

BBC BITESIZE - BLOOD BROTHERS

Episode 5

Carl: Hello, and welcome to the besides English literature podcast.

Jean: We're here today to help you dive a little deeper into some of the texts in GCSE English literature.

Jean: In this series, we're heading to Liverpool to discover Willy Russell's Blood Brothers

Carl: I'm Carl Anka,

Jean: And I'm Jean Menzies. And in this episode, we're taking a closer look at the form, structure and language within Blood Brothers. Obviously, Blood Brothers is a play, which has an impact on the structure and language.

Carl: The dialogue and the language really emphasises the characters' different social classes, while the structure of the play tracks the twins' development over the years.

Jean: So let's begin by taking a closer look at the form of Blood Brothers and how being a musical plays an important part in the play.

Carl: It's clear from the opening that Blood Brothers is a musical. So you know it's a play and it features songs as an important part. They're spread throughout the play. And they're used throughout the plot. For example, Mrs Johnstone tells us all about her life through the medium of song.

Jean: So I think it's a really important thing to remember when you pick up a copy of Blood Brothers to always have in your head that this is a piece of theatre. It was written to be seen and heard as a performance. So it's written in lines of dialogue with stage directions and songs. These are important to read so you can visualise how this was meant to be seen on stage.

Carl: It is easy to skim on the stage directions when you're reading, because sometimes it feels like it's not important. However, it really is. There are loads of little moments where people were standing on stage at the same time and dialogue is crossing over. But they're not necessarily aware of each other. If you read a dialogue without the stage directions, it can feel quite messy, but together it makes perfect sense. You can picture things so much more clearly. Stage directions are how they show the reader how the characters are behaving. For example:

Extract

Mrs Lyons: Wherever I go you'll be just behind me. I know that now ... always and for ever and ever like, like a shadow unless I can ... make ... you go ... But you won't, so ...

We see that throughout the above Mrs Lyons has opened the knife drawer and has a lethal-looking kitchen knife in her hand. Mrs Johnstone, unaware, has her back to her. On impulse, and punctuated by a note, Mrs Johnstone wheels. On a punctuated note Mrs Lyons lunges again but Mrs Johnstone manages to get hold of her wrist, rendering the knife hand helpless. Mrs Johnstone takes the knife from Mrs Lyons's grasp and moves away.

Mrs Johnstone: *(staring at her; knowing)* YOU'RE MAD. MAD.

Jean: The dialogue is just Mrs Lyons getting stressed and upset but the stage directions tell us more.

Carl: If you hadn't read those directions, you wouldn't know that Mrs Lyons was preparing to stab Mrs Johnstone. Stage directions are really important.

Jean: And the songs are the same. The lyrics and the songs tell us so much about the characters, what's going on and how they feel. They're used for other purposes, too. They can reveal more about characters than dialogue does. They remind the audience of key ideas and themes like when the narrator repeats the same song about the shoes on the table and they create the mood and atmosphere of different scenes.

Carl: The songs in Blood Brothers keep it moving. They keep the plot going. This is why the structure of the play is really important.

Jean: Early in Act One Mrs Johnstone has a song where she's filling us in on a bit of her life and giving us her backstory:

Extract

Mrs Johnstone: *(singing)* We all had curly salmon sandwiches,
An' how the ale did flow,
They said the bride was lovelier than Marilyn Monroe.
And we went dancing,
Yes, we went dancing.

Carl: And as you said, this is the beginning of Act One. So this is important because it's a key part of the structure of Blood Brothers is that it has two acts.

The first act starts in the early 1960s Before the birth of the twins, Mickey and Edward, and it moves on seven years to when the boys meet for the first time properly as children.

Act Two picks up when Mickey and Edward were in their teenage years and it tracks them all the way through adulthood. There's chunks of time that pass over so you can focus on the pivotal moments in the lives of both of the twins.

Jean: And just like in Mrs Johnstone song, songs are used throughout to fill in gaps and tell us what happened in the times that passed or what's happened previously.

Carl: Songs, form and function. It makes things easy to follow. Apart from the opening of Blood Brothers, the play is in chronological order, so in Act One we see how the twins are separated, then we see differences in their childhood. They get to know each other again, when they're a bit older. It ends with a really happy song as Mrs Johnstone's family move to the countryside and things begin to look positive for the family.

Jean: And Act Two carries on from much the same place. The Johnstone family seemed to have had a positive start in their new home and they're much more content. But it's in Act Two when things start going wrong. Mickey and Sammy go to prison, and the events of Mickey's adulthood become more and more tragic, ultimately ending with Mickey and Edward's deaths.

Carl: The events in Act Two are becoming sadder. We spoke in other episodes about how as Mickey get older, the social class begins to affect him negatively. Unemployment really begins to take a toll. And these negative experiences, make the end of Blood Brothers seem inevitable.

Jean: And the time that the structure breaks from chronological order is right at the beginning to show the audience what the ending will be, and exactly how inevitable it is that this play will end in tragedy. Let's rewind to the opening of Act One.

Extract

Narrator: So did y' hear the story of the Johnstone twins?

As like each other as two new pins,
Of one womb born, on the selfsame day,
How one was kept and one given away?
An' did you never hear how the Johnstones died,
Never knowing that they shared one name,
Till the day they died, when a mother cried
My own dear sons lie slain?

Carl: Now read the stage directions:

Extract

The lights come up to show a re-enactment of the final moments of the play – the deaths of Mickey and Edward. The scene fades.

Carl: So, right at the start of Blood Brothers, it's not only has the narrator explained that Mickey and Edward have died on the same day they've discovered they are brothers. But the stage directions tell us the audience are also shown the final moments of Mickey and Edward, whilst the narrator speaks. So there's no doubt, no question about it. The moment you sit down and start watching Blood Brothers, you know where the story's heading, you know that Mickey and Edward are going to die. That's the ultimate spoiler really. It's likely that Willy Russell took some inspiration from William Shakespeare. As Shakespeare uses a similar structure technique in Romeo and Juliet and a number of other plays, revealing the fate of central characters near or at the start of his plays.

Jean: It's a really interesting structural choice, because of course, it has an effect on how a reader or audience experiences the play.

Carl: You already know that everything you're experiencing is leading to one final point, you don't know when the final point is happening. But you know it isn't going to be pleasant.

Jean: And you mentioned that we know that an audience would actually see those final moments as well as hearing about them. One of the main reasons I really enjoy reading plays is because you get such an insight from the stage directions. And being told how someone will look in a moment. It's like having an extra view into a story. And with a musical, the use of song is really clever for that too. So much of what we don't see in *Blood Brothers* is told to us through song, allowing a way for Willy Russell to fill in the gaps for us.

Carl: Language is also really important to play. So let's stay in Act One but move things forward a little bit to hear about how language makes such an important impact in *Blood Brothers*.

Extract

Mrs Johnstone: I said, I said, look, next week I'll pay y' –

Mrs Lyons: It's a pretty house, isn't it? It's a pity it's so big. I'm finding it rather large at present.

Carl: What you just heard are some of the first times that we hear Mrs Johnstone and Mrs Lyons speak, even in just those two moments, we already have such an understanding of the differences between the backgrounds of Mrs Johnstone and Mrs Lyons. You can from see Mrs Johnstone's dialogue that Russell uses the abbreviation and phonetic spelling to represent her Liverpudlian accent.

Jean: Whereas Mrs Lyons' speech is more representative of the middle class and what is typically accepted as standard English. You also know from the content that Mrs Johnstone has struggled more than Mrs Lyons and Mrs Lyons comes from a more privileged background and obviously still lives an affluent life.

Carl: We hear the same between Edward and Mickey when they first meet as well. The differences between them at seven years old are quite funny. One knows swear words, and the other one knows what a dictionary is. But as they grew up, the humour between those differences is lost. And the way they speak just shows more and more about how the gap is widening, and how they're becoming two very different people. There's a difference between their lives and their experiences because of their social classes. The difference between the working class characters and the middle class characters in their speech is a key element as to how Willie Russell uses language.

Jean: The language he uses for the characters is mainly naturalistic so we get a sense of a realistic conversation between the characters. It also means that the character's emotions can be revealed by how they speak and their fluency. When characters are very upset or angry, they speak using a broken syntax, so their sentences are fragmented with pauses and incomplete moments, as tends to be the case in everyday life. A great example is when Mickey confronts Edward about his affair with Linda

Extract

Mickey: I had to start thinkin' again. Because there was one thing left in my life. (Pause.) Just one thing I had left, Eddie – Linda – an' I wanted to keep her. So, so I stopped takin' the pills. But it was too late. D' y' know who told me about ... you ... an' Linda ... your mother ... she came to the factory and told me.

Carl: The way he speaks is broken up. You see how affected and upset everything has made Mickey. It makes the characters real, doesn't it?

Jean: It does. I know myself, I just get extra Scottish when I'm angry. And I think that's exactly why Willie Russell chose to use primarily informal language.

Carl: Now, you say primarily because it's not throughout the entire play. Some of the best bits in my opinion come from Willy Russell's use of figurative language. Figurative language is when you don't use the literal meaning. It hit me like a tonne of bricks is a great example of figurative language. In *Blood Brothers*, we see Willie Russell use this a lot more in the songs with metaphors throughout that link some of the key themes to the play.

Jean: Marilyn Monroe features throughout *Blood Brothers*, but at the beginning she represents freedom and sexiness, but towards the end of the play, she's used as a nod to early death and what we know to expect from Mickey and Edward.

Carl: She's used towards the end of *Blood Brothers* to symbolise Mickey's loss of control and to foreshadow what's going to happen to him in the future. Mickey's very own death.

Jean: Like we said before, there's so many ways that Willie Russell finds to tell us things in *Blood Brothers* without directly writing in the dialogue. Stage directions here, are important again:

Extract

Mickey and Sammy exit.

Mrs Johnstone stands watching them as they approach the bus stop. She smiles at Mickey's failure to cope with Linda's smile of welcome.

Jean: Those aren't just straightforward stage directions telling people where to stand. The language he uses paints a clear picture. He lets the audience and the reader inside so they understand how people are reacting to each other and why.

Carl: Willy Russell knows what he's doing. We can say that much. I think I'm really understanding the decisions he made when he sat down and worked with *Blood Brothers* and why he wrote it in this particular style.

Jean: Well, that's what we want and there's still more to come. Thanks for listening to episode five of the Bitesize English literature podcast all about form, structure and language in Blood Brothers.

Carl: We still got a lot to discuss. So take a listen to all episodes on BBC Sounds to find out more. In Episode Six, we're going to be chatting about the dramatisation of Blood Brothers and how being a play rather than a novel impacts the reader and the audience.