

Context – *Blood Brothers* was written by Willy Russell, and was first staged in 1983.

Willy Russell – William Russell (born 23rd August 1947) is an English dramatist, lyricist and composer. Amongst his most popular works are *Educating Rita*, *Shirley Valentine* and *Blood Brothers*. Russell is from Liverpool, and wrote his first play, *Keep Your Eyes Down*, in 1971 whilst he attended the city's St Katherine's College of Higher Education. Two of his plays, *Shirley Valentine* and *Educating Rita*, have become successful feature films.

Influences through Russell's Life – Much of Willy Russell's work is influenced by his own working class background. Russell was a child from a low-income family, with a father who struggled with drug addiction. His father worked in a factory and his mother worked as a nurse. Russell left school at age 15, without any academic qualifications, and became a hairdresser. He did not return to education until age 20. Russell has a love of popular music (one of his earlier plays is about The Beatles) which is evident in most of his plays.

Marilyn Monroe – Marilyn Monroe was an extremely famous Hollywood actress, whose fame transcended the boundaries of her Hollywood films. She was presented in the media as a 'fantasy' woman who lived a perfect life. Yet, the reality was very different – she became addicted to anti-depressants and eventually died from an overdose. From the 1950s onwards, Monroe was just one part star from a society in which everyday people became more influenced by pop/celebrity culture.

Margaret Thatcher – Margaret Thatcher was a Conservative politician who was elected as Prime Minister of the United Kingdom in 1979, four years before *Blood Brothers* was first performed. Seeing British manufacturing as uncompetitive, she blamed trade unions as being too strong in calling strikes on weakened employers. So, she reduced unions' powers and sold off and closed uncompetitive companies.

Effect in the UK/ Liverpool – A short-term effect of companies being closed and sold off was that there was an economic downturn across the UK and unemployment soared. This particularly effected the more industrialised northern areas of the country, with Liverpool being a prime example. Liverpool's docks, a chief source of employment in the city, were allowed to fold, causing thousands of households to fall into poverty and unemployment. Crime levels increased, drug use skyrocketed, and housing deteriorated in poorer areas.

Thatcher's Values vs. Russell's Values – One of the pivotal beliefs in Thatcher's system was that success and wealth came to those who chose to work hard. In *Blood Brothers*, Russell demonstrates opposition towards that view, suggesting that opportunities are more limited for those that are raised in working class backgrounds, when compared to those from the middle classes. This divided society is demonstrated through showing the effect of different upbringings on a set of twins.

Main Characters – Consider what Russell intended through his characterisation of each of the below...

Mickey – Mickey is the biological twin of Edward who Mrs Johnstone opts to keep. Mickey has a harsh working-class upbringing, but at his heart he is honest and sincere. He takes a number of knocks in life (that Edward is fortunate enough to avoid) for example impregnating his girlfriend (Linda) and getting laid off from his industrial job. He hardens as the play goes on, becoming cynical after time in prison, and becomes addicted to anti-depressants.

Mickey Quote: "Do you wanna be my blood brother, Eddie?"

The Narrator – All-knowing and slightly menacing, the Narrator takes on a number of roles throughout the play. Sometimes he plays parts (e.g. the Milkman) whilst at other times he stands back and comments upon the action as it unfolds. The Narrator reminds the audience of the terrible act that causes the tragedy to unfold, and warns the audience of the tragic events that are to come.

Narrator Quote: "So did y'hear the story of the Johnstone twins?"

Mrs Johnstone – Mrs Johnstone is the biological mother of Mickey and Edward, as well as a number of other children. She is a deeply superstitious woman who has to struggle to get by, however she also has a good heart and a strong sense of right and wrong. She gives up one of her twins as she genuinely believes that she has no choice after being left by her husband. As the play progresses, she is overcome by regret, however she always remains kind and loving.

Mrs Johnstone Quote: "In the name of Jesus, the thing was done,"

Edward – Edward is the biological twin of Mickey, who Mrs Johnstone gives to Mrs Lyons to raise as her own. Like Mickey, Edward is honest and sincere, remaining kind and down-to-earth despite his luxury upbringing with the snobbish Mrs Lyons. Unlike Mickey, however, Edward benefits from every advantage in life, such as attending private schools and university. He uses his position as a councilman to help Mickey, but also begins an affair with Linda.

Edward Quote: "It's just a secret, everybody has secrets, don't you have secrets?"

Linda – Linda begins the play as a tomboy who enjoys playing with Mickey and Edward, but she soon becomes an object for their desire. At the beginning of her adolescence, she seems solely attracted to Mickey, telling him that she loves him even before their first kiss. However, after years of poverty (and Mickey's imprisonment) she turns to Edward for comfort and the two begin an affair.

Linda Quote: ""You can get up off the ground again"

Mrs Lyons – Mrs Lyons is the opposite of Mrs Johnstone – arrogant, snobbish, and infertile. She adopts Edward and brings him up as a wealthy, middle-class boy. Like Mrs Johnstone, Mrs Lyons is racked with guilt from the deed of separating the twins, but this influences her to create a superstition to keep Mrs Johnstone away. She eventually becomes so unhinged and paranoid that she will lose her son that she attempts to kill Mrs Johnstone.

Mrs Lyons Quote: "Oh...you mean you're superstitious?"