Drama revision guide

Year 9: Blood Brothers
Willy Russell

Willy Russell was born in 1947 into a working-class family near to Liverpool. He left school at 15 without academic qualifications and became a hairdresser. By the age of 20 he felt the need to return to education and, after leaving university, he became a teacher at a comprehensive school in his home city.

During this time Russell wrote songs for performers and for radio shows. One of his early plays was about the Liverpool pop group the Beatles. He has a love of popular music and this can be seen in many of his plays, but especially in Blood Brothers.
Social context

Blood Brothers was completed in 1981, two years after the Conservative party leader Margaret Thatcher became Prime Minister. She felt that British manufacturing industry had become uncompetitive and saw the cause as weak employers and overly strong trades unions who were, she felt, only too willing to call their members out on strike. She reduced the powers of the workers’ unions and privatised (‘sold off’) many publicly owned companies. She closed many uncompetitive coal mines, too.

Liverpool

Workers march to save jobs

A short-term result was that Britain suffered an economic downturn and unemployment soared. This particularly affected industrialised working-class areas in the north of the country and Willy Russell would have seen this first hand in his home city. Liverpool’s famous docks, a traditional source of local employment, were allowed to run down and thousands of households fell into poverty; crime levels increased; housing was allowed to deteriorate and illegal drug use became more common. Some of this context is directly reflected in the play, for example, Russell shows the terrible effects of unemployment on Micky's self-esteem.

Political context

Margaret Thatcher

One of Thatcher’s central political beliefs was that success came to those who chose to work hard. In Blood Brothers, Russell contradicts this view. He shows a divided society by having Mickey and Edward attend very different schools and live in different houses.

That money and influential connections are necessary to become successful is written into the play. Mickey’s failure, despite his good character and hard work, is the basis of the tragedy in the drama.
**Marilyn Monroe**

*Marilyn Monroe* was a very famous Hollywood actress. Her image was well known even to people who did not watch her films. She was presented by the media as a kind of ‘perfect’ fantasy woman and she was shown to live a glamorous and carefree lifestyle. The reality was often very different. She needed anti-depressants and eventually died from an overdose of pills.

Russell uses references to Monroe throughout the play. At each point he refers to a different aspect of her life and public image. Mrs Johnstone enjoys the glamour of Monroe's public image. Later in the play Mickey becomes hooked on anti-depressant ‘nerve pills’ and this is compared to Monroe's own depression.

**Pop culture**

In the 1960s society went through massive changes. As a result of young people gradually having more money, popular culture (music, TV and film) flourished, becoming accessible to a much wider public. Even the poorest in society, people represented in the play by the fictional Johnstone family, would have had the chance to go to the cinema or to a club for dancing.

Think about the various ways characters in Blood Brothers are influenced by music, film and, especially, fantasy. Mr. Johnstone’s attitude toward his wife is based on her likeness to Marilyn Monroe. Mrs Johnstone’s love of ‘dancing’ is a love of escape from her everyday life. The boys’ love of playful but ‘violent’ games, playing at cowboys and gangsters is influenced by films.
The main themes in Blood Brothers are connected with differences in social class, and the effects these have on the lives of the main characters.

Although superstition and fate are presented as themes, the political message of the play seems to be saying that it is real-world social forces that shape people's lives.

Background

The themes within any literary work are the underlying ideas that probably prompted the work to be created. We know that Russell enjoyed music and had his roots in the working class North. We can guess, too, that he was critical of certain political ideas and felt there were definite wrongs in society.

Creating a play that might end up being viewed by tens of thousands might seem to him a particularly effective way not just of gaining wealth and fame but also as a way of getting his ideas across in a persuasive and influential way.

Social class

Family and friendship for characters from two different social classes form the heart of the play. Russell shows how wealth brings privilege, even down to the way the Johnstone's and the Lyons are treated differently by the law.

The four main characters can be seen to be social stereotypes, presented dramatically in order to emphasise certain important differences in social class. Russell does this to show the unfairness that it results in.

The individual and society

In the play Russell illustrates the influence that society has on individuals, in their education, behaviour and the opportunities they have. When Mickey says at the end of the play ‘I could have been him’, the audience become aware of just how differently life might have turned out for him if he had been brought up within the Lyons family.

Nature vs. Nurture

The 'nature versus nurture' debate is about how much a persons life is determined by their inherited genetics (their 'nature') and how much is determined by the environment they grow up in ('nurture'). The boys are identical twins and so the difference in the way their lives turn out must be a result of their different upbringings and social positions. Russell uses the twins idea to persuade us that attitudes in society influence peoples lives more than their individual efforts at wanting to do well.
Russell’s play is deliberately objecting to a view that was popular in the UK at the time the play was written. Margaret Thatcher’s right wing conservative government claimed that everyone who wanted to work hard could be successful. But Russell clearly objects to this view.

**Fate, bad luck and destiny**

Each of the major characters is presented as being trapped and plagued by various kinds of misfortune and bad luck. Russell seems to be asking us to consider whether there really is such a thing as fate or destiny or whether life pans out because of natural rather than supernatural reasons, because of the way we are educated and live.

So although fate and superstition is a recurring idea, everything in the play leads to question whether these things really exist.

**Friendship**

In the play, the friendship between Eddie and Mickey is initially strong despite their different social backgrounds. Russell is saying that children can make friends easily and form strong relationships even if their parents don’t approve. He is suggesting that human nature is blind to social conventions.

But in the adult world, unemployment and poverty hits Mickey. Edward seems to him to be from a different world. Russell seems to suggest that friendship is dependent upon shared experiences. Once the two characters go their separate ways, shaped and moulded by education, wealth and social status, tensions develop between them.

**Education**

This theme is linked to social class. Russell shows that wealth brings different educational opportunities and these lead to very different lifestyles. Eddie and Mickey are educated differently. One goes on to university and a successful career in politics, the other to a factory job making boxes. Redundancy and lack of opportunity then lead Mickey to crime, drug addiction and depression. Without a better education Russell is saying that Mickey had few options, and so we are asked to see Mickey's mistakes in a sympathetic light.

The effects of education shape the lives of the women in the play too. When Mrs Johnstone loses her husband she falls into poverty from which her lack of education has
provided her with no easy means of escape. She can take unskilled work, and also has to rely on the State for rehousing to a better place.

Compare her with Mrs Lyons who also, despite presumably a middle-class education, is still not self-reliant. In this case Russell is suggesting perhaps that the traditional lives the women lead have less freedom, even when they are educated.

**Growing Up**

Many works in drama and literature have a theme of ‘growing up’. Russell’s play is in part just this. Life, for the children, is shown to be a carefree game in Act One. But the pressures of growing up in different backgrounds and educational systems are shown to bring problems later on.

It is the different experience of growing up that ends the friendship between Edward and Mickey. For example after Mickey loses his job Edward tries to be positive about his situation. But Mickey tells Edward that he cannot understand living on the dole. He says that Edward hasn't had to grow up like him, to face the difficulties of the adult world. He says that they don't have anything in common any more.

**Men and women**

All three major female characters in the play (Mrs. Johnston, Mrs. Lyons and Linda) suffer at the hands of the men in their lives – they are either let down by their husbands or receive no affection from them.

Russell presents a world where the roles of women and men are sharply separate, as a result of the roles given to men and women in their social classes. The female characters tend to be more passive, the male characters are shown as being active and macho.

**Money**

Russell’s play has money and materialism as a theme. Mrs. Johnstone’s life in debt, buying things on the ‘never-never’, leads to problems. But Mrs Lyons’ wealthy existence fails to bring her contentment and happiness either.

Money controls the relationship of Edward and Mickey too – once Edward returns from university as a wealthy man, Russell suggests that his friendship with the penniless Mickey can no longer be the same, as he cannot appreciate Mickey's reaction to being jobless. And nor can Mickey's pride allow him to accept financial help from Edward.
The characters in Blood Brothers are largely defined by the social class they live in. Their attitudes and behaviour are largely fixed, with the exception of the children.

Mickey and Edward grow and change as the story develops, making a friendship across the social divide, but one that is doomed by external forces.

Mrs Johnstone

- She is 25 years old at the start of the play and has already had seven children. This suggests that she has a naturally maternal character, embracing new life and being a caring person. Russell might also be hinting at religious rulings against contraception.

- Often she makes rash decisions on impulse rather than thinking carefully over the consequences of her actions. For example, she buys lots of items from a catalogue on credit despite knowing she probably won’t be able to pay for them later.

- She has a strong, generous character knowing almost instinctively what’s right and wrong, although her circumstances make it hard for her to be a straightforwardly ‘good’ person. She refuses Mrs Lyons’ attempts to bribe her showing that she values people above money, yet she does agree under extreme pressure to give Mrs Lyons one of her children. This is suggested to be largely unselfish because she is shown only to have concern for the child, foreseeing a more comfortable life for him.

- She is naturally a kind and loving mother and finds it hard to discipline her children and keep them under control. When Sammy burns the school down instead of scolding him she casually jokes that it was the school’s fault for letting ‘the silly gets play with magnesium’.
- She is uneducated and does not value intellectual or academic pursuits. This is probably why she is superstitious, something which causes her to believe the twins’ curse and be terrified into following Mrs Lyons’ desires. It also means she lacks concern for the education of her children, taking little interest when either Mickey or Sammy are suspended from school.

- She is lively and has a zest for life. This can be clearly seen in her love of dancing, but also in her general attitude, which could almost be said to be happy-go-lucky. She follows her instincts, believing them to be her best guide through life.

- She has a fatalistic attitude: ‘what will be will be’. She does not really concern herself with causes or explanations of the events in her life, instead accepting them as they happen. She rejoices in her relocation by the council for example, but does not wonder how this occurred – to her, it is merely the work of fate’s lucky hand.

- She is poor and trapped by poverty. This makes it very difficult for her to care for her children and is ultimately the reason that she gives Edward away to Mrs Lyons. Russell suggests that she is old before her time (remember that she is only in her mid-twenties at the start of the play) and has had to sacrifice any youthful enjoyment for the life she has.
Mrs Lyons

- She is presented by Russell as a lonely housewife, with a cold character who finds it difficult to be affectionate towards others. This may be her natural personality, but circumstances certainly haven’t helped: she and her husband are unable to have children naturally and her husband spends long periods at work away from home.

- She is wealthy, but dependent upon her successful businessman husband’s income. She doesn’t work or do the housework. She hires Mrs Johnstone to do the cleaning for her, while she shops for expensive things. Russell creates this character as an inconsiderate, pampered but dependent individual.

- She is a self-centred character who uses others for her own gain. Once Mrs Johnstone has handed over Edward, she no longer needs her and cruelly discards her, manipulating her through preying on her uneducated and superstitious mind.

- She is an over-protective mother, who is always anxious about Edward, and tries to keep him in the house or garden away from Mickey because she doesn’t want him ‘mixing with boys like that’.

- She is shown to be overcome by anxieties and suspicions in later scenes, which Russell suggests are the results of excessive loneliness and a loveless life. She becomes unreasonable and is possibly mad when she attacks Mrs Johnstone.
Mickey

- He is created by Russell to be a friendly, excitable boy in Act One. He likes to play adventure games with others and sneak off to pull pranks.

- He looks up to his older brother Sammy and often feels like a cast-off in comparison to him. He feels the need to impress Sammy and finds it hard to say no to him. Later in the play this will influence him into helping in Sammy’s crime.

- He is very shy about his emotions and takes years to ask Linda out even on a date. He finds it hard to tell Linda that he loves her. He tries to prove himself to her through working hard but becomes even more withdrawn after becoming unemployed.

- He is energetic, bright and witty, but not very well educated. He does not show interest in his schooling and gets suspended for ridiculing his teacher. He is more interested in getting a job.

- He likes Edward’s generosity and, in turn, enjoys being able to show him new things. Edward gives Mickey a chance to shine and be a leader and escape the oppression he feels from his brother, school and general poverty.
Edward

- Edward is presented by Russell as a friendly, generous character. He searches out Mickey to play with and perhaps naively offers him sweets in an attempt to impress him. He joins in with Mickey and Linda’s games and unselfishly tries to get Mickey to express his love for Linda.

- He is raised in a middle-class home and is educated at a private school. He feels restricted and this is one of the reasons he likes the company of Mickey. He revels in Mickey’s liveliness, bad language and risky games.

- He is shown to be an impulsive character and one who doesn’t think too deeply about the consequences of his actions. This can be seen in the way he rashly mocks the policeman in the first act and has an affair with Linda in the second.

- He seems to lack compassion and does not sympathise with Mickey’s plight. Instead, he tells Mickey to use his dole money to live like a ‘Bohemian’. Later, he arranges for Mickey to have a job, but does so condescendingly by keeping it secret.

Linda

- She is presented by Russell as naturally kind and compassionate character. She comes to Mickey’s aid both when he is suspended from school and when he is mocked by the other children.

- She is quite feisty and humorous, joining Edward and Mickey in their games and often leading the way. For example, she plays a trick on a policeman so that the three of them can run away.

- Linda is strong-willed and very supportive of Mickey. She tries to protect him and keeps pushing him to give up his drugs.

- Linda is from a poor family like Mickey. Her lack of education and money allows her no real chance of happiness once Mickey becomes a depressed drug addict. As a last resort, she asks Edward for help before having an affair with him. Her betrayal of Mickey suggests that she is in some ways untrustworthy; but this is also her only chance to escape from the circumstances that have trapped her.

Minor characters
**Sammy**

- He is an aggressive and threatening kind of character who the audience would recognise. From the start of the play he is shown to enjoy making fun of others, especially Mickey.
- He is presented as anti-social and criminal, threatening a bus conductor with a knife and killing a filling station worker.
- He has no outlet for his hostile tendencies, he has no job or money.

**Mr Lyons**

- He is presented as a wealthy businessman who spends long periods of time away from his family. He becomes the managing director of the factory where Mickey worked before Mickey was made redundant.
- He is a distant figure to his wife and son, preferring not to get involved in their affairs. Instead he provides money and homes in wealthy areas as well as expensive schooling for Edward.
- He seems indifferent to the people whose lives he can directly affect - his workforce. He sends Mickey a heartless redundancy letter.

**Narrator and other characters**

**The narrator**

- Russell creates a ‘character’ of the narrator, who acts a little like the Greek ‘Chorus’ from ancient tragedy whose role is to explain some of the key action on stage. The narrator also involves the audience by asking them directly to judge what they see. He helps to make sure that the audience stay a little ‘detached’ from the events of the play. He also helps them remember that this is a ‘story’.
- He reveals that the brothers die at the very start of the play and from then on constantly reminds the audience of the twins’ fate. He presents the themes of fate, destiny and superstition throughout the play, but at the end he asks the audience to consider if it was social forces rather than ‘fate’ that caused the tragedy.

**Policeman, Milkman, Judge, Teachers**

- These minor characters are created for various dramatic purposes. They either lack sympathy or are unfair and two-faced when dealing with others. They represent social institutions, which Russell seems to suggest are prejudiced.
The policeman is friendly at the wealthy Lyons’ house, but in contrast is harsh when dealing with the Johnstones.

The milkman won’t listen to Mrs Johnstone’s valid excuses initially, but once she has some money at her new home he is pleasant and flirts with her.

The judge gives Sammy a lighter sentence than would have normally have been handed out, but this is only because he is attracted to Mrs Johnstone’s appearance.

Edward’s schoolteacher is petty and takes the side of Edward’s bullying classmates. Mickey is certainly awkward and disrespectful to his teacher, but he and Linda are suspended for minor things. The teacher does not bother to answer Mickey’s questions, even though they seem quite justified.
Questions

1. When and where was Blood Brothers first performed?
2. What set, props and scenery were used?
3. How does Willy Russell describe how the idea came to him?
4. What jobs did Willy Russell have before he became a writer? How might these jobs have influenced his plays? (Think about character types, settings and styles).
5. How does Willy Russell explain the fact that he writes so effectively about women? What things have influenced his strong female characters?
6. List at least 4 reasons why you think Willy Russell writes so passionately and personally about class difference. Think about how his life might have been affected by the ‘social divide’.
7. List as many references to guns in the play as you can find. Do you think that Willy Russell is suggesting a link between children playing with guns and the consequences at the end of the play?