

BBC BITESIZE - BLOOD BROTHERS

Episode 3

Carl: Hello, and welcome to the Bitesize English literature podcast. If you want to get all the episodes in this podcast, download the BBC Sounds app.

Jean: Whilst you're in the BBC Sounds app, there's loads of other things you can use to help you - full versions of some of the text you might be studying, revision playlists and other BBC Bitesize podcast series to help with different GCSE subjects.

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

Jean: and I'm Jean Menzies. And in this episode, we're taking a closer look at more of the characters within Blood Brothers. In a previous episode, we shone the spotlight on Mickey, Edward and Linda. And in this one, we're going to find out more about Mrs Johnstone, Mrs Lyons and the Narrator so let's get into it.

Extracts

Mrs Johnstone: With one more baby we could have managed. But not with two. The welfare have already been on to me.

Mrs Lyons: Twins? You're expecting twins?

Narrator: How quickly an idea, planted, can
Take root and grow into a plan.
The thought conceived in this very room
Grew as surely as a seed, in a mother's womb.

Mrs Lyons: (containing her excitement) Give one of them to me. Please, Mrs Johnstone. Please.

Mrs Johnstone: Are y' ... are y' that desperate to have a baby?

Carl: I think when we're looking at Mrs Johnstone and Mrs Lyons, it's really important to understand that this is where the story starts. Because it all begins in this moment. And in this scene in particular. Mrs. Johnstone is a single mother of seven children, and she's just found out she's having twins. And she's worried she can't afford two more babies.

Jean: I know. But it really does seem like Mrs Lyons has completely taken advantage of her there. She's just pounced when she's vulnerable. And she goes on to really manipulate her to give her one of

the babies. She plays on everything she knows about Mrs Johnstone. Her worries about money and the fact she's superstitious. Let's rewind for a moment.

Extract

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

Jean: Right there. That's the moment that we find out how superstitious Mrs Johnstone is. And as we move forward in the conversation between Mrs Johnstone and Mrs Lyons about separating the babies, Mrs Lyons plays on those superstitions to make sure that Mrs Johnstone never tells anyone about the twins.

Extract

Mrs Lyons: They ... they say that if either twin learns that he once was a pair, they shall both immediately die. It means, Mrs Johnstone, that these brothers shall grow up unaware of the other's existence. They shall be raised apart and never, ever told what was once the truth. You won't tell anyone about this, Mrs Johnstone, because if you do, you will kill them.

Carl: Mrs Lyons definitely manipulates the situation because she is so desperate to have a baby. Mrs Johnstone is lacking in power in this situation. And I think that has a big impact on that. She takes a lot of what Mrs Lyons says at face value. So when Mrs Lyons says that she's going to be giving Edward a better life, she believes it. When Mrs Lyons says that she's still going to get to be around Edward at work, Mrs Johnstone believes it because she is still Mrs Lyons' cleaner at this point. And she believes everything Mrs Lyons says wholeheartedly.

Jean: That arrangement ends pretty quickly. Not long after Mrs Johnstone gives Edward to Mrs Lyons, Mrs Lyons fires her, which just shows us that Mrs Lyons definitely has a bit of a cruel streak. Definitely a selfish one. Which I don't think Mrs Johnstone really demonstrates.

Carl: Yeah. They are two very different women, though, so it makes sense to look at them separately. Mrs Johnstone first:

Extract

Mrs Johnstone: By the time I was twenty-five,
I looked like forty-two,
With seven hungry mouths to feed and one more nearly due.
Me husband, he'd walked out on me,
A month or two ago,
For a girl they say who looks a bit like Marilyn Monroe.

Jean: To me, Mrs Johnstone seems like such a warm and caring mother. She struggles to raise her seven kids alone. But she's doing her best and she's trying, she just doesn't have a lot of control over them, which means they do cause trouble around where they live.

Carl: She's not had it easy. She's had seven children with her husband, who used to adore her and take her dancing, but he left her for another woman.

Jean: I don't think I need to say anything more about this man.

Carl: No. But Mrs Jones has been through a lot and she's kind of it's still and she's still a good mum. She's still kind heart but she's just not got a lot of control in her life.

Jean: Then when they're rehoused to the countryside, you can tell she's so excited and looking forward to her fresh start. She's standing on her own two feet there and even manages to stand up to Mrs Lyons in a way she never could at the beginning. Listen to this:

Extract

Mrs Johnstone: I don't want your money. I've made a life out here. It's not much of one maybe, but I made it. I'm stayin' here. You move if you want to.

Carl: She is more sure of herself. She's able to say no to Mrs Lyons now even though Mrs Lyons is offering her even more money. It does seem like things are getting better for her until Mickey and his older brother Sammy go to prison.

Jean: And from that point, it really just starts to unravel all over again. She's worried about Mickey taking the pills. But she's happy to hear that Linda's managed to get him some work in a new house. But she would also like to know who's been helping them.

Carl: And maybe she knows about councillor Lyons by then. But Willie Russell, he's not going to tell us which I think, some really clever storytelling. The next we see of Mrs Johnstone is when her and Mickey are together as she chases him down to finally tell him the truth about Mickey and Edward being twins. And as Mickey and Edward both lie dead at the end, it's Mrs Johnstone we see left alone, singing and hoping desperately, that it isn't true.

Jean: And it's so sad. I think we need to remember that it is Mrs Lyons who's the one that tells Mickey about Linda and Edward. She is such a key part of that chain of events. Because once Mickey knows, that's when he goes to get the gun.

Carl: This is probably a good time to take a closer look at Mrs Lyons. She's very lonely when we first meet her, she has a huge home. But her husband works away a lot on business. So he's never really there. She thought that she'd have children to fill the house with however, we quickly learn that hasn't happened.

Jean: Yeah, and I absolutely feel for her. But it's about the specific actions that Mrs Lyons goes on to take. She doesn't even tell her husband that Edward is really Mrs Johnstone's because he's away for so long that she can just tell him. Well, I gave birth while you weren't here.

Carl: The baby (Edward) not being hers biologically does have an effect on Mrs Lyons for sure. She gets a bit paranoid. It doesn't help in the long run. Because when she wants to leave the neighbourhood they're currently in, she can't tell Edward the truth about why.

Extract

Mrs Lyons: It's just ... it's these people ... these people that Edward has started mixing with. Can't you see how he's drawn to them? They're ... drawing him away from me.

Carl: Mr. Lyons suggest that Mrs Lyons sees a doctor. Mr. Lyons can't really understand why Mrs Lyons is so worried.

Jean: Meanwhile, we're all in on the secret. She starts panicking when she finds out Edward is spending time with his biological family. And it makes her over protective and pretty jealous, which ironically ends up pushing Edward further away. Listen to this. This is when they reconnect as teenagers and Mrs Lyons finds out then goes to try and pay Mrs Johnstone to leave.

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 ...

Carl: In all that time, you can hear Mrs Lyons talking there. She's getting a knife out of the drawer. Getting ready to lunge at Mrs Johnstone. Mrs Lyons is desperate. But Mrs Johnstone managed to grab the knife. Otherwise, I think things would have gone a little bit more tragic for everyone involved in the story.

Jean: Mrs Lyons is in such a panic about what will happen if her secret is revealed. It's like she just wants it all to end by any means possible. I do wonder if she knows what she's doing when she tells Mickey about Linda and Edward having an affair at the end. Like we said before, she sets off a chain of events that leads to both boys lying dead. Not that she could have predicted that outcome. But it does feel like she was going for some big climactic end to this whole series of lies.

Carl: Mrs Lyons ends up betraying her own son. And that's the moment that leads to the downfall of everyone involved.

Jean: It's a little bit difficult to feel for her in this moment.

Carl: But before we wrap things up, there's one more character we need to look at who is definitely a bit unusual.

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: The narrator! Definitely an unusual character.

Carl: Some may make the argument that the narrator should not be classed as a character because he doesn't really play a part in the story.

Jean: That's true. He doesn't ever interact directly with the characters in the play. He does speak to them, but they don't respond. He's mostly talking to the audience and bringing them in.

Carl: The narrator does that a lot throughout this play. The narrator also reminds the audience what's going to happen. So there's foreshadowing throughout. And as we heard in that clip, the narrator acts as a social conscience for the audience and guides him through their thoughts, making sure they don't forget what's coming.

Jean: There's something about him that's almost a little bit sinister when you're watching or reading this plays. But he's also quite practical.

Carl: Remember, the narrator at the very beginning told us the twins will die. And just like in this bit, the narrator wants to make sure that we're reminded of that fact as things develop.

Jean: When we say "he" referring to the narrator, it's not quite accurate because in the text itself, no sex or gender is given. The character is simply named the narrator. In the first ever live performance in 1983 he was played by a man, which is probably what's influencing us here. But you could imagine the narrator as whoever you would like.

Carl: I think there is a practical side for the reader and the audience. He also definitely acts as a bit of a conscience too. I like it when the narrator directly asks a question to the audience that makes them think.

Extract

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

Jean: That was right at the end when the twins both die. I see what he means. Those two direct questions really make the audience think about what they've just seen.

Carl: The narrator is one of the most important characters of the play as they act as a guide and give insight.

Jean: We've discussed so many important characters, it's been great to step inside and really see them in action.

Carl: We hope it's been useful for you as well. And we hope you've learned some more about the characters in Blood Brothers.

Jean: Thanks for listening to the Bitesize English literature podcast and part two of the characters in Blood Brothers.

Carl: We've still got a lot to discuss. So take a listen to other episodes on BBC Sounds to find out more about the themes and language in Blood Brothers.