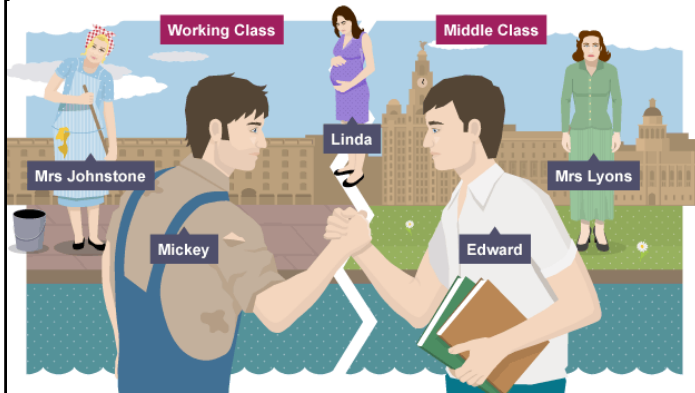


# DRAMA — BLOOD BROTHERS (WILLY RUSSELL) - KNOWLEDGE ORGANISER

## Plot Summary



1. Mrs Johnstone, a struggling single mother of seven, finds out that she is pregnant with twins. Her employer, Mrs Lyons persuades Mrs Johnstone to give her one of the babies.
2. Mrs Lyons takes Edward and brings him up as her own, convincing her husband this is true. Mrs Johnstone goes back to work but fusses over Edward, leading to Mrs Lyons firing her.
3. Aged seven, Mickey and Edward meet and become best friends, along with Mickey's neighbour Linda. The three get into trouble with the police when they begin to throw stones at windows.
4. Scared of Edward becoming close to his biological family, Mrs Lyons convinces her husband to move the family to the countryside. Soon afterwards, the Johnstones (and Linda's family) are rehoused by the council.
5. As teenagers, Mickey and Edward meet again and they rekindle their friendship. Linda and the boys remain close throughout their teenage years before Edward goes to university.
6. After marrying a pregnant Linda, Mickey loses his factory job.
7. As they grow older Eddie secretly helps Mickey by getting him a new job and helping his family to get moved up the
8. Edward and Linda start a light romance. Mickey finds out and is furious so he finds Sammy's gun and goes to find Edward.
9. Linda tells Mrs Johnstone what is happening. She rushes to find Mickey and tells him in front of Edward that they are twins.
10. Mrs Lyons enters with a gun, clearly suffering from a mental breakdown. She shoots the brothers 'they were born and they died on the self same day'.

## Key Words

Objectives, Duologue, Ensemble, Chorus, Suspension of Disbelief, Status-Ranking, Hot-Seating, Split Focus, Thought Tunnel, Monologue, Duologue, Acts, Scenes, Stage-Directions, Thrust Stage, Traverse Stage, Theatre in the Round, Proscenium Stage, Language, Class, Superstition, Accent, Multi-Roling, Naturalism, Comedy, Stylised, tableau, Accent

## Themes

### Social Class

Willy Russell asks several questions of the audience through the events of Blood Brothers, particularly about how equal our society is. Through presenting twins, who have the same DNA but are brought up in such different families, the playwright shows how much our life experiences affect the opportunities we have in life. Russell wrote Blood Brothers in 1981, and it was first performed as a musical in 1983. This was during the period that Conservative Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher was in power. There was very high unemployment during this time, particularly in industrial working-class areas in northern England, such as Liverpool - where Russell is from and where the play is set. Mickey and his family represent the working classes, who were badly affected by the economic downturn, whereas Edward and the Lyons family embody the middle classes, who thrived in the 1980s.

The difference between the Johnstone and Lyons families draws attention to the impact that a person's social class can have on their opportunities in life. From the moment that Mrs Johnstone goes to work for Mrs Lyons at the beginning of the play, the audience's attention is drawn to how their lives are worlds apart. This contrast is emphasised throughout the play, through the characters of Mickey and Edward. Even at the age of seven, the twins' experiences of life are disparate. When they are young, their friendship overcomes their differences, but as they get older, the space between the brothers gets wider and harder for them to move past. Margaret Thatcher believed that anyone could be successful if they worked hard. Russell demonstrates that for Mickey this is not true. Without having the opportunities that Edward is given, Mickey's prospects are very limited, regardless of how hard he works and his desire to succeed.

### Superstition/Fate

Russell also introduces the idea of superstition through the character of Mrs Johnstone. Should we accept that fate is in control of our lives or are other factors more important? Mrs Johnstone's superstition is revealed early on in Blood Brothers and is one of the things that gives Mrs Lyons power over her. This is linked to fate and destiny, because Mickey and Edward's death is shown to be inevitable from the opening scene, making the superstition Mrs Lyons tells Mrs Johnstone about the twins come true. The narrator is a key character for this theme, as he reminds the audience of the twins' fate at several different points of the play. However, while superstition and fate are very important themes in Blood Brothers, Russell questions whether they really exist or whether social class is more important in determining Mickey and Edward's futures.

## Characters

The main characters in Blood Brothers are the twins Mickey Johnstone and Edward Lyons, and their mothers Mrs Johnstone and Mrs Lyons. Mickey and Edward's friend Linda, who becomes Mickey's wife, is also an important character.

The Narrator is on stage throughout the play and communicates with the audience rather than being involved in the events.

Mickey's brother Sammy and Edward's father Mr Lyons feature less in the play, but both have an impact on the plot

**Mickey Johnstone** — When Mickey is aged seven, he is friendly, open and easily upset; when Mickey is a teenager, he is awkward, embarrassed and hides his feelings; as an adult Mickey is depressed and angry with how his life has turned out. The actor playing Mickey has to use his voice, facial expressions and body language to convey these changes to the audience so that they can follow the storyline correctly

**Edward Lyons** — As a child, Edward is very friendly and eager to make friends; as a teenager, he is warm and fun-loving (although he doesn't understand Mickey's problems when he is in his late teens); as an adult, he appears in the play less but he is a successful, professional man.

**Mrs Johnstone** — Unlike the twins, Mrs Johnstone stays very similar throughout. She is down-to-earth and very affectionate towards her children. Mrs Johnstone struggles to support her family and is very superstitious which leads to her being easily manipulated by Mrs Lyons,.

**Mrs Lyons** — At the beginning of the play, Mrs Lyons is in control and manipulative, however, she becomes increasingly insecure after taking Edward from Mrs Johnstone. Mrs Lyons loses control and becomes irrational resulting in the murder of Mickey and Edward.

**The Narrator** — The Narrator is a difficult character to play in a different way because he does not interact with other characters in a normal way; he speaks to them and about them but they do not show awareness of his presence.

The Narrator is on stage throughout the play, watching the characters and commenting on events. This can be played in different ways: sometimes the Narrator is played as a sinister, threatening character and sometimes he is more objective in the way he is played.

Regardless of the way he is depicted, the Narrator is always mysterious and creates an important link between the audience and what is happening on stage, through speaking directly to those watching and asking them questions.

## Form & Structure

**Acts and Scenes** — The version you are studying is split into 5 Acts. Each act is divided into scenes. The scenes in each act are not evenly distributed.

**Narrator** — The narrator appears throughout the play and only talks directly to the audience. He always speaks in rhyming couplets.

**Monologue** — The play has several monologues (uninterrupted speeches). The most notable is Mickey's 'I wish I was our Sammy' speech in Act 2.

**Chorus** — Alongside the main characters there are a group of unnamed supporting actors who work as an ensemble when necessary (backing singers, other Johnstone children), help with scene transitions and also take on minor speaking roles.

**Multi-roling** — There are times in Blood Brothers when actors play more than one role.

**Song** — This is only used in Act 1 and used to explain Mrs Johnstone's backstory. Willy Russell would later add more songs to the play and turn it in to a smash West End musical.

**Naturalism** — The main scenes in Blood Brothers have a realistic and believable feel. However the Narrator and Chorus add stylisation to the piece.

**Freeze Frame** — This is used to mark the key moment when 'the plan' was thought of by Mrs Lyons.

**Comedy** — There are some very funny moments in the first half of Blood Brothers but these disappear as the play gets darker.

**Language** — Willy Russell uses language to show the contrast between the working class and middle class characters.

**Accent** — The play is often performed with Liverpudlian accents (except for the Lyons family who speak in a contrasting 'posh' way).

**Tableau** — These are used in the scene where the Teenagers recreate highlights of their summer holiday.

**Chronological Order**—The scenes are in the order the events happened (unlike the musical version).