

BBC BITESIZE - BLOOD BROTHERS

Episode 2

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

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

Carl: And I'm Carl Anka and in this episode we're taking a closer look at the characters within Blood Brothers. Blood Brothers centres around Mickey and Edward two twins who've been separated at birth and have two very different upbringings.

Jean: So I guess it makes sense to get straight into it and start with one of the twins. Shall we take a look at Mickey Johnstone.

Extract

Mickey: What's your birthday?

Edward: July the eighteenth.

Mickey: So is mine.

Edward: Is it really?

Mickey: 'Ey, we were born on the same day ... that means we can be blood brothers. Do you wanna be my blood brother, Eddie?

Edward: Yes, please.

Mickey: *(producing a penknife)* It hurts y' know. *(He puts a nick in his hand.)* Now, give us yours. He nicks Edward's hand, then they clamp hands together.

Mickey: See, this means that we're blood brothers, an' that we always have to stand by each other.

Carl: So what you've just heard is the scene where Mickey and Edward become Blood Brothers. And I think this is a really sweet and wholesome scene. I mean, considering that pricking each other's fingers and mixing their blood and whatnot.

The thing that's really important when understanding Mickey is that Mickey, especially young Mickey is a really friendly kid, he just loves chatting and being happy and being a little rascal.

Jean: I know if only friendships could be as simple now as they are at age seven when you're that innocent and open.

Carl: And friendly, and you can make friends with someone based on who their favourite dinosaur is.

Jean: We learned so much about Mickey in this particular scene. Remember, he's the twin brother who's been brought up by his biological mum with his seven siblings and not as much money. He's not

had a great education. And he gets into trouble a lot at school. But he doesn't seem to care about his and Edward's differences at all when they meet, and he's just instantly outgoing and fun.

Carl: There's this bit in the plate where Mickey doesn't know what a dictionary is. But he knows swear words. So he teaches a swear word to Edward, and Edward explains to him what dictionary is, it's one of my favourite parts. It shows the differences between the two boys through the words they know and don't know. Willie Russell was trying to tell us a lot when he wrote that scene.

Jean: I love that bit, too. It really sort of emphasises how, in a lot of ways they're quite similar. And they both have this sort of excitement and curiosity about them. It just comes about in a different way, because of the different opportunities that they have.

Carl: There's that old phrase about how talent is distributed evenly. But opportunity isn't. And I think this scene really illustrates it. Another thing that you find out a lot in this play. Is that Mickey? He's a very loyal friend to both Edward and Linda.

Jean: And he's a really good son. You can see how close he is to Mrs. Johnstone throughout the play. They have such a good relationship.

Carl: I know we sound a little bit like a Mickey Johnstone fan club so far. It's not all good for Mickey, you know how the story ends and his more than one scrape with the law. Things will change as they grow up.

Jean: Yeah, they do. When the twins meet again, as teenagers, they quickly rekindle their friendship. And it seems like everything is back to how it was. It's as adults that things really begin to change, isn't it?

Extract

Mickey: Yeh. But you're still a kid. An' I wish I could be as well, Eddie, I wish I could still believe in all that blood brother stuff. But I can't, because while no one was looking I grew up. An' you didn't, because you didn't need to.

Jean: It must be so hard for Mickey at this point. A little kid who was so positive and happy about the world has been changed by his experiences in life. He's had a terrible time with jobs and unemployment, which means he can't support his wife Linda or the baby they're having together, which is something there was so much expectation placed upon young men to do, especially back then. In the early 1980s, there was still quite a strong belief in the traditional gender divide. And men going to work as the breadwinner whilst women took on the more caring role at home.

Carl: He keeps looking at Edward and his life's been way smoother. And Mickey's angry. He's jealous, like a lot of people when they see someone that has something that they think they should have themselves.

Jean: Absolutely. And he says that himself. Edward hasn't had to grow up because he hasn't had to struggle like Mickey and he doesn't blame Eddie for that. But it's hard to be around.

Carl: No, he doesn't blame Edward for that at first, but it gnaws at him. It picks away at him over time. And I think when Mickey ends up in prison and becomes very depressed, something breaks in him. Something snaps, it's the final straw. Mickey loses what's left of his self esteem. His relationship with Linda how he sees Edward it all comes crashing down and it just leads to this horrible endpoint where both him and Edward die.

Mickey says himself in the final scene, "How comes you got everything and I got nothing." And I think it sums up how he feels about Edward in the end.

Jean: I think that this might be a good time then to start discussing Edward.

Extract

Mickey: Gis a sweet.

Edward: All right. (He offers a bag from his pocket.)

Mickey: (shocked) What?

Edward: Here.

Mickey: (trying to work out the catch; suspiciously taking one) Can I have another one. For our Sammy?

Edward: Yes, of course. Take as many as you want.

Carl: Edward is a nice boy. But what do you make of Edward?

Jean: I mean, I think what we've just heard really sums him up, he's warm, and he's kind, he shares his sweets immediately without thinking about it because he just thinks Mickey is brilliant from the moment they meet. He's been brought up very differently being raised as an only child by a wealthy woman, who he thinks is his biological mother. But we know she isn't. He's generous with what he has. And instead of looking down on Mickey and Linda when they meet, he's thrilled to be their friend. But I don't think he fully understands how significant what he has is compared to what they have.

Carl: The difference in money and education. The difference between having seven siblings and having none is absolutely huge by itself. And as smart as Edward thinks he is, Mickey teaches him a lot about being street smart. I think that's why Edward really enjoys the rebelliousness that gets them both into trouble.

Jean: Edward, meanwhile, is really drawn to Mrs. Johnstone as well. You might remember that she gives him a locket when he's young. And even though he doesn't know the real significance and sentimentality of it belonging to his biological mother, he still keeps it. The woman he thinks of as his own mother and Mrs. Lyons is very overprotective, as she's desperate to keep him close. But that, meanwhile, seems to push him more away.

Carl: Yes, Blood Brothers is one of those plays that brings up the question of whether it's our genes, or our environment that has a bigger impact on all of us. There are two boys born from the same mother, but with entirely different upbringings. And in their loyalty and kindness they're not too different, but it's the opportunities they've been given that creates a divide that grows as they get older and older.

Jean: While Mickey is struggling to get a job, Edward goes to Oxford University and carries on the path to success, which seems like it was just waiting for him since day one. And whilst Edward is still lovely and kind, he's a bit clueless to the realities of Mickey's life, because he's never experienced poverty or unemployment.

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?

Carl: Only someone who never needed a job could say "So why is a job so important?" Bless him. Edwards hires in the right place a lot of time, but he truly has no idea.

Jean: I suppose he's never had to live or struggle like Mickey has. He's on track to be councillor, Lyons and Mickey's life is a world away from this.

Carl: But Edward is still the generous kid that we saw at the beginning. That part is still there. And as he gets older, he helps Linda find Mickey a job, and he helps them find a family home. So he does use his advantages for good.

Jean: Not all good though!

Carl: Yeah, he does kiss Linda a little bit!

Jean: It's that thing that ultimately leads to his death. Because it's finding out about Edward and Linda that sends Mickey looking for him with a gun.

Carl: Yes. And look, we know Edward's always loved Linda. There's been no secret about it. But he's always wanted best for Mickey. So he's helped Mickey asked Linda out in the first place.

Jean: And I do think he wants what's best for Linda at the end when they're having the affair. However, sort of underhanded that might be. She has grown a lot more distant from Mickey, through Mickey's own choice in a way. And Edward knows that he can give her a good life the life that Mickey can't.

Carl: She's really important to both Mickey and Edward's stories. Now, what do we know about Linda?

Jean: This is teenage Linda.

Extract

Linda: Oh, leave him alone, you. Y' big worm!

Jean: And this is adult Linda

Extract

Linda: An' what about what I need? I need you. I love you. But, Mickey, not when you've got them inside you. When you take those things, Mickey, I can't even see you.

Jean: So there was two different clips of Linda there. One where she's a teenager sticking up for Mickey with his teacher. And one as an adult. As she's begging Mickey to stop taking the pills. He became addicted to in prison.

Carl: It's Linda, who I feel for the most. She's kind and confident as a kid and she always protects Mickey, whether it's from his bigger brother Sammy or from a teacher when they're all in their teenage years.

Jean: And she's still only a late teenager when she falls pregnant with Mickey as the father of her baby and then marries him. She's nothing but encouraging of Mickey when he's trying to get a job. And we don't really hear her complain about her own lack of opportunities, which in a lot of ways are going to have mirrored Mickey's because she is from a poor background like Mickey and her pregnancy will have impacted on her opportunities as well.

Carl: Yep. And when we just heard her there was an adult she is trying desperately to make Mickey stop taking the pills, you can hear how she's a loving and supportive wife to Mickey she wants Mickey to be better for himself and then better for the family involved. It could be easy to forget that Linda, as an adult, is now a mother and she has a child to protect as well.

Jean: I think Willie Russell does leave a lot up to the imagination with Linda, like he wants us to make judgments for ourselves about her. She's such a strong link between Mickey and Edward and she's also a key part of both of their deaths as it's her affair with Edward that kicks off the chain of events that leads to the shootings.

Carl: There's something the narrator says that really sticks with me about Linda as well.

Extract

Narrator: There's a girl inside the woman
Who's waiting to get free
She's washed a million dishes
She's always making tea.

Carl: A girl inside a woman who's waiting to get free. It's the word free, isn't it? Which reminds you that she's really trapped as a working class housewife with no real way out.

Jean: Just like Mickey. She's stuck in a cycle because of who she is and the lack of opportunities and education she's had. Whilst Mickey becomes angry and jealous of Edward for his different life, Linda moves towards him and sees the positives that life offers. This could also really give us an indication of why she had an affair with Edward. Him and his lifestyle look good, especially given what's happened in her own life.

Carl: That's a lot to take in. And that's not all the characters yet.

Jean: Nope, there is in fact, a whole other episode come all about Mrs. Johnston, Mrs. Lyons and the narrator.

Carl: I love it when the character is just simply known as “the narrator.”

So thank you for listening to episode two of our Bitesize English podcast that's going over some of the characters from Blood Brothers.

Jean: There's still a lot more to learn. So take a listen to the rest of the episodes in the Bitesize English literature podcast on BBC Sounds to find out more. In episode three, we'll continue looking at characters concentrating on Mrs. Johnston, Mrs. Lyons and the narrator