

# FACTFILE:

## GCSE DRAMA

### Component 3



## Knowledge and Understanding of Drama, Exploration of the Set Text

### Blood Brothers

by Willy Russell

#### Social

- The play is set in the early 1960's, although it was written by Willy Russell in 1981. It spans over a twenty-year period, taking it up to the period in which it was written;
- Housing was in short supply and many of the inner-city homes were run-down and impoverished and in the play the Johnstone's are re-housed out of the city;
- There was high unemployment in Liverpool at this time which is reflected within the play as Mrs. Johnstone cleans for Mrs. Lyons and struggles to bring up seven children on her own;
- The economy suffered and unemployment rates rose; particularly affecting working class areas such as Liverpool;
- Crime levels rose and there was an increase in illegal drugs being used. The effect of these factors is reflected with Sammy's involvement with the law Mickey's spell in prison, his drug habit and the violent conclusion;
- There was a huge disparity in the class system of the time, which is reflected in the difference between the Lyon's and the Johnstone's.

#### Cultural

- Liverpool, at this time was well known for it's music which is reflected in the fact that Russell chose to represent the story through the genre of musical theatre and uses various musical references;
- Pop culture icons of perfection such as Marilyn Monroe are set against Mrs Johnstone's 'Imperfect' life;
- America had a huge impact upon the rest of the world who aspired to the famous celebrities of the period in a bid to escape their mundane lives;
- Everyone could access the cinema and this is reflected in Mickey and Edward's visits to see films and also references to cowboys and American idols.

#### Historical

- Willy Russell was a teacher and originally wrote Blood Brothers as a school play in 1981 in conjunction with Merseyside Young Peoples' Theatre;
- The play was first performed at the Liverpool Playhouse in 1983;

- During the 1980's, the government underwent a huge transformation with a Conservative government coming to power and Margaret Thatcher taking over as Prime Minister. Britain saw huge austerity measures introduced during this time;
- The play spans twenty five years which is the life of the twins Mickey and Edward;
- Difference between the working class and middle class was clearly seen at this time and is reflected in the comprehensive schooling of Mickey and the public schooling of Edward;
- There is historical accuracy with reference to Marilyn Monroe, the education system, and university opportunities, unemployment in Liverpool, drug addiction and the music of the period.

### Theatrical Conventions

- This is a piece of musical theatre and was written to be performed on a proscenium arch stage;
- The technique of foreshadowing and dramatic irony are often used to warn the audience of future events;
- The narrator is a convention chosen by Russell to relate the 'tragic fate' of the characters as events unfold. The narrator also multi-roles throughout, this creates a comic effect;
- The use of song is used throughout the play to reveal key information, comment on the action and sometimes create specific mood;
- Split scenes are used throughout to show two scenes being performed on stage at the same time;
- Flashback is used at the opening as the play starts with the ending.

### Form and Style

- The play is described as 'A Musical' with book, music and lyrics by Willy Russell;
- It has elements of black-comedy and a tragic ending;
- The style reflects elements of the 1950's 'kitchen-sink drama' that focuses on social elements of the working classes;
- The original staging was on a proscenium arch stage;
- The play opens with a flashback, which is a re-enactment of the final scene, this is a type of prologue, used to predict events;
- The Narrator helps to bridge the time span and links scenes with the use of monologue;
- The characterisation of Sammy, Linda, Edward and Mickey as children develops comedy, exaggeration and high energy in performance.

### Genre

- The genre is Musical theatre, which is theatre that combines song, dialogue and some choreography to relate events and tell a story;
- The play is non-naturalistic in genre with the use of narration, musical elements, ensemble acting, asides and other non-naturalistic techniques;
- It contains elements of both comedy and tragedy and concludes with a climactic and tragic finale;
- The narrator is used effectively throughout the piece to inform, predict, forewarn, advance the action and involve the audience. In using a narrator, the *fourth wall* is broken.

### Language

- The dialogue is written in a Liverpool dialect;
- The naturalistic language is used to create realism;
- The class distinction is inferred through the language used and is particularly evident between the characters of Edward and Mickey such as the 'F' word and 'a dictionary';
- Language and how it is used to show distress and anger as the characters often speak using broken syntax;
- Language is used for comic effect with standard, received English misunderstood creating tension or confusion;

- Mickey recites a humorous five verse poem in Act 1 when he is seven and nearly eight. Each stanza has eight lines with simple rhyme.

### Structure

- The play contains two acts;
- The first act begins in the early sixties and spans a seven year period. Act two opens up with the boys as teenagers; around the mid 1970's. This act spans the boys lives from their teenager years through to adulthood;
- The plays only deals with the significant moments in the twins lives, scanning past years as well as creating a climactic build up to the tragedy at the end of the play. Russell uses songs to show the time gaps and reveal important information about character and situation;
- There is a flashback at the start of the play in which the final outcome is revealed. After this moment, the play moves at a fast pace, in a linear and chronological way;
- The first act focuses on the friendship that blossoms between the two boys as well as building tension through the device of foreshadowing;
- Act one ends on a positive note, with Mrs Johnstone singing *Oh Bright New Day*, expressing her optimism for the future. Act two culminates in the deaths of Mickey and Edward and therefore is more tragic and sinister.

