

# BBC BITESIZE - BLOOD BROTHERS

## Episode 4

**Carl:** Hello, and welcome to the Bitesize English literature podcast. This series is designed to help you tackle your GCSE in English literature by transporting you inside the texts you're studying and break them down. To give you the key things you need to ace your exam.

**Jean:** Remember, there's lots of resources on the BBC Bitesize website. So take a look there for even more information on Blood Brothers. I'm Jean Menzies.

**Carl:** I'm Carl Anka. And in this episode, we're taking a closer look at the themes within Blood Brothers. There are some key themes that stand out within the play, and we're going to explore three important ones. One is social class inequality. Number two, superstition and fate. And number three is violence.

**Jean:** All of those are definitely themes that play a huge role in Blood Brothers. And I'm looking forward to getting into them actually.

**Carl:** Let's head inside.

### Extract

**Mrs Johnstone:** If my child was raised In a palace like this one, He wouldn't have to worry where His next meal was comin' from. His clothing would be supplied by George Henry Lee.

*Mrs Lyons sees that Mrs Johnstone might be persuaded.*

**Mrs Lyons:** He'd have all his own toys  
And a garden to play in.

**Mrs Johnstone:** He could make too much noise  
Without the neighbours complainin'.

**Mrs Lyons:** Silver trays to take meals on.

**Mrs Johnstone:** A bike with both wheels on?

*Mrs Lyons nods enthusiastically.*

**Mrs Lyons:** And he'd sleep every night In a bed of his own.

**Carl:** So we see quite early on in the play that Mrs Lyons is trying to persuade Mrs Johnstone to give her one of her twins.

**Jean:** Yeah, the scene really shows why Mrs Johnstone thought she was doing the right thing as she named all the things that Edward will have if he lives with Mrs Lyons instead of her, it must have been really difficult and it's heart-breaking to hear, but also a real sign of the times.

**Carl:** Absolutely. Willy Russell wrote Blood Brothers in 1981. It was first performed as a musical in 1983 This all during a time where the Conservative Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher was in power.

**Jean:** This book, as we know, is based in Liverpool, which is in northern England, an area which was hit really hard in the 1980s with high unemployment. Now, although there had been economic decline in Liverpool before Margaret Thatcher came into power. She was a key part of deindustrialization. And because of that, so many people who worked in the coal mines, shipyard steel mills, were finding themselves unemployed.

**Carl:** Yes. And Willy Russell was from Liverpool. So he was living through all of this at the same time. And although Blood Brothers is set a little bit earlier, in the 1960s, Willy was writing his characters to represent the time he was living through, so we see a representation of working class people being badly affected by the economic downturn with Mickey and the Johnstones. Whereas the middle classes, like Edward, and the Lyons are shown as thriving.

**Jean:** The difference in social class meant absolutely nothing in their friendship at age seven, though, did it? Let's get to when they first met.

#### **Extract**

**Edward:** Fantastic. When I get home I'll look it up in the dictionary.

**Mickey:** In the what?

**Edward:** The dictionary. Don't you know what a dictionary is?

**Mickey:** Course I do... It's a, it's a thingy, innit?

**Jean:** You know, this is one of my favourite scenes, Mickey has just taught Edward a swear word. And then we hear Edward Teach Mickey, what a dictionary is. It's an adorable scene because they both really don't care about the differences in their social class. And instead, they're happy to learn from each other. And they both know different things. But it does really show off this theme of social class and inequality. Even at seven, Edward is clearly getting access to a better education than Mickey is.

**Carl:** The impact of Mickey's educational opportunities really sets up his life and future opportunities or lack thereof. And of course, Edward goes off to university and becomes a city councillor, which seems completely obvious that that was going to happen to him. But Mickey doesn't have the same chances as Mickey loses his factory job. And he really struggles to find more work, even though he's actively looking for it.

**Jean:** And it's at this older age that there's inequality and their differences do start to impact their friendship. Let's jump forward a little bit.

#### **Extract**

**Edward:** Why ... why is a job so important? If I couldn't get a job I'd just say, sod it and draw the dole, live like a bohemian, tilt my hat to the world and say 'screw you'. So you're not working. Why is it so important?

**Mickey:** \*(looking at him)\* You don't understand anythin', do ye? I don't wear a hat that I could tilt at the world.

**Jean:** This is where we see the gap widening in their friendship because their differences are making an impact now. Edward just can't understand that Mickey has nothing to fall back on because Edward will always have his family's wealth and support.

**Carl:** Yes. And without having the opportunities that Edward has, Mickey's prospects are limited regardless of how hard he works and how much he wants to succeed. They're on completely different paths from day one. And as we see, it really does show us how social class and inequality work in action. It's a key theme throughout Blood Brothers.

**Jean:** Now one of the other themes in Blood Brothers that we need to take a look at is superstition and fate. Superstition is really introduced in Blood Brothers by Mrs Johnstone right at the beginning of the play, shall we listen?

#### **Extract**

**Mrs Johnstone:** Oh God, Mrs Lyons, never put new shoes on a table ... You never know what'll happen.

**Mrs Lyons:** (*twigging it; laughing*) Oh ... you mean you're superstitious?

**Mrs Johnstone:** No, but you never put new shoes on the table.

**Carl:** It's quite funny part on its own. Mrs Johnstone's absolute fear of shoes being put on the table! But actually this is something that Mrs Lyons uses to her advantage later on to exert power over Mrs Johnstone.

**Jean:** Knowing that she's so superstitious. Mrs Lyons tells Mrs Johnstone that if either twin learns that he was once a pair, then they will both immediately die, which makes you want to roll your eyes when she says it because it's clearly something she's making up to have some control over Mrs Johnstone.

**Carl:** It comes true in the end. And this is where fate comes into play.

#### **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?

**Jean:** As we know, Mickey and Edward's death is inevitable from the opening scene when the narrator tells us that it will happen, which makes the superstition that Mrs Lyons tells Mrs Johnstone come true.

**Carl:** Yes. And it's the narrator. That's the key character for this thing, although we weren't quite sure whether to call them a character as they don't really play a part in the story. But either way, the narrator reminds the audience of the twins' fate at different points throughout the play. In fact, there's a song called New Shoes on the Table, which referenced the earlier conversation between Mrs Johnstone and Mrs Lyons that's repeated by the narrator at different points throughout. Let's fast forward and find it.

**Extract**

**Narrator:** Yes, y' know the devil's got your number  
He's gonna find y'  
Y' know he's right behind y',  
He's standin' on your step  
And he's knocking at your door.  
He's knocking at your door,  
He's knocking at your door.

**Jean:** That just gives me chills. It's repeated even at some happy moments in the play. The narrator just reminding the audience of Mickey and Edward's fate and what's to come for them.

**Carl:** Right then Jean, where do you stand on this? Do you think Mrs Lyons puts a curse on Mickey and Edward with that superstition? Or do you think it was just fate?

**Jean:** I think it is a symbol of her overarching behaviour, which leads to what happens. As part of her characterization. She's manipulative, and the superstition is a version of that manipulation that we then see throughout the play coming back again and again until she reveals that Edward kissed his wife.

**Extract**

**Narrator:** And do we blame superstition for what came to pass?  
Or could it be what we the English have come to know as class?

**Carl:** Superstition and fate are definitely important themes in Blood Brothers. But Russell himself is questioning whether or not they really exist or whether social class is actually a more important thing in determining what becomes of Mickey and Edward.

**Jean:** Yeah, this question from the narrator really makes you question whether it's anything to do with superstition, or whether social class and inequality is really the key factor in their lives and their deaths.

**Carl:** It's a lot to think about.

**Jean:** But while we think about that, we also need to take a look at the final key theme in Blood Brothers: violence.

**Extract**

But you know that if you cross your fingers  
And if you count from one to ten

**Jean:** It's something that's present in the play throughout, particularly for working class families.

**Carl:** So this is all the kids playing a game pretending to shoot each other. The violence is only a game, but it does potentially tell us a lot about these kids who, only seven, are playing games that revolve around guns and death.

**Jean:** It also acts as foreshadowing or as a prediction for the violence is still to come into play because it definitely doesn't stay pretend.

**Carl:** Unfortunately not. Sammy is Mickey's older brother, and Mickey and himself eventually go to prison. And that's because Sammy shoots someone in a robbery that's gone wrong. In fact, Sammy is connected in some way to a lot of the violence in the play. This is why I keep calling him a big rascal. The violence seems to reflect the lack of power in the characters whenever they start to lose power, like when Mickey is struggling to support Linda and his baby. That's when Mickey decides to take part in this robbery. And it's when the characters turn to violence, to regain some of the power that they feel has been lost.

**Jean:** While we see it among the working class characters in the play more frequently, it definitely isn't limited to them. Let's head back to a moment where Mrs Lyons is losing her power.

#### **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 ...

**Jean:** and we know that she's reaching for a knife the whole time. She's seeing this because it tells us in the stage directions and she lunges at Mrs Johnstone.

**Carl:** And if Mrs Johnstone hadn't acted so quickly, I think Mrs Lyons might have caught her.

**Jean:** Yeah, and this is what you meant about people losing power. This is just after Mrs Johnstone has refused to move again and separate the boys now they've reconnected as teenagers. Mrs Lyons has lost control. So she turns to violence.

**Carl:** The whole play culminates in this big moment of violence, as both twins are shot. That's been building up throughout the entire story and Mickey's instinct when he is angry and upset with Edward is to immediately grab a gun. He doesn't actually shoot him on purpose. I think that's what makes it really tragic. It's a complete accident.

**Jean:** But by that point, violence has taken over their lives and with both the boys now dead, it really shows the devastating impact that violence can bring.

**Carl:** It is really sad that both Mrs Lyons and Mickey become violent when they feel a lack of control, as in the end, it doesn't bring them any power back at all.

So they were some of the key themes from Blood Brothers: social class and inequality, superstition and fate, and violence.

**Jean:** Thanks for listening to the Bitesize English literature podcast and joining us as we explore the themes in Blood Brothers.

**Carl:** Don't forget you can listen back to this or any of the episodes at any time to help your revision on BBC Sounds.