



Contexts

Willy Russell's Life



1. Born in 1947 into a working class family.
2. He grew up just outside Liverpool.
3. Father had various jobs including mining and factory work.

Russell and Education



1. Left school at 15 with just one O'level: a D in English Language. Became a hairdresser.
2. Went to evening classes and university to become a teacher.
3. Russell uses his work to demonstrate the value and importance of education in transforming peoples lives.

Russell's Intentions



1. Russell's plays focus on the issues faced by working class people.
2. His characters are fictional, but Russell uses them to illustrate the unfairness of the class system.
3. Russell uses his work to show how social divides, like class, can affect their opportunities in key areas such as education, job prospects and wealth.

Russell's Influences



1. Some of the key themes that Russell explores are reflected in his own experiences. For example, growing up in a working class family.
2. The play was written in the 1980s but is set earlier between the 1960s and 1980s.
3. At this time there was a strong class divide: the middle classes had more opportunities than the working classes.



Society and the family

1. The 'nuclear' family was the expected norm: mother, father and children.
2. Single parent families, like Mrs Johnstone's and babies born out of wedlock, carried a social stigma and were 'frowned upon'.
3. Most families were patriarchal (controlled by men) – the man led the family and particularly in middle class families went to work to provide for them. This is the situation in the Lyons household.



The decline of Industry

1. In the 1970s, Britain's traditional industries (coal mining and shipbuilding) declined.
2. This caused wide-spread unemployment in the working class communities who worked in these industries, but had less of an impact on the middle classes.
3. Cities like Liverpool were hugely affected as most men relied on a single industry i.e. shipbuilding for work.
4. By 1980, unemployment in Liverpool reached 25%.
5. Many people had to 'sign on' to receive unemployment benefits ('going on the dole'). Mickey represents the many working-class men who became unemployed in this period.
6. High unemployment led to riots and an increase in crime, and depression.

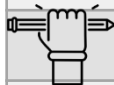
Margaret Thatcher



1. Became Prime Minister in 1979
2. Thatcher believed that Britain's traditional industries were no longer economically viable and closed them.
3. Thatcher also reduced the powers of trade unions significantly. One outcome of this was that employers could make their employees redundant more easily.



Contexts



Education

1. The Education Act of 1944 led to 'secondary modern schools' and 'grammar schools.'
2. The top 20% went to a grammar school with an academic curriculum. The other 80%, like Mickey and Linda, went to secondary modern schools and were taught more practical subjects.
3. 7% of students were educated in private, fee-paying schools. These schools cost approximately 25% of the average wage, therefore only the upper and middle classes, like Edward's family, could afford these schools.
4. There were far fewer university places and most people went straight into employment after school.

Housing

1. As in most UK cities, Liverpool has a mix of both wealthy and poorer areas in fairly close proximity to each other.
2. Liverpool's housing had been affected by the bombings of World War 2 and the council housing built to replace it was poor quality.
3. Most council houses had no heating, indoor toilets or gardens. Overcrowding was common. This is the kind of housing that the Johnstone's have in Act 1.
4. In the 1960's, the government began to build New Town's from small existing towns that were extended and redeveloped.
5. Skelmersdale, which is the setting for Act 2, was one of these towns.

Language

anaphora – to repeat a word/phrase at the beginning of successive clauses
asyndeton- list without conjunctions
characterisation- built up description of character
colloquial – informal, conversational language
dialect – vocabulary/grammar which is specific to a particular region
dialogue – words spoken by characters in conversation.
euphemism – the use mild/vague expressions in place of harsh/blunt ones.
foil - someone with opposite characteristics
hyperbole- exaggerated statement
imagery- visually descriptive language
lyrics – the words of a song
metaphor- an image created by writing about something as if it is something else
motif - a recurrent image
omniscient narrator – a narrator with a 'God-like' knowledge of the world of the story.
pathos- language to evoke pity or sorrow
personification- writing about an object as if were human
protagonist – the main character
satire- use of humour or ridicule to criticise
simile- comparing using 'like' or 'as'

Structure and Form

allegory - characters/events represent ideas about society, religion, morals or politics
antithesis – a person or thing that is in direct contrast to something else
Brechtian – a style of theatre that alienates the audience
conflict- a problem faced by characters
cyclical structure – when a story's beginning and end mirror each other
didactic – intended to teach something, especially a moral lesson.
exposition – the opening part of a story where setting and characters are introduced
foreshadowing- clue about something later
fourth wall – the idea that between the action and the audience there is an invisible wall
juxtaposition- two contrasted ideas
melodrama - exaggerated characters/events
montage – series of images, often used to suggest a sequence of events taking place over a period of time.
prolepsis (flashforward) – a future event is narrated before its chronological place by "flashing forward" to a moment later in the story
resolution- the point where conflict is resolved
soliloquy – when a character speaks directly to the audience as if thinking aloud.
Verfremdungseffekt - alienating/distancing the audience



English

Y10 Spring 1&2:

Russell's 'Blood Brothers'

Key Characters

| | | |
|---------------|---|---|
| The Narrator | Introduces the story of the play; multi-roles – sometimes steps into the action as a minor character; summarises and comments on the action; reminds the audience of the play's inevitable ending throughout it. | omniscient, detached, mysterious, foreboding |
| Mrs Johnstone | The single, working class mother of Mickey and Edward. At the start of the play she is 25 and has 7 children. Works as a cleaner for Mrs Lyons who encourages her to give away one of her twins. Is sacked by Mrs Lyons Gives Edward a locket that contains a picture of herself and Mickey. Moves to Skelmersdale to start a new life. Reveals the truth to Mickey and Edward in the final scenes. | Impulsive, irresponsible, sympathetic, gullible and naïve, loving and maternal. |
| Mrs Lyons | Edward's "adoptive" mother. A stereotypical middle-class housewife, but is childless. Persuades and manipulates Mrs Johnstone into giving up one of her twins Sacks Mrs Johnstone and tells her that if the truth is revealed the twins will die Tries to keep the twins apart Persuades her husband to move house to get away from the Johnstones Is disturbed when she discovers Edward's locket Tries to attack Mrs Johnstone with a knife Reveals Edward and Linda's affair to Mickey | Lonely, cold, wealthy, dependent, inconsiderate, self-centred, manipulative, over-protective, anxious, unreasonable, unstable |
| Mr Lyons | Believes he is Edward's real father Is a wealthy business man, but he often has to leave his family in order to work Gives Edward a toy gun Thinks Mrs Lyons should see a doctor for her nerves Makes many of his workers redundant | Traditional, absent, distant, capitalist, uncaring. |
| Mickey | The twin Mrs Johnstone keeps Meets Edward aged 7 and becomes his 'blood brother' Is suspended from school aged 14 Leaves his secondary modern school and gets a factory job Marries Linda when they discover she is pregnant Is made redundant Argues with Edward Takes part in a robbery with his older brother Sammy and is sent to prison Discovers, from Mrs Lyons, that Linda is having an affair with Edward Shoots Edward dead after Mrs Johnstone reveals the truth Is shot by the police | Outgoing, sensitive, affectionate and loyal. During Act 2 he becomes depressed, jealous and angry. |
| Edward | The twin Mrs Johnstone gives to Mrs Lyons Meets Mickey aged 7 and becomes his 'blood brother' Is told by Mrs Lyons to stay away from Mickey Is given a locket by Mrs Johnstone when he moves away Is suspended from school aged 14 Leaves his private school and goes to university Comes home for Christmas and argues with Mickey/tells Linda he loves her Becomes a local councillor and helps Mickey and Linda find housing and work Begins an affair with Linda Is shot dead by Mickey | Polite and friendly, generous, naïve. Privileged and affluent. |



English

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Key Characters

| | | |
|-------|---|---|
| Linda | Mickey's childhood friend – she protects and defends him Becomes Mickey's girlfriend and then wife after she becomes pregnant Asks Edward for help in finding a home and employment for Mickey Encourages Mickey to tackle his addiction Becomes bored and unfulfilled Has an affair with Edward | Caring, protective, determined, brave, unfulfilled. |
| Sammy | Plays aggressive games and intimidates Mickey as a child Owns an airgun Starts a fire at his school Pulls a knife on a bus conductor Persuades Mickey to participate in the garage robbery Shoots someone during the robbery | Influential, dishonest, wayward, violent. |

Key Motifs

Marilyn Monroe



One of the first songs in the musical—sung by Mrs. Johnstone—constantly returns to the refrain of Marilyn Monroe. At first, Monroe is used as a figure of glamor and wealth, and Mrs J aspires to be like her. She's flattered when people compare her to the film star. As the musical continues, however, Mrs. Johnstone compares herself negatively to Marilyn Monroe, noting that she herself has become old and poor, quite unlike her idol.. The parallels between Marilyn Monroe and the Johnstones continue late into the play, as when Mrs. Johnstone compares her son Mickey's dependence on antidepressants to Monroe's own addiction struggles. Although Monroe began as an icon of beauty and aspiration, she ends up being yet another tragic example of a life gone terribly awry.

Guns



Guns appear throughout the course of the musical, foreshadowing the terrible violence that sits at the narrative's end. In Act 1 they are relatively innocent, as when the children use pretend weapons to play war games, and when Mickey hides his brother Sammy's air rifle. By Act 2, they turn sinister, and eventually Sammy uses a gun in a robbery, an act that ends in a murder. Of course, the fearsome power of guns is finally demonstrated in full when Mickey confronts Edward with a gun at the end of Act 2. Although he does not intend to shoot his twin, he is so crazed and enraged that he does so accidentally, and is then shot by policemen. By the end of the play, Russell has demonstrated that guns cause violence and chaos in a variety of situations.

The locket



Before he moves away from Liverpool, Edward receives a locket from Mrs. Johnstone with a picture of herself and Mickey in it. Edward later gets into trouble at his boarding school for refusing to remove it when ordered to do so by a teacher. On a narrative level, the locket symbolises the bond that Edward feels with Mickey. On a deeper level, however, the locket illuminates the connection between Edward, Mickey, and Mrs. Johnstone—a connection which, despite Mrs. Lyons' best efforts, cannot be severed. On the question of nature vs. nurture, the locket represents Russell leaning towards the side of nature, implying that although Edward has been separated from his blood relations, he still feels a deep and powerful connection to them.

Shoes on the table:



Near the beginning of the musical, Mrs. Johnstone reacts fearfully when she sees shoes on the table—something commonly thought to mean bad luck. Mrs. Lyons then uses Mrs. Johnstone's superstition to convince her to keep her sons separate and in the dark about their relationship. Throughout the play, the Narrator continually emerges and warns the characters that the "shoes are on the table," along with various other superstitions and symbols of bad luck (such as a cracked mirror, etc.). These symbols remind the characters of the bad luck that they have brought about themselves, and also remind the audience of the terrible finale that lies ahead. At the end of the musical, however, the Narrator tells the audience that it was the class system, rather than bad luck or superstition, which doomed the two brothers.



English

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Plot Summary and Key Quotations

| | | |
|----------|--|---|
| Prologue | <p>The Narrator's opening speech outlines the basic story of the play and asks the audience to judge Mrs Johnstone.</p> <p>There is a brief 're-enactment' of Mickey and Edward's deaths.</p> | <p>"An' did y' never hear of the mother so cruel/ there's a stone in place of her heart?" (5)</p> |
| Act 1 | <p>Mrs Johnstone is a single mother of seven and is pregnant with twins.</p> <p>Her employer, Mrs Lyons, is unable to have children but desperately wants a child of her own.</p> <p>Mrs Lyons convinces Mrs Johnstone to give her one of the twins to bring up as her own.</p> <p>Reluctantly, Mrs Johnstone agrees and gives Mrs Lyons her child.</p> <p>Mrs Lyons dismisses Mrs Johnstone, tries to give her money and tells her that if the boys ever discover they are twins, they will immediately die.</p> <p>Aged 7 the twins meet and become 'blood brothers'.</p> <p>Both mothers forbid them from seeing each other.</p> <p>Mrs Lyons hits Edward after he swears.</p> <p>A policeman catches Mickey, Edward and Linda throwing stones at windows and speaks to both parents.</p> <p>Mrs Lyons persuades Mr Lyons to move to another area.</p> <p>Before he leaves Mrs Johnstone gives Edward a locket that contains a picture of her and Mickey.</p> <p>The Johnstones are rehoused in Skelmersdale, a new town.</p> | <p>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." (6)</p> <p>"If my child were raised/ in a palace like this one/(He) wouldn't have to worry where his next meal was coming from." (13)</p> <p>You won't tell anyone about this, Mrs Johnstone, because if you do, you will kill them" (23)</p> <p>"You see, you see why I don't want you mixing with boys like that! You learn filth from them and behave like this – like a horrible little boy, like them. But you are not like them. You are my son, mine" (37)</p> <p>"Serious crime, love" vs. "More of a prank, really." (47-48)</p> <p>"Bright new day"... "Startin' all over again"</p> |
| Act 2 | <p>Mrs Johnstone sings about her neighbours and going out dancing with the milkman.</p> <p>Sammy has been put on probation after burning his school down.</p> <p>Mickey is now 14 and attends a secondary modern school with Linda, who tells him she loves him.</p> <p>Edward is at a single-sex private boarding school.</p> <p>Sammy pulls a knife on the bus conductor.</p> <p>Both boys are suspended from their schools.</p> <p>Mrs Lyons sees the locket.</p> <p>Mickey struggles to articulate his feelings for Linda to her.</p> <p>The twins meet again, recognise each other and decide to go to the cinema.</p> <p>The increasingly paranoid Mrs Lyons threatens Mrs Johnstone with a knife.</p> <p>Mickey, Edward and Linda spend their teenage years together.</p> <p>Mickey has a job, before Edward leaves for university he encourages Mickey to reveal his feelings for Linda.</p> <p>Mickey and Linda marry after she becomes pregnant.</p> <p>Soon after Mickey loses his job.</p> <p>Edward returns from university – he and Mickey argue.</p> <p>Mickey agrees to join Sammy in a robbery. Sammy shoots someone and both he and Mickey are sent to prison.</p> <p>Mickey becomes addicted to anti-depressants.</p> <p>Linda asks Edward for help finding a house and a job for Mickey.</p> <p>Linda and Edward have an affair.</p> <p>Mrs Lyons tells Mickey about the affair, Mickey takes Sammy's gun and goes after Edward.</p> <p>Mrs Johnstone reveals they are brother. Mickey's gun goes off, killing Edward, and Mickey is killed by the police.</p> | <p>"I don't care who knows, I just love you. I love you!" (65)</p> <p>"all boredom and futility" vs "talk of Oxbridge"</p> <p>"I know, but I still can't tell you. It's just a secret, everybody has secrets, don't you have secrets?" (69)</p> <p>MRS. L: I curse the day I met you. MRS. L: I curse you. Witch! (79)</p> <p>"And who dare tell the lambs in spring/ what fate the later seasons bring?" (83)</p> <p>"It's a premature retirement/For those surplus to requirement" (88)</p> <p>"In your shoes I'd be the same, I'd still be able to be a kid. But I'm not in your shoes" (93)</p> <p>"That's why I take them. So I can be invisible" (100)</p> <p>You know the devil's got your number, You know he's right beside you, He's screamin' deep inside you, And someone said he's callin' your number up today Today. TODAY! (104)</p> <p>"(He stands glaring...almost uncontrollable with rage): I could have been...I could have been him!" (106)</p> |



English

Y10 Spring 1&2:

Russell's 'Blood Brothers'

Key Settings Act 1: Liverpool – The Johnstones' house and the Lyons' house

Act 2: Skelmersdale – The Johnstones' house and the Lyons' house

Key Themes

Social Class

The central theme in the play. Russell's key message is that social class can determine the course and outcome of our lives. The Johnstones and the Lyonses are class stereotypes that are instantly recognisable through their accents, behaviour and attitudes.

Russell uses juxtaposition and parallel scenes to clearly show the class differences between the families. For example, the policeman's differing treatment of each one.

Nature versus Nurture:

Through the device of twins separated at birth Russell is able to show that being wealthy and powerful is a matter of luck, not natural superiority, which links to his beliefs in social equality. Throughout the play, Edward has many natural similarities to Mickey:

- They both use expletives (swear words)
- They both play with guns
- They are both suspended
- They are both in love with Linda

However, through Act 2 Russell illustrates that the twins social class and the impact of their upbringing (nurture) affects the opportunities they have: Edward goes to university and becomes a local councillor; Mickey after being made redundant resorts to crime and is imprisoned.

The middle class Lyons' wealth gives Edward huge opportunities and advantages; the working class characters are trapped in poverty and are ultimately reliant on, a largely uncaring middle class.

Fate and Superstition

Fate: being 'fated' means being unable to escape what is going to happen to you – having no real control over your life because it has been predetermined.

The prologue shows Mickey and Edward's fate and Russell uses a series of motifs e.g. guns to remind the audience of the inevitability of their fate throughout the play.

Russell also uses the Narrator in this way and his repetition of 'the devil's got your number' – the devil is the personification of the fate triggered by the pact between the mothers.

Both Mrs Johnstone and Mrs Lyons are also trapped by fate.

The fate Mrs Lyons dreads is driven by her insecurity that Edward will be lured away from her by his 'natural' family or that he will die when the truth about the twins is revealed. Ironically it is when she reveals Edward and Linda's affair that this happens – fate cannot be avoided.

Superstition: refers to irrational belief in, or fear in the supernatural – especially to practices which are meant to ward off evil.

Mrs Lyons uses Mrs Johnstone's superstitious beliefs to manipulate her and invents the superstition about the twins. Eventually this superstitious belief begins to control Mrs Lyons as well.

The Narrator references various superstitions which adds to the sense of impending doom. In the end he asks, "And do we blame superstition on what has come to pass? Or could it be what we English have come to know as class?" (107)

Childhood and Growing Up

The play follows Mickey and Edward from birth until death, focusing on key stages of their lives, aged: 7, 14 and early adulthood.

Act 1: Childhood

- Presented mainly as a time of carefree innocence and fun
- Russell creates humour from their innocence and his nostalgic portrayal of childhood.
- Their friendship crosses class boundaries.
- The twins are shown to have similar natures: play games with guns, get into trouble with the police, are suspended...
- Russell uses songs to emphasise their similarity (My friend)

Act 2: Growing up

- The pivotal change in their relationship occurs when Edward returns from university for Christmas to find Mickey unemployed and married to Linda who is pregnant.
- The scene where the wedding and the redundancies at Mr Lyons' factory are interwoven illustrates the harsh realities of adult life.
- Edward's privilege means he cannot understand Mickey's experiences and this causes bitter resentment.
- As adults, Edward holds power and influence over Mickey's life – his position means he can get Mickey a house and job.

Women's Roles

Mrs Johnstone and Mrs Lyons' role as mothers is central to the plot.

Mrs Johnstone's role is stereotypically and traditionally working class has been to marry young and have children; Mrs Lyons' role is traditionally middle class – a housewife. However, she cannot fulfill this properly because she cannot have children. In Act 1 she sings that she has "dreamed" of all the places she would take her son.

Both fathers are absent: Mr Lyons because he prioritises business; Mr Johnstone because he leaves his wife and children leaving them in poverty.

Despite spending little time on stage, Mr Lyons is still seen to be at the head of his family, making all the major decisions. Linda, as a child, rebels against traditional female roles – she joins in the boys' games and beats them. She is protective of Mickey and is not scared of Sammy.

As an adult, Linda's life mirrors Mrs Johnstone's – she becomes pregnant, gets married, becomes a housewife.

Although none of the women fight against their traditional roles, there is a sense of dissatisfaction in each of them. Mrs J dreams of unobtainable glamour; Mrs L's dream of motherhood is destroyed; Linda seeks escape with Edward.