

Knowledge Map - 'Blood Brothers' by Willy Russell

Synopsis:

Blood Brothers is a musical by Willy Russell. The story is a contemporary nature versus nurture **plot**, revolving around fraternal twins Mickey and Eddie who were separated at birth. The twins' different backgrounds take them to opposite ends of the social spectrum, one becoming a councillor and the other unemployed and in prison. They both fall in love with the same girl, causing a tear in their friendship and leading to the tragic death of both brothers.

William 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.

Context:

Escalating economic decline in the 1970s meant that many people had little or no income, which divided the rich and poor. This is called social exclusion. People suffer from social exclusion when they do not have access to adequate health care or education. Lack of education and health care stop people from getting good jobs which mean they will have little or no income which means that social exclusion becomes a cycle for families. In the 1980's Liverpool's famous docks, a traditional source of local employment, were allowed to run down during this economic downturn, 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 Mickey's self-esteem. Central political beliefs of the time were 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.

Themes:

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 person's 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.

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.

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.

Dramatic Conventions:

Monologue – a speech presented by a single character, most often to express their mental thoughts aloud

Split Scene – in drama and theatre the term is used to describe two or more **scenes** which are performed on stage at the same time.

Improvisation – something created spontaneously

Foreshadowing – be a warning or an indication of future events

Dramatic Irony – something that is understood by the audience but not the characters

Writing Assessment:

Produce a monologue, from a specific characters point of view, to explore their thoughts and feelings at a pivotal moment in the play

Reading Assessment:

How are the effects of social exclusion presented in ‘Blood Brothers’?

Key Vocabulary:

- Mrs Lyons Adolescence
- Mrs Johnstone Social Exclusion
- Eddie Sympathy
- Mickey Audience
- Linda Conventions
- Monologue Stage directions
- Split Scene Expression
- Foreshadow Narrator
- Drama Tragic
- Liverpool
- Surrogacy