

BBC BITESIZE - BLOOD BROTHERS

Episode 7

Carl: Hello, and welcome to the Bitesize English literature podcast. This series is designed to help you tackle your GCSE in English literature.

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

Carl: I'm Carl Anka.

Jean: And I'm Jean Menzies.

Carl: And in this episode, we're taking a closer look at the context of Blood Brothers. And when it was written.

Jean: Which was the 1980s.

Carl: Yes, it was slightly before my time. Blood Brothers was written in 1981 and opened in Liverpool Playhouse in 1983. It was transferred to London's West End in the same year, and went on to win two Awards, including Best New Musical. So what was happening in the 1980s that made Blood Brothers such a hit?

Archive

Margaret Thatcher: Now that the election is over, may we get together and strive to serve and strengthen the country of which we're so proud to be a part of...

Newsreader: Mrs Thatcher told the conservative trade unionists, that like any family living beyond its means, the government must cut its spending...

Margaret Thatcher: We have to fight our battles every day. They're never won. You've got to sell your goods every day, you've got to be efficient every day, you've constantly got to think of the morrow. It's a daily battle for each and every day.

Carl: Margaret Thatcher. She was the prime minister who was in power at the time of Willy Russell writing Blood Brothers.

Jean: Which makes a lot of sense because it was under Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government, that a lot of working class people lost their jobs and unemployment was higher than ever before. As we mentioned in episode four, there had been an economic decline in Liverpool before Margaret Thatcher came into power, but she was a key part of deindustrialization. And so people who worked in coal mines, shipyards, steel mills, were finding themselves unemployed.

Carl: This especially affected working class industrial areas of northern England such as Liverpool. Liverpool is where Blood Brothers is set and where Willie Russell was from.

Jean: In fact, Willie Russell himself was from a working class family who lived near Liverpool. He left school at the age of 15, without any academic qualifications and became a hairdresser. By age 20, he decided to return to education and went on to be a teacher in his home city. Perhaps this explains how education is portrayed in Blood Brothers. Maybe he found that education offered him more opportunities and that's why he showed the differences between Mickey and Edward's education and then in their careers as they grew up.

Carl: That makes sense. There is such a large gap between working and middle class families in Britain at this time. The Johnstone and the Lyons families really are stereotypes of that time. So many working class families struggled financially to find work during this time. And it's a class divided education too, which is shown by Edward attending a private boarding school and Mickey going to the local secondary school. Middle class families were also less affected by the unemployment rates, which widened the gap between Mickey and Edward even further.

Jean: There was a really interesting bit in the montage of the Margaret Thatcher years where we heard how she believed that everyone could be successful if they worked hard enough. But Russell uses Mickey's character to show us that that isn't true. We see him trying his best to get work and support his family. But he can't do it without the help of Edward, who has risen easily to a position of power thanks to his social class and opportunities.

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.

Carl: It definitely feels like Willy Russell is writing about the time he was currently living in. The play is set a little bit earlier. It begins in the 1960s and follows the characters over the next two decades. The characters are representative of the time Willy was currently living in as though the whole thing was happening in 1981. Reflecting the different people and the class types around him, he's shining a light on something that he was probably seeing every single day.

Jean: And if we're talking about shining a light on things that were around him at the time, there was a famous name that's mentioned throughout the play.

Carl: I think we all know who that famous name is mentioned this point in time.

Archive

Man's voice: Miss Monroe, it's time!

Audience: *(Chanting)* Marilyn, Marilyn, Marilyn!

Marilyn Monroe: I think it just craved a little affection — you know, a sense of being loved and needed and wanted.

Marilyn Monroe: Why do they always look like unhappy rabbits?

Marilyn Monroe: But I'm not just generally happy. If I'm generally anything I guess I'm generally miserable. (*Laughs*)

Carl: Marilyn Monroe - she is mentioned a lot in *Brothers*. I mean a lot.

Jean: She does get a few name checks, doesn't she? And she's not necessarily from the time that Willie Russell was writing, but her legacy certainly lived on throughout this era.

Carl: Marilyn Monroe was a very famous Hollywood movie star for the 1950s. She was known for being a brilliant actress and being incredibly glamorous. But she also struggled with depression and died in 1962 aged only 36.

Jean: She was such an icon of the 20th century and even though into the 21st century, I think most of us would recognise an image of her. She was remembered not only for her incredible success, but also for her suffering at the same time, and I think we can see why Willie Russell chose to include her.

Carl: Yes, the way she's referred to changes as the play moves on. At first Mrs Johnstone is referring to how she was compared to Marilyn Monroe when she was younger. And she's talking about the glamorous version of Marilyn Monroe. And she represents the freedom and the sexiness, and someone that men, particularly Mr. Johnstone, desire.

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.

Jean: As the play moves on, and the events become sadder and we're heading closer to the tragic ending, the references to Marilyn Monroe begin to represent her own early death and what's to come for the twins. We talked more about that in episode five too, if you need a refresher.

Extract:

Mrs Johnstone: (*singing*) Tell me it's not true,
Say it's just a story.
Something on the news.
Tell me it's not true.
Though it's here before me,
Say it's just a dream,
Say it's just a scene
From an old movie of years ago,

From an old movie of Marilyn Monroe.

Carl: Marilyn Monroe's life spiralled out of control. She became dependent on prescription medication, and she unfortunately died of an overdose in her 30s. She is used in Blood Brothers towards the end of the play to symbolise Mickey's loss of control, and to foreshadow Mickey's own early death. She is a reference point in the context of the time that Blood Brothers was released. Because in 1983, when Blood Brothers first went onstage, most people knew the story of Marilyn Monroe without it having to be explained.

Jean: It's definitely important to remember the context of when Blood Brothers was written, and what was going on at the time, it adds another layer to the key themes that Willie Russell discusses and makes them even more relevant to the time.

Carl: Indeed, I think it's really important for us to say that when you're talking about Mickey's depression, and dependence on antidepressants, that with the right support and treatment, most people can live rich, full lives. In fact, you're listening to one of them talk right now. Hello, that'd be me. We definitely need to say that because this is a play, and it's been written to make an impact and tell a gripping story. So let's separate the fiction from real life at the moment. Thank you for listening to episode seven of the Bitesize English literature podcast, and all about the context of Blood Brothers.

Jean: You can test what you've learned about Blood Brothers from this and all the other episodes in the Bitesize English literature podcast by heading to the final episode, the recap quiz and just a reminder that all the episodes are available to listen to on BBC Sounds.

Carl: We hope that this has been a helpful podcast for you and your revision. And if you really enjoyed it, please share it with your friends. Bitesize English literature podcast, listen on BBC Sounds!