

# GCSE **Blood Brothers** *Willy Russell*



ThinkIT



## Genre

What are the difficulties inherent in attempting a literary reading of a theatrical show? How can you overcome this? e.g. is doing a literary reading of *lyrics* different to doing a literary reading of *poetry*? How? Why? How does the musical format affect the transitions between scenes?

Consider the production note: *"the different settings and time spans being indicated by lighting changes, with the minimum of properties and furniture. The whole play should flow easily and smoothly, with no cumbersome scene changes"*

In what ways does Russell utilise the common musical features of a Narrator and Chorus?

## Game-Playing

How heavily do games feature in the narrative? Do you think the presence of games is related to this idea of 'playing parts'?

*"But you know that if you cross your fingers  
And if you count from one to ten  
You can get up off the ground again  
It doesn't matter  
The whole thing's just a game."*

Consider the role games play in the *escalation of violence* in the characters.

### Sammy (Act One)

*I got y'  
I shot y'  
An'y' bloody know I did.*

Do you think that Russell represents violent behaviour as inevitable for some characters? What arguments can you find for and against this view? Do you think that violence is presented as being related to class?

### Mickey/Sammy (Act Two)

*M: You shot him, you shot him.  
S: I know I bloody did.*

## "But a debt is a debt, and must be paid"

How is *debt* presented in the narrative?

How does Russell draw comparisons between financial debt and other kinds of debt? How are the characters haunted by the debts that they carry?

What do you think is meant by the phrase *"living on the never never"*?  
*"Next week, next week! Next week never arrives around here."*

How is social mobility presented in the play? Do any of the characters successfully move up the social hierarchy? To what extent? *"Because you're the youngest, Mickey. It used to happen to Sammy when he was the youngest."*

To what extent are different characters encouraged to accept the way things are and not challenge them?

To what extent are the working classes shown as being unable to help themselves, due to the way that society is constructed?

*"I didn't sort anythin' out, Linda. Not a job, not a house, nothin'. It used to just be sweets an' ciggies he gave me, because I had none of me own. Now it's a job and a house. I'm not stupid, Linda. You sorted it out. You an' Councillor Eddie Lyons."*

## Manipulation

What different methods of manipulation do the characters employ?

Blackmail? Bribery? Threat? Fear? e.g. How do you react to the fact that it is *Mrs Lyons* who tells Mickey about Linda and Eddie's affair?

Are there more subtle ways that the characters influence each others' behaviours? For example, when they are children compared to when they are adults?

## Stories within Stories

Consider the opening line from Mrs Johnstone: *"Tell me it's not true. Say it's just a story."* – Do you think Russell is playing on the idea that the audience know the play is a story? What other examples can you find of this in the narrative?

In addition... consider how different characters 'play their parts'

Most notably, think about the *Narrator*: Is there a common theme to the different characters that the narrator plays? Why do you think Russell wanted the narrator to play these characters, and not different actors?

Russell makes no attempt to disguise that it is the narrator. Consider the episode with the gynaecologist: *"Actually I've given up the milk round and gone into medicine. I'm your gynaecologist now."*

Can you find moments in the play when the narrator is playing another character, but still has knowledge of the overarching narrative? What effect does this have?

E.g. the conductor: *"But you've got to have an endin', if a start's been made. No one gets off without the price bein' paid."* What is the effect of these double-meanings?

## Employment

How does Russell present Mr Lyons? To what extent could he be seen as representative of the business classes? Consider the language and tone adopted in 'Take a Letter Miss Jones'.

*It's a premature retirement  
For those surplus to requirement  
I'm afraid it's just a sign of the times,  
Miss Jones*

*My dear Miss Jones, we'd like to thank you  
Many years of splendid service  
Et cetera blah blah blah  
You've been a perfect poppet*

How are attitudes towards employment used to highlight tensions between the upper and working classes?

*Mickey: "I'd crawl back to that job for half the pay and double the hours [...] after bein' fucked off from everywhere, it seems like it was paradise"*  
*Eddie: "Why... why is a job so important?"*

## Characters and Mental Health

Consider how Mr Lyons and Eddie employ euphemism when talking about Mrs Lyons' mental state:

*"Perhaps we should be talking about getting you something for your nerves"*  
*"Are you feeling alright, Mummy? You're not ill again, like you used to be... are you?"*  
*"She's off her beam, my ma"*

Did you find Mrs Lyons' attempted assault of Mrs Johnstone a surprise?

Now think about the character of Mickey.

*"And treats his ills with daily pills, / Just like Marilyn Monroe"*

How do you react to Linda's insistence that Mickey stop taking his pills? How might this tell us something about attitudes towards mental health issues?

*"There's a man gone mad in the town tonight,  
He's gonna shoot somebody down"*

In the text, to what extent do you think mental health issues are male, female or both in 'Blood Brothers'?

## Structure

How do you react to the narrative structure of the play? In particular, with the idea that the conclusion of the play is revealed at the opening?

How does this affect the way that the story is told throughout the play, and the effect that it has on the audience?

How does Russell handle the transitions between dialogue and song? Do the songs happen at particular times – can you spot a pattern?

What is the effect of the split stages, when there are two things going on at once.

e.g. in 'A Light Romance', when we see the growing relationship between Eddie and Linda, at the same time as Mickey making an effort not to take his pills.

How do you react to the pace of the two Acts. Does the narrative pick up pace towards the close of the play?

In particular, think about how you react to the abruptness of the ending.

## Parenthood

How closely linked are the ideas of 'good parenting' and wealth in the play?

What is the correlation implied by some of the characters?

more money = better parent?

*"But like they say at the welfare, kids can't live on love alone."*

In what ways are children treated like possessions by some of the characters?

*"Myself, I believe that an adopted child can become one's own."  
"just for a while I came to believe that he was actually mine"*

## Theme: Prophecy - Superstition - Fate - Chance

Think about these four words. How are they explored in the narrative? What are the relationships between them, if any?

Do you associate certain characters with some of these words? Why?

Mrs Lyons: *"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."*

Thinking about superstition, do you agree with the assessment that this is linked to class?

*Mrs J: "Now go on. Beat it, go home before the bogey man gets y'."*  
*Mrs L: "The sort of thing a silly mother might say to her children."*

How do you respond to the following lines from the narrator?

And do we blame superstition for what came to pass?

Or could it be what we, the English, have come to known as class

## Theme: Nature versus Nurture

To what extent can you see the play as an exploration of ideas relating to *nature* versus *nurture*?

Consider how the story arcs of Mickey and Eddie dovetail – e.g. when they are both suspended from school.

To what extent are Mickey and Eddie presented as similar and/or different?

Now consider the following quotation from Mickey:

*"Yeh. But you're still a kid. An' I wish I could be as well, Eddie. I wish I could still believe in all that blood brother stuff. But I can't, because while no one was looking I grew up. An' you didn't, because you didn't need to; an' I don't blame y' for it, Eddie. In your shoes I'd be the same, I'd still be able to be a kid."*