loses his job and goes to prison
7. Comments on the action and reminds the audience of fate
8. By showing the twins' deaths

## What to do next

**Practise 12 questions on this topic**

**Try 4 exam questions, with mark schemes**

**Read the lesson, one step at a time**

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