BLOOD BROTHERS KNOWLEDGE ORGANISER

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.



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.



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.



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 sky-rocketed, and housing deteriorated in poorer areas.



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.



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 is 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?"

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?"

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?"

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 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,"

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?"

Themes – A theme is an idea or message that runs throughout a text.

Class and Money – The themes of class and money are dominant as they both control the actions of characters and significantly impact upon their lives. For example, the catalytic deed – Mrs Johnstone giving one of the twins away – comes about because she simply cannot afford to keep them both. Class then heavily influences the paths that Mickey and Edward then follow.



Fate and Superstition – The voice of fate is provided over and over again throughout the play by the Narrator, who reveals even at the outset that the two will die. Mrs Lyons plays on Mrs Johnstone's belief in superstition in order to keep her away from Edward. However ridiculous and made-up it sounds, it eventually comes to pass, almost as if the false threat is in itself a sin.



Nature vs Nurture – As Mickey and Edward are twins, they are genetically (nature) as similar as can be. Therefore, Russell is suggesting that it is in fact nurture (their upbringing) that causes their contrasting behaviours, actions, and mannerisms. It is clear that Russell feels that unjust society is the heaviest influence in where people end up.



Coming of Age – Although much of the play focuses on dark and complex ideas, one of the lighter themes within the play is the theme of the boys 'coming of age.' Although the play ends tragically, much of it deals with the boys growing up, evolving from young boys, to teenagers, to men. As they mature, their experiences and preoccupations notably shift.



Scene-by-Scene Summary – Alongside key quotations from each section of the play.

Beginning of Act I	The play opens with Mrs Johnstone begging the Narrator to tell her 'it's not true', and the Narrator revealing that the Johnstone twins were separated at birth, and only found out when they died. Mrs Johnstone (a 30-something woman who looks much older) tells of her life having a shotgun wedding, having many children at a young age, and her husband leaving her. Mrs Johnstone cannot pay her bills, and her children are hungry. In the next scene, Mrs Johnstone is seen cleaning for the wealthy Mrs Lyons, who laments not being able to have children. Mrs Johnstone finds out that she is having twins (she cannot afford them both). Mrs Lyons begs her to give one of them to her. Initially, Mrs Johnstone is horrified, but Mrs Lyons is able to convince her. Mrs Lyons plays on Mrs Johnstone's belief in superstition to have her swear on a bible to tell no one. The deal is final.	*"So did y' hear the story Of the Johnstone twins? As like each other as two new pins Of one womb born, on the self same day, How one was kept and one given away?"*
Middle of Act I	Mrs Johnstone gives birth to twins, and when she returns from hospital creditors take her possessions to pay for bills. Mrs Lyons enters and forces Mrs J to give up the twin, as promised. Reluctantly, she does so. When returning to the house the next week, Mrs J plays with the twin she gave away – Mrs L arrives and is furious – she fires her. Mrs J threatens to take her baby with her, and then to tell someone, but Mrs L makes up a new superstition about twins secretly parted, who learn their origins, immediately die.	*"Surely, it's better to give one child to me. Look, at least if the child was with me you'd be able to see him every day, as you come to work."*
End of Act I	7 years later, Mickey remarks to his mother that he is sick of his older brother, Sammy, bullying him. By chance, he then meets Edward, and the two instantly become best friends – they realise that they have the same birthday and agree to become 'blood brothers.' When Mickey introduces Edward to his mother, she is alarmed, and sends him home. When Mrs L finds out the two have become friends, she is also incensed. Mickey and Edward decide to play together against their mothers' wishes. With Linda, they play with a toy gun, then throw stones at a window, but are caught by a Policeman. The Policeman acts v. differently to the Johnstones and the Lyons families. The Lyons move to the country. Edward and Mickey both miss each other dearly. Not too long after, Mrs J is receives a letter stating that her family is being relocated to the country. She sees it as a fresh start.	*"See this means that we're blood brothers an' that we always have to stand by each other. Now you say after me: 'I will always defend my brother. I will always defend my brother."*
Beginning of Act II	Mrs J sings happily about her new house and life. She pays bills on time. Mickey is now 14 and has begun to notice girls. Meanwhile, Edward now attends boarding school. Mickey now clearly has a crush on Linda. They get on a bus together, which Sammy attempts to rob before being chased away. Linda warns Mickey never to turn bad like Sammy. Meanwhile, Edward is suspended at school for wearing a locket given to him by Mrs J (with a picture of her and Mickey in it) before he left. Mickey and Linda are also suspended from their school for answering back to a teacher. Leaving school, Mickey longs to be able to tell Linda how he feels. He bumps into Edward, and the two recognise one another. They begin to talk about girls, and decide to go and watch a pornographic film together, in order to get some tips. Mrs Lyons watches their whole exchange, and follows them.	*"Linda...Linda...Don't...Linda, I wanna kiss y', an' put me arms around y' an' kiss y' and kiss y' an even fornicate with y' but I don't know how to tell y' because I've got pimples an' me feet are too big..."*
Middle of Act II	The boys stop at Mrs J's house to get money. She is shocked but happy to see Edward. She gives them money for a movie. Mrs Lyons (now increasingly unstable) confronts Mrs J, offering her large amounts of money to leave the area. Mrs J refuses. Angered, Mrs L tries to stab Mrs J, but Mrs J disarms her. Mrs L is becoming known as a 'mad woman.' Edward and Mickey emerge from the movie, impressed. Linda also emerges, having been at the same movie. Edward, excited, stands on a car, and the three are chased away by a policeman. The three spend a great deal of time together, and we see them grow from 14 to 18. At 18, Mickey now works in a factory, and Edward is going away to University. Although Edward clearly has feelings for Linda, he loyally encourages Mickey to ask her out, which he does. Mickey soon reveals to Mrs J that Linda is pregnant, and that they will marry soon. They get married, but shortly afterwards, Mickey is made redundant from the factory.	*"Due to the world situation The shrinking pound, the global slump And the price of oil I'm afraid we must fire you, We no longer require you, It's just another Sign of the times"*
End of Act II	Edward returns from university buoyant, however when he meets the depressed and cynical Mickey, the two argue. As they leave one another, Edward sees Linda, and confesses his love for her. Sammy then convinces Mickey to help him out in a robbery, which inevitably goes wrong – Mickey has to spend time in prison. When he is eventually released, his drug induced apathy (he's addicted to anti-depressants) prevent him from getting a job. Linda gets help from Edward (now on the housing committee) to get Mickey and her a new house. Mickey, however, continues to be cynical and depressed. Linda and Edward begin an affair. Mrs L shows Mickey Edward and Linda together, and Mickey is enraged. He finds the gun that Sammy hid in the botched robbery job, and tracks down Edward (who is at the town hall). Mrs J and Linda, realising what is going on, pursue him. He finds Edward and points the gun at him. A policeman asks Mickey to put the gun down. Mrs J emerges and reveals the two are brothers. Mickey, hysterical, torments his own position, and accidentally shoots Edward. The police then shoot Mickey.	*"And do we blame superstition for what came to pass? Or could it be what we, the English, have come to know as class? Did you ever hear the story of the Johnstone twins, As like each other as two new pins"*

Russell's Dramatic Devices

Dramatic Irony	The audience is aware throughout the play that Mickey and Edward are twins, but they do not know this until the very last scene.
'The Fourth Wall'	The Narrator and Mrs Johnstone break the fourth wall when they speak to the audience directly at the beginning and end of the play.
Stage Directions	The preche directions detailing how Mickey, '*uncontrollable with rage*', '*waves*' the gun around before it explodes at Edward.
Dramatic Tension	The events leading up to the final scene, including Edward and Linda's affair, and Mickey finding out, help to build the dramatic tension.

The Features of Tragedy

Tragic Hero – A main character cursed by fate and in possession of a tragic flaw (both Mickey and Edward display some features of tragic heroes).

Hamartia – The fatal character flaw of the tragic hero (their upbringings/differences, and also their bond between one another).

Catharsis – The release of the audience's emotions through empathy with the characters.

Internal Conflict – The struggle characters engage with over incidents/flaws. (Mrs Johnstone's regret at giving one of her twins away).