

BBC BITESIZE - BLOOD BROTHERS

Episode 1

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

Jean: I'm Jean Menzies - author and ancient historian.

Carl: I'm Carl Anka, journalist and author.

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

Carl: It's worth noting that there will be spoilers in this as we look into each text as a whole. So if you're not quite finished reading, or you're not quite ready for spoilers, just come back later.

Jean: There's plenty here to get your teeth stuck into.

Carl: You've clearly done something right because you made it here. If you want to hear all the episodes in this podcast, make sure you download the BBC Sounds app.

Jean: And don't forget that whilst you're in the BBC Sounds app, there's loads of other things you can use to help you with your revision - full versions of some of the texts you might be studying, revision playlists, and other Bitesize podcasts series to help with different subjects.

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

Carl: This episode, we're going to look at the plot of blood brothers. What happens, who's there? And why did these events take place? It's a hefty one, we're going to go inside the play, find out all the key moments from the story and then give you an overview of what Blood Brothers is all about.

Jean: This play is all about twin brothers, Mickey and Edward who are separated at birth.

Carl: So, two twins have gone into very different upbringings. It starts in the 1960s and the events in the play take place over the next 20 years.

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 self same 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: So that /was the opening prologue from act one of blood brothers voiced by the narrator and foreshadowing what's to come. So it's kind of saying the whole story.

Jean: This method of beginning the story is pretty common feature in tragic plays. And you might recognise the same thing from Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet too. But we'll talk a little bit more about that in episode five. The Johnstone twins of one womb born on the self same day. How one was kept and one given away. So we know straight off from the narrator's narration that these twins are about to be split up.

Carl: Not only do we know that they'll be split up, but we also know that well, unfortunately, they're going to die.

Jean: I love that they introduced a story like that. It's so impactful and immediately draws you in. You already know what you're in for.

Carl: Remember, as well, this is a play you're going to be sitting in your seat in the theatre and you just walked in, you just sat down, everything's gone dark, and you're like "Hey, so these two are going to die. Wait... what?"

Jean: So the plot, let's get down to it and find out exactly how and why the Johnstone twins are split up, how and why they die. And what happens in between.

Carl: Right. So it all begins with Mrs. Johnstone. She is a struggling single mother of 7 children.

Jean: Seven? I feel like we really need to stress that. That is a lot. And it must have been a lot to deal with, especially as a single mother.

Carl: My mum was one of 17. So yeah, that's just like a lot. So a lot of noise in around the room. So Mrs. Johnstone has seven children already. And then she finds out she's pregnant with twins. She's employed by Mrs. Lyons who is much wealthier women and Mrs. Lyons persuades Mrs. Johnstone to give her one of her babies.

Jean: Honestly, it really throws you in the deep end with how wild the story is going to get. And when you think you've seen it all, Mrs. Lyons manages to even convince her own husband that the baby Edward is theirs.

Carl: Yeah. It's a real tricky switcheroo, shall we say? Remember Mrs. Johnstone is still watching Mrs. Lyons after all this she's going to see Edward, her baby, grow up. The twin she gave away every single day when she's at work.

Jean:
Until Mrs. Lyons can't cope with Mrs. Johnstone being around Edward and fires her.

Carl: Could have been the end of it. Could have just been all over by Act One, but oh boy. Things get weird. Mickey. The other twin and Edward find each other several years later.

Extract

Edward: Hello.

Mickey: Hello.

Edward: I've seen you before. You were playing with some other boys near my house.

Mickey: Do you live up in the park?

Edward: Yeah. Are you going to come up and play up there again?

Mickey: No. What do but I'm not allowed.

Edward: Why?

Mickey: Cause me mum says

Edward: Well, my mummy doesn't allow me to play down here actually.

Jean: Oh, seven year old Edward and Mickey meeting for the first time! I have no idea that they're twins are related at all.

Carl: Can you even imagine? I know not every twin is identical. But I feel as if you could walk away from the story looking people in the street and go, "Wait, are you? You look like me! Could we could we be related?"

Jean: It's a scary thought to think that maybe we have secret twins out there.

Seven years old, Mickey and Edward meet each other and become best friends and blood brothers, as they call themselves when they realise they were born on the same day. Another coincidence there. And they also have Linda, Mickey's neighbour in their friendship group. So three best friends all together.

Carl: Yep. Three Musketeers. Linda is the girl that they both fall in love with as well. We're going to find out a lot more about Linda when we look at the characters in later episodes.

Jean: They're a fun little trio, so different from each other. With Edward obviously having been brought up in a wealthy household as an only child by Mrs. Lyons and Mickey with his seven siblings who are all always getting into trouble and living in a neighbourhood with much less money.

Carl: Mrs Lyons doesn't like it when she finds that Edward has become friends with Mickey. And to top it all off the three of them – Mickey, Edward and Linda get into trouble with the police, when they throw some stones at some windows. The trio get dragged home (Edward to Mrs. Lyons, Mickey to Mrs. Johnstone) and that's the last straw for Mrs. Lyons. That's it, no more hanging out together.

Jean: Yeah. And even there, you see the massive difference in the way they're treated by society. One gets threatened with prison and the other one a light tap on the shoulder. And you can see that Mrs. Lyons just grows more and more terrified that one day the secret is going to be revealed.

Carl: Edward still doesn't know who his biological family is. It's one of those ticking time bombs. So eventually, something's going to give.

Jean: But in a bid to hopefully prevent that from happening, Mrs. Lyons convinces her husband (who still doesn't know, by the way, that Edward is not his biological child) to move the family to the countryside. But not long after that, Mrs. Johnstone and her family, as well as Linda's family get moved to new council houses, also in the countryside. And that's how we leave them all at the end of Act One. Separated again, living in different places and no longer able to be best friends or blood brothers.

Extract

Edward: Well, where do you live?

Mickey: The estate. Look!

Edward: My God. I only live...

Mickey: I know.

Carl: And then we pick things up in Act 2, where Mickey and Edward are teenagers. And as you may have just heard, they meet again. And just like that, they are best buds again.

Jean: They realise they've been living quite close for years, haven't they? It's wild to think they could have met even earlier, Edward in the big house on the hill.

Carl: Yep. And Linda's still part of the gang too. In fact, it's Edward, who encourages Mickey to ask Linda to be his girlfriend, even though Edward feels something for her himself. They all stay really close throughout the teenage years before Edward goes off to university. And then, when Edward's is at university, Linda finds out she's pregnant, and she gets married to Mickey.

Jean: Which, in an entirely different story, might have been the happily ever after that everyone was looking for. It could have all worked out. But as we know from the opening prologue it doesn't.

Carl: Mickey loses his job in a factory quite soon after he and Linda get married, and he is desperately trying to find work somewhere else. He speaks to Edward about it this time, but Mickey gets really annoyed about Edward's carefree life at university. So Mickey doesn't tell Edward that Linda is pregnant. But Linda does.

Extract

Linda: It's all right. I suppose. I suppose I always loved you in a way.

Edward: Then marry me.

Linda: Didn't Mickey tell you? We got married two weeks before you came home. And I'm expecting a baby.

Jean: Edward finally tells Linda he loves her. He asked her to marry him, which we know would give her life she never would have had with Mickey because they have such different trajectories. But at this point, he doesn't know that she's already married to Mickey and pregnant with their child. All this time, they're having this conversation. And Mickey and his big brother Sammy are trying to find a way to make some money and end up committing a crime that gets them both sent to prison.

Carl: Oh Sammy. You big rascal.

Jean: Antagonist of the play

Carl: Indeed. So everyone's just a bit spare. Everyone's a bit lost. Everyone's not telling everyone the thing they should be telling them. You really want Mickey to go out that night. And you really want him to let Edward help him. You really want Edward to just get a bit more help. And Linda to be looked after and the baby to be okay. But these things don't happen because, well, remember that prologue: things aren't going to end well.

Jean: And then in prison, Mickey becomes severely depressed and starts taking antidepressants to help him cope, but he becomes dependent on them. And that continues once he is released and starts a new job.

Carl: So then Linda calls Edward or as he's now known, councillor Lyons. Because he's done very well for himself. In fact, he's done so well for himself he's a city councillor, and he makes decisions in the area where Mickey and Linda live. But during the encounter where Edward and Linda meet, they kiss and then Mrs Lyons tells Mickey, what has happened.

Jean: Oh, this is just another moment where I want to step inside and stop what's about to happen. We're getting so close to the end of Act Two now and the author of blood brothers, Willy Russell, told us at the very beginning what was going to happen through the Narrator. And he tells us again now.

Extract

Narrator: There's a man gone mad on the town tonight
He's gonna shoot somebody down
There's a man gone mad
Lost his mind tonight
There's a mad man, there's a mad man
There's a mad man runnin' 'round and 'round

Carl: Mickey has found Sammy's gun and he goes off to have some words, with Edward in the town hall about Edwards kiss with Linda. Mrs. Johnstone follows Mickey and then finally, finally tells him in front of Edward that they are twins. Just as the police arrived to try and stop what's about to happen.

Jean:

She finally tells him that they're brothers. Tells both of them that they're twins, that she couldn't afford to keep both of them so she agreed to give one away. But that just hurt Mickey more in the moment as he realises he could have had the life that Edward had if they swapped places. He waves the gun around and as he speaks it accidentally goes off killing Edward and the police then shoot Mickey leaving them both dead. What an ending.

Carl: Not the cheeriest one!

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?
So, did y' hear the story of the Johnstone twins? As like each other as two new pins.
How one was kept and one given away?
And they were born and died on the self same day.

Carl: The thing about blood brothers is obviously you know that they're both going to die. And you know something bad is going to happen. When it happens, it's still shocking.

Jean: Yes. And you still wish that there was going to be a moment where the play has played a trick on you. And actually no, it's all going to work out fine. We said it was wild. Well, thanks for listening to episode one of our Bitesize English literature podcast all about the plot of Blood Brothers.

Carl: We've still got a lot to discuss. In episode two, we're going to be taking a closer look at the characters. In particular Mickey, Edward and Linda and don't forget, you can listen back to this or any of the episodes at any time to help your revision on BBC Sounds.