

# Plot Summary

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**Plot** - this refers to the events that make up the storyline of the play.

## **Act I**

The play opens with a prologue that tells us that the Johnstone twins were separated and then died on the day they found out about each other. Mrs Johnstone gives a brief history of her life and then starts her new job cleaning for Mrs Lyons. Mrs Johnstone finds out she's having twins and wonders how she will cope. Mrs Lyons asks if she will give one twin to her as she is unable to have children of her own and can offer it a good life. When the babies are born Mrs Lyons takes Edward, and Mickey stays with his biological mother, Mrs Johnstone. Mrs Lyons then sacks Mrs Johnstone, threatening her with a superstition about separated twins dying if they ever find out about each other, to ensure she leaves Edward behind.

There is a jump forward in time seven years and the boys meet playing on the street. They become firm friends and blood brothers. The boys get in trouble with the police and the Lyons plan to move to the country to get Edward away from the Johnstones. Mrs Johnstone gives Edward a locket before he leaves. The boys are lonely without each other. The Johnstones are rehoused to the country.

## **Act II**

Another seven years have passed. Mickey and his friend Linda get the bus to school but Mickey's older brother Sammy robs the conductor. Edward gets suspended from his boarding school for refusing to give up his locket and Mickey and Linda get suspended for being rude to their teacher. The three friends meet and continue as close friends until they are eighteen.

Just before Edward leaves for university he makes sure Mickey and Linda get together. Linda becomes pregnant and she and Mickey marry and move in with Mrs Johnstone. Mickey loses his job and is persuaded by Sammy to help with a garage robbery. Sammy shoots the garage attendant and Mickey gets seven years in prison. Mickey is depressed in prison and ends up on medication.

Mickey is released early but is a shadow of his former self. Edward, who is now a town councillor, helps Linda get Mickey a job and their own home. Mickey refuses to stop taking his pills and Linda and Edward start an affair. Mrs Lyons tells Mickey about the affair and he gets Sammy's gun and goes after Edward. Mrs Johnstone follows him and tells him not to shoot Edward because they are twins. Mickey's gun goes off killing Edward and then Mickey is shot by the police.

# Scene Summaries and Analysis

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## Scene divisions


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### Key for using this




This box signifies a definition of a key term.

### Discuss...



*This box provides a topic or question to provoke student discussion*



**Did you know?** This box contains useful extra information relating to the text.

# Act I

## Prologue p.5

### Summary

Mrs Johnstone and the **Narrator** are on the stage. The Narrator's prologue tells the audience what is going to happen and the shooting of the twins is acted out. The Narrator invites the audience to judge Mrs Johnstone's character as the story unfolds.

### Analysis

The play opens with Mrs Johnstone singing the first two lines of 'Tell Me It's Not True', the lyric that closes the play. The Narrator then recites a prologue which tells the whole story in eight lines. The first four lines are **rhyming couplets** and the last four are **cross-rhyme**, with the additional rhyme in the repetition of 'died' in the middle of the seventh line. The structured rhyme gives an authority to what the Narrator describes as it denotes careful planning and intention.

There is a **dumb show** of the deaths of the twins at the end of the play and the Narrator then passes judgment on 'the mother, so cruel' and invites the audience to 'judge for yourselves'. This call to judgment means that the Narrator is acting as a commentator on the action, like a **chorus** in a play by **Sophocles**. Both of the Narrator's speeches start with a direct address to the audience and a reference to oral storytelling 'An' did you hear', which establishes a sense of community with the audience as well as claiming a **mythical** status for the events that will follow. The opening line 'Tell me it's not true' undermines the idea that the events are a 'story'.

### Discuss...

Can you think of any other plays or stories where the ending is revealed at the beginning? Do you like it when you know what is going to happen?

Revealing the ending in this opening scene creates suspense for the audience as they are invited to see how events will lead to this end.

**Narrator** – the narrator is the person who is telling the story.

**Rhyming couplet** – when two adjoining lines rhyme (e.g. cat/sat).

**Cross-rhyme** – a rhyming pattern where every other line rhymes (e.g. cat/dog/bat/frog). Notated as abab in a rhyme scheme.

**Dumb show** – a **mime** that was used to show the audience the main action of the play before it started.

**Mime** – acting without words.

**Chorus** – a chorus (a group of singers or actors) was an essential part of Ancient Greek theatre. In some plays they would comment on the action; in others they might take part in the action or they could perform the songs. Where an individual actor performs as the chorus they can be called the choric or choral character.


**Sophocles** – an ancient Greek playwright.

**Myth/mythical** – a story that is not true but which contains a psychological truth.

Mrs Johnstone recalls how she met her husband at a dance and how she fell for his charm. She marries him after falling pregnant and then after her first baby 'Darren Wayne' is born she quickly becomes pregnant again. She says that she had seven children, and was pregnant again by the time she was twenty-five, when her husband left her. Her money troubles are introduced by the milkman (sometimes played by the Narrator in a milkman's coat) and we learn that she has a job starting 'next week'. Voices offstage represent the seven children saying that they're hungry and Mrs Johnstone breaks off from singing to recite a long list of food that she will buy.

## Analysis

The mood lightens after the prologue with Mrs Johnstone singing 'Marilyn Monroe'. The song tells the story of Mrs Johnstone meeting her husband, who flattered her with **clichéd** compliments and a comparison to 'Marilyn Monroe'. Marilyn Monroe becomes an important **symbol** in the play for attractiveness but also for tragedy.



**Symbol** – an object that stands for something else.

**Cliché** – an expression that has been overused so that it has lost its original impact.

The line 'we went dancing' is repeated and stands not just literally for dancing but also for their relationship. When she is pregnant again there is 'no more dancing' and after seven babies her husband leaves her for someone 'who looks a bit like Marilyn Monroe' and 'they go dancing'. Mrs Johnstone's rejection is signalled by the change from the pronoun 'we' to 'they'.

While the second half of the scene covers the serious topics of debt and hunger, it also contains comedy through the joke about the baby having nothing to do with the milkman and the listing of the foodstuffs, especially the rhyming 'ham', 'jam' and 'spam'.

Mrs Johnstone's references at the end of the scene to Marilyn Monroe and dancing show that she still thinks that her life can improve and that it might be possible to return to happier times before she was a penniless single mother.

## Working for Mrs Lyons pp. 7–9

### Summary

Mrs Johnstone starts work for Mrs Lyons. We learn that Mr Lyons is away for nine months and that they haven't been able to have children but Mr Lyons does not want to adopt. Mrs Johnstone tells Mrs Lyons that she is pregnant again. Mrs Lyons puts some new shoes on the table and Mrs Johnstone reveals she's superstitious when she reacts to this with shock. Mrs Lyons finds the superstitious belief funny but removes the shoes from the table.

The Narrator enters and begins the first rendition of 'Shoes Upon The Table' which lists a series of common superstitious beliefs. Mrs Johnstone repeats her denial of being superstitious but her actions make it clear that she is.

Mrs Johnstone then meets with her gynaecologist who tells her that she is having twins. Mrs Johnstone is left shocked by the news and wondering how she will cope financially.

### Analysis

These first few lines between Mrs Johnstone and Mrs Lyons provide the background to what they agree in the next scene. The Lyons' house is 'lovely' and 'big' which implies that they have plenty of money. Mr Lyons is away for his work for 'nine months', which coincides with the length of a pregnancy. Mrs Johnstone reveals that she is 'havin' another one' and jokes that all she had to do was 'shake hands' with her husband to become pregnant, which could seem a little brash and insensitive considering that Mrs Lyons own childlessness. Mrs intended to reassure Mrs



#### Did you know?

**New shoes on the table** – it is considered by some to be bad luck to put new shoes on the table; this may be because of the links with laying out dead bodies on tables so putting shoes there might be seen as an invitation for death to visit the house.

has just shared her disappointment and loneliness at her Johnstone then launches into a short speech that is Lyons that she will still be able to do her job despite being pregnant. Her chatter also provides a foil, or contrast, to the dramatic reaction she has when Mrs Lyons puts a pair of **new shoes on the table**. Mrs Johnstone's strong reaction to the shoes being on the table is indicated by the use of **blasphemous** terms, she exclaims 'Jesus Christ, Mrs Lyons, what are y' trying to do?' and demands that Mrs Lyons 'take them off' the table.

**Blasphemous** – to use language in a way that is disrespectful towards gods or religion.

**Gynaecologist** – a doctor who specialises in treating women and, in this instance, is monitoring Mrs Johnstone's pregnancy.

Mrs Lyons laughs when she realises it is just a superstition and exits, but the theme of superstition is highlighted by the Narrator's song.

The stage directions then require the Narrator to 're-enter as a **Gynaecologist**', although some productions use a different actor to play this part. It must, however, be the same actor who played the milkman a few moments previously for Mrs Johnstone's next line to have any comic effect.

#### Discuss...

Can you think of any other common superstitions? What is meant to happen if these superstitions are not observed?

Mrs Johnstone tells Mrs Lyons she is expecting twins and that she is worried that her children will be taken into care. Mrs Lyons asks her to give one of the babies to her and while Mrs Johnstone is at first reluctant to agree she is persuaded by the idea that the child will have a better life with the Lyons. Mrs Johnstone asks if she 'would still be able to see him every day' and Mrs Lyons agrees. Mrs Johnstone 'nods' her agreement and Mrs Lyons then hurriedly makes plans, including using a cushion to create a bump under her clothes and jokes about suffering from 'piles' (swollen or twisted veins near the anus (bottom), common in pregnancy). Mrs Lyons then insists on Mrs Johnstone promising on the Bible.

The mood changes after the promise on the Bible; the Narrator introduces the idea of a debt and Mrs Johnstone is left standing alone.

## Analysis

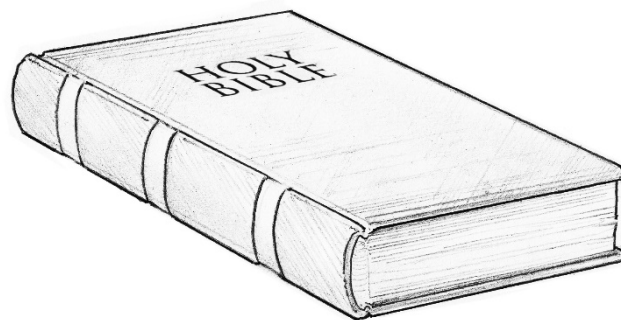
Mrs Johnstone refers to being in trouble with 'the Welfare', what we would now call Social Services. The Narrator enters and compares the idea Mrs Lyons is about to have with a plant that can 'take root and grow'. A different metaphor then compares it to a child that is 'conceived' and grows 'in a mother's womb', linking the plan that is made to Mrs Johnstone's unborn children.

The advantages that a child growing up with Mrs Lyons would have are represented by a reference to an upmarket shop in Liverpool, 'George Henry Lee' and the image of 'a bike with both wheels on'. There is a moment of unity between the two women when they sing 'a credit to me' together which symbolises the fact that they are in agreement.

The mood changes, highlighted by music, as Mrs Lyons grabs a Bible to make it a 'binding agreement'. The Narrator enters and '*a bass note, repeated as a heartbeat*' heightens the tension as the Narrator comments on what has been done. Mrs Johnstone is '*uncomfortable*' about having to swear on the Bible but Mrs Lyons insists that it was essential. Mrs Lyons exits and the heartbeat sound effect '*grows in intensity*'. The Narrator comments again and a plethora of business and financial terms has built up to describe what the two women have agreed: it's a 'binding agreement'; a 'pact'; a 'deal' and a 'debt'.

### Discuss...

Are there any reasons that we could have sympathy with Mrs Johnstone's decision? Has Mrs Johnstone done the right thing? Did she really have any other options? Were her motives good?



## Twins are born pp. 13-16

### Summary

A few months have passed and Mrs Johnstone arrives home with her newly born twins to find the Catalogue Man and the Finance Man demanding payments. The Finance Man tells her that she shouldn't have 'signed' for everything if she knew she couldn't pay but Mrs Johnstone says she couldn't stop herself as having six months to pay 'seems years away'. Items are removed from the Johnstone house that haven't been paid for.

Mrs Johnstone sings 'Easy Terms' which links the removal of her possessions to the upcoming giving up of one of the twins. Mrs Lyons takes one of the twins while Mrs Johnstone sings the last verse of the song and then gives Mrs Johnstone a week off. Mrs Johnstone returns home and tells her older children that one of the twins has 'gone up to heaven'. The episode ends with the children asking for toys and 'a new dress' from the catalogue and so the cycle of debt looks set to continue.

### Analysis

While we are certainly supposed to sympathise with Mrs Johnstone's position it is also being made clear that she is not wholly innocent. She says to the Finance Man 'I've spent all me bleedin' life knowin' I *shouldn't*. But I do'. The emphasis on '*shouldn't*' makes it clear that her lack of self-control is part of the problem. She tries to make a joke of the situation, describing their table being taken when they were 'in the middle of our tea', which also reveals that it is not the first time that she has been unable to pay her debts.

**Never never** – an informal term for hire purchase agreements when you pay for something you've bought by making small, frequent payments (usually weekly or monthly).

**Foreshadows** – hints at and prepares the audience for an event later in the play.

The song 'Easy Terms' develops the use of the financial or business imagery started in the previous scene. Mrs Johnstone describes giving up one of the twins in the same terms as giving up the furniture and possessions. She cannot 'pay the bill' and, therefore, the baby 'must be returned'. The song uses the informal terms 'easy terms' and '**never never**' to refer to hire purchase agreements. A second meaning of 'easy terms' - that of having an informal or comfortable relationship - is also alluded to later in the song; Mrs Johnstone imagines the future when the close relationship she has now with her son, their 'easy terms', will have to be hidden or kept a secret when he is given to the Lyons. The song also **foreshadows** the tragic end, by repeating the line 'or the price I'll have to pay', reminding the audience that Mrs Johnstone's actions will not go unpunished.



## Mrs Johnstone gets sacked pp. 16–20

### Summary


Mrs Johnstone returns to work and Mr Lyons is there talking to the baby and calls him Edward. Mrs Lyons is uncomfortable with Mrs Johnstone being around and objects to her picking the baby up. Mrs Lyons tells her husband she wants to sack Mrs Johnstone but at first he thinks she is overreacting and suggests she has 'depression' but eventually concedes it is her decision. Mrs Lyons asks for fifty pounds (which would be like asking for eight hundred pounds today) to buy things for the baby, which Mr Lyons hands over as he is anxious to get to work.

Mrs Lyons tells Mrs Johnstone that she has to leave because they are 'not satisfied' with her work. She gives her the fifty pounds to help persuade her to go and Mrs Johnstone reluctantly agrees but says that she is taking the baby with her. Mrs Lyons then threatens Mrs Johnstone saying that she committed a crime: first she accuses her of giving her baby away and then of selling him. Mrs Johnstone looks at the fifty pounds and, realising the implications of taking the money, *'throws it across the room'*. She then starts to leave saying that she is going to tell someone what has happened. Mrs Lyons then threatens her with the superstition that the twins will 'both immediately die' if they ever realise they are twins that have been 'secretly parted'. Mrs Lyons gives the money to Mrs Johnstone again and then exits.

The scene ends with the Narrator singing 'Shoes Upon the Table'.

### Analysis

Mrs Johnstone arrives at work and talks to Mr Lyons about baby Edward. She wants to pick him up but Mrs Lyons stops her and sends her off to clean the bathroom. Mr Lyons remonstrates with his wife for being too 'hard' on Mrs Johnstone but Mrs Lyons says that Mrs Johnstone is behaving towards the baby 'as if she were his mother' - which creates **dramatic irony**. Mr Lyons suggests that Mrs Lyons has post-natal 'depression' but she rejects this and insists that Mrs Johnstone has to go.



**Dramatic irony** – when the audience understands the importance or meaning of something that happens or is said but the characters do not.

Mrs Lyons' desperate attempts to prevent Mrs Johnstone taking Edward are evident in the dialogue. The repetition of words at the start of her sentences: 'because ... because' and 'they say ... they say' suggest that she is making the superstition up as she is speaking. (There is certainly no evidence of a real superstition like this existing.)

The Narrator's song 'Shoes Upon The Table' makes the link with Mrs Johnstone's belief in superstition earlier in the play. We hear the 'devil's got your number' refrain for the first time as a series of threatening images are created, as the devil is described as 'starin' through your windows' and 'creepin' down the hall'. The song culminates with the devil 'knocking on your door'.



## Mickey and Edward meet aged seven pp. 20–27

### Summary

Seven years have passed. We see Mickey, the twin who has stayed with Mrs Johnstone, knocking frantically on his front door. Mrs Johnstone initially screams 'Go away!' but opens it when she realises it is Mickey. This leads to a joke about her thinking it was the 'rent man' and we realise that she is still plagued with money problems. Mickey complains that Sammy, his older brother, has 'robbed me other gun' but his Mum just says it's because he's the youngest. She warns him about playing away from 'the rough end' and also staying away from the 'big houses in the park' – which the audience may realise is where Edward lives. Mickey is left sitting outside his house feeling fed up and recites a rhyme about his life and Sammy.

Edward enters and the two begin talking. The differences between them are evident in their language but they make an immediate connection and when they realise they 'were born on the same day' they become **blood brothers** by cutting their hands and holding them together.

Edward explains what a dictionary is and Mickey shows off about Sammy and the 'plate in his head', which both boys think means a plate that you eat off. This leads Edward to behave a little strangely when Sammy enters later as he tries to see the shape of the plate in Sammy's head. Sammy enters with a gun, which is a **precursor** to his real gun later in the play. Then Mrs Johnstone enters and when she realises who Edward is she immediately separates the boys, sending Mickey inside and Edward home. She sings a verse of 'Easy Terms' as she watches Edward leave.

### Analysis

The scene is linked to the previous one through the last line of the Narrator's song 'knocking at your door' and Mickey (aged seven) actually knocking at his door.

Mickey's rhyme uses a single-rhyming pattern (abcb) in five stanzas of eight lines each. This structure emphasises Mickey's age - both through the repetitive, nursery- or playground-style rhyme or chant and through the repetition of the phrase 'I'm nearly eight!'. There are a lot of comic lines in Mickey's rhyme and we get a strong characterisation of Mickey's big brother Sammy. The descriptions also invite a lot of physical humour: particularly the spitting and weeing into the letter box.

#### **Blood brothers** – blood

brothers feature in many traditional tales from across the world. Blood is used, usually in a ceremony, to symbolise a permanent bond of loyalty between men.

**Precursor** – something that comes before to announce or prepare for what follows.

**Dialect** – a particular type of language spoken in a certain area.

**Accent** – the way that words are pronounced. Can be dependent on area, social group or age.

### Discuss...

Compare Mickey's rhyme with the traditional rhymes or chants that young children use. Does it share the same rhyme and rhythmical structure?

Edward enters as Mickey

finishes his recitation. His language forms an immediate contrast to Mickey's, which has been established as a strongly Scouse or Liverpudlian **dialect** through the use of 'mam' and 'rob all me things' in the previous lines, and he goes onto use 'gis' (meaning - give me) and 'soft' (meaning silly or stupid) as he speaks to Edward. Edward says 'mummy', 'actually' and

'super fun'. This use of language and **accents** indicates the class difference that has emerged between the two twins due to their different homes. Mickey uses swear words to heighten the contrast further, saying 'pissed off' and whispering the 'F word' to Edward. Dramatic irony is created when the boys become blood brothers as the audience know they are already brothers.

## Mrs Lyons unhappy pp. 27–30


### Summary

Edward returns home and is given a toy gun by Mr Lyons. They all sit together looking at a book until Mr Lyons gets up to leave for work. While Mrs Lyons is complaining to her husband that he is spending too much time at work Edward starts looking up words in the dictionary. The audience may remember that he said he was going to look up the 'F word' but he asks how to spell '**bogey man**'. Mrs Lyons laughs at the superstition and says it is what 'a silly mother might say to her children'.

Mickey knocks on the door and asks Eddie to come out to play. They tell Mrs Lyons that they share a birthday and are blood brothers and she immediately shows Mickey out as she realises that he is Edward's twin. Edward is angry and uses a swear word he has learnt from Mickey. Mrs Lyons hits Edward but is immediately sorry.

### Analysis

This scene shows the differences between Edward's middle-class home and Mickey's working-class life. Edward is given a gun to play with, something we know that Mickey longs for. When they talk about the 'bogey man' it is to show that Mrs Lyons is still laughing at superstitions at this point in the play, something that will change later.



**Bogey man** – a bogey is an evil or mischievous spirit; a bogey man is an imaginary creature that comes to take away naughty children.

After sending Mickey away Mrs Lyons justifies her actions to Edward by saying that he is 'not the same' as them, emphasising the class difference that has grown between them. Edward's use of his newly learnt 'F word' represents the influence that meeting Mickey has had on him. Mrs Lyons' reaction is shocking as she hits him '*hard and instinctively*', demonstrating that she is no longer in total control of her actions. Her terror of losing him is shown through the repetition of 'my son'.

This is a very lively part of the play with lots of noise and singing and actors running around as children battling. Linda is introduced for the first time and we see she is a feisty character who is not afraid to stand up to Sammy. The children play at being gangsters, cowboys and Indians and soldiers. Whenever any of them are shot they get up again and the song emphasises that ‘the whole thing’s just a game’. When Sammy and the other children start picking on Mickey it is Linda who defends him, telling them to ‘leave him alone!’ and she manages to scare Sammy off by threatening to tell her mum that he steals from their house. She comforts Mickey, who is upset about dying, by saying that when he dies he’ll meet his ‘twinny again’ and won’t have to go to school.

Mickey ‘produces an **air pistol**’ that he has taken from Sammy’s hiding place and they go to find Eddie. At first Eddie is worried about being caught shooting statues in the park but Mickey and Linda convince him that they have ‘dead funny things’ they say to the police.

Edward finally agrees to sneak out with them and the Narrator sings a new verse of ‘The Devil’s Got Your Number’ that dramatises Mrs Lyons’ fear of losing Edward by referring to ‘gypsies’ who ‘take your baby away’.



### Analysis

The refrain in the song ‘the whole thing’s just a game’ creates an image of childhood where there are no serious consequences for actions that take place during play. They can pretend to shoot each other and kill each other but none of it matters. This sets up a contrast later on in the play when there are serious consequences for shooting and killing. It also foreshadows a line that Mrs Johnstone sings at the end of the play when she wishes that the twins’ tragic end is ‘only a game’.

This scene is important in establishing Linda’s character. The way she protects Mickey establishes the pattern that their relationship will follow for most of the rest of the play.

While the action purports to be made up of children’s games it is worth noting that it is all very violent. From the gangster Al Capone, to the violence of colonial expansion in USA, war and the atom bomb, all the games represent brutality and death.

This

**Air pistol** – a weapon that shoots a pellet using compressed air.

**Scapegoating** – making someone else take the blame for something they didn’t do.



**Did you know?** Traditional folktales and legends sometimes referred to fairies and gypsies taking babies. There is no evidence that gypsies or travellers ever stole children, it is a case of **scapegoating**. Russell is using a stereotype to create a dramatic effect.

## Mrs Lyons wants to move pp. 35–36

### Summary

Mrs Lyons is worried about Edward disappearing from the garden and has called her husband home from work. Mr Lyons blames her 'nerves', implying that she is mentally or emotionally unbalanced. She says she wants 'to move' and Mr Lyons' reply, 'how many times', shows that this is a subject they've discussed on numerous occasions. Mrs Lyons tries to express that she is afraid of losing Edward but Mr Lyons, who doesn't know that Edward is adopted and, therefore, can't know that she is afraid of him mixing with his biological family, thinks her fears seem irrational.

He puts a pair of Edward's shoes on the table but Mrs Lyons rushes to push them off. The Narrator ends the scene with the end of 'Gypsies In The Wood'.

### Analysis

This scene marks a changing point in Mrs Lyons' character. In previous scenes she has laughed at superstitions but here she '*rushes at the table and sweeps the shoes off*', revealing her changed state of mind.

When the Narrator sings 'Gypsies In The Wood' it repeats several phrases from 'Shoes Upon The Table', including 'the devil's got your number', but this time it is addressed to Mrs Lyons instead of Mrs Johnstone. It seems they are both going to be punished for what they have done.



## The policeman visits pp. 36–38

### Summary

Linda, Mickey and Eddie are shooting the air pistol, presumably at Peter Pan's 'little thingy'. Mickey and Eddie both miss but Linda doesn't. Mickey gets fed up with missing and puts the gun away. Linda suggests throwing stones through some windows but as she counts to three a policeman walks up behind them. Eddie, remembering what they told him earlier about answering policemen, uses the 'waiting for the ninety-two bus' and 'Adolf Hitler' replies. This gets them all into trouble.

The policeman speaks to Mrs Johnstone first and his language towards her is threatening: he says Mickey was 'about to commit a serious crime' and that they'll 'end up in court again'. It seems that Mickey is being harshly treated because Sammy has already been in trouble and Mrs Johnstone is warned to 'keep them in order'. As he leaves Mrs Johnstone sings the opening lines of 'Bright New Day' which foreshadows their move to the country at the end of the act.

The policeman's demeanour with Mr Lyons is very different. He 'has removed his helmet and holds a glass of scotch'. The policeman describes what has happened as a 'prank' and advises Mr Lyons to stop Edward mixing 'with the likes of them in the future'. This incident seems to have proved Mrs Lyons' concerns right and Mr Lyons immediately starts talking about them moving away.

### Analysis

This scene creates humour through Linda being a crack shot and the boys both missing their target. It also provides the punchline to the joke set up previously when Edward uses the lines about the 'ninety-two bus' and 'Adolf Hitler'.

The second part of the scene, when the policeman visits the two households, is a stark demonstration of the differences between being working class and middle class and shows how much more difficult Mickey's life is compared to Edward's.

This scene is used to introduce the idea of a move to the country. It is signalled twice in the scene, once by Mrs Johnstone in her song as she dreams of a fresh start and then by Mr Lyons when he suggests the move to Edward.

## Mrs Johnstone and Edward pp. 38–40

### Summary

Edward goes to Mickey's house to say goodbye. He tells Mrs Johnstone he's moving away and she tries to comfort him when he becomes upset by hugging him and giving him a locket that contains a picture of her and Mickey. Edward gives Mickey a gun as a present and then moves to stand with his parents.

### Analysis

Edward's polite manners seem to shock Mrs Johnstone as she 'doesn't usually have kids enquiring about my health' and their conversation could seem awkward because of his formality. However, when Mrs Johnstone comforts Edward she is taking on her natural maternal role with him. The stage directions describe Mrs Johnstone as '*cradling him*' which symbolises infancy and the last time that she was able to hold him.

The difference in their class is emphasised when Eddie suggests that she should 'buy a new house near us', not really understanding that this is not possible for Mrs Johnstone. The locket becomes a 'secret', just as his adoption is, and as a secret has disruptive potential as the plot progresses.

Their connection is emphasised when '*he looks at her a moment too long*' and Mrs Johnstone makes a joke about when he starts 'dancing', referring to the start of the play when dancing was used to describe her relationship with her husband.

## Mickey and Eddie separated pp. 40–42

### Summary

The Lyons have moved to the country and Mr and Mrs Lyons are enthusiastic about being there but Edward is not. He covers his eyes when Mrs Lyons points out a magpie because 'it's one for sorrow'. Mrs Lyons says it's just a 'silly superstition' but Edward refuses to abandon the things he has learnt from Mickey.

Mickey goes to try to find Edward by visiting his old house but is unable to find out where he is gone. They sing a duet 'My Friend'.

### Analysis

Edward's unhappiness and his refusal to abandon the superstitious beliefs he has learnt from the Johnstones shows how much he misses Mickey. Mickey is shown to feel the same as he is described as ending up '*aimless and bored, deserted and alone*' and by the sorrowful 'Sunday Afternoon'.

The connection between the boys is shown as they sing the duet 'My Friend' from their two disparate locations.



**Did you know?** Superstitious beliefs about magpies can be found in folk songs and a children's nursery rhyme. They can be a symbol of bad luck. Seven magpies stand for a secret and the number seven recurs several times in *Blood Brothers* (Mrs Johnstone has seven children before she has the twins, the play moves forward in seven-year leaps, Mickey is sentenced to seven years in prison).

## The Johnstones are moving pp. 42–45

### Summary

Mrs Johnstone receives a letter. At first Donna Marie assumes it is a 'summons' to court and Sammy's reaction when he is called is to claim his innocence. In fact the letter tells them they are being rehoused.

Mrs Johnstone sees this as a chance for 'starting all over again', leaving her bad reputation behind. It seems the neighbours are just as keen for the Johnstones to leave. The Policeman says that there will be a 'drop in the crime rate' and a neighbour looks forward to it being 'calm'. Their packing consists of them leaving most of their broken (and stolen) belongings behind and Mrs Johnstone's positive image of their new life is so exaggerated that it includes 'His Holiness' the Pope coming for tea.

As she sings they arrive in the country but straight away it seems that their talent for mischief and trouble may have followed them as Sammy ends up sitting on a bull and Donna Marie steps in a cowpat. Despite this Act I finishes on a high note with Mrs Johnstone and her family happy to be 'movin'.

### Analysis

A stark contrast is created between the two locations, the inner city that is being left behind and the country that they are moving to, through the language used to describe them. Their current home is described as a 'mess' and full of 'muck an' dirt' and they leave behind 'rags', 'wobbly' furniture and 'bare' carpets. The future in the country is seen as 'pure', 'clean' and having lots of 'space'. This simplistic view that it is the location that is the problem is undermined by the neighbours' reaction to the Johnstones going as they think that all the trouble will leave with them.



**Did you know?** Large numbers of residents of inner-city Liverpool were rehoused by government at this time to housing estates outside the city. Skelmersdale is a real town 13 miles outside Liverpool. Large numbers of Liverpool residents were moved there in the 1960s.



**Did you know?** Some stage versions of the play have Linda with an extra line here saying that she is moving too. This may be to more clearly explain her presence in Act II, although it was quite common for people from the same areas in the inner city to end up being rehoused to the same area outside the city.



## Act II

### Life in the country pp. 46–47 (seven years have passed)

Summary

Mrs Johnstone sings about her new life in the country. Things seem better for her as she can pay her bills and men are again comparing her to Marilyn Monroe. Only Sammy and Mickey are still living with her but Sammy has been in serious trouble for burning the school down. Mickey is now fourteen years old and a typical teenager, worried about blackheads and girls. Mrs Johnstone says she hasn't seen Eddie for years.

#### Analysis

Act II starts with a return to the 'Marilyn Monroe' song from the beginning of Act I and references to Marilyn Monroe serve to symbolise that Mrs Johnstone's life has somewhat improved in the country. The milkman and the judge both say she's 'like Marilyn Monroe' and she can 'pay her bills on time'. The depiction of her life is still realistic though: the neighbours 'fight on a Saturday night' and Sammy has got into serious trouble because he 'burnt the school down', although Mrs Johnstone seems reluctant to take any responsibility for this as she blames the teacher for letting him 'play with magnesium'.

**Magnesium** – a flammable metal.

Mickey is described as a typical teenager, his age is given as fourteen - which is how the audience learn that seven years have passed, he has 'blackheads' and 'dreams all night of girls'. He briefly dances to the short burst of rock music in the middle of Mrs Johnstone's song, which will serve as a contrast to Eddie's dancing in the next scene.

**Ellipsis** – the omission (leaving out) of one or more words for effect. Can be marked by three points (...).

**Premonition** – a sign that something, usually bad, is going to happen.

The song gradually becomes slower and ends with Mrs Johnstone saying she hasn't seen Eddie. For the first time the reference to Marilyn Monroe acknowledges her tragic end as Mrs Johnstone prays that Eddie 'will be okay | Not like Marilyn Monroe...'. The **ellipsis** indicates a pause which acts as a **premonition**, or reminder, of the ending that the play is inexorably moving towards.

### Edward goes to school p. 47

Summary

There is a very brief scene of Edward at fourteen awkwardly learning to dance with Mrs Lyons and then leaving for school.

#### Analysis

Mrs Lyons is trying to teach Edward to waltz, which provides an immediate contrast to the way Mickey was dancing in the previous scene. Their class difference is highlighted by these different dances and also the fact that Edward is leaving for boarding school. Hints are given about Mrs Lyons' continuing delicate mental state as the stage directions say that she 'holds on to' Edward - until he has to pull away and tell her to 'stop fussing'. A hint is also given when she seeks reassurance from him that they're 'safe here' because although Edward doesn't quite voice his concerns he does start to say something 'sometimes ...' but is cut off by the car horn.

## On the bus pp. 48–50


### Summary

As Mickey leaves for school Mrs Johnstone teases him about Linda. Sammy goes with him to catch the bus to get his **dole** money.

The conductor (or Narrator) speaks to Mrs Johnstone as Mickey, Sammy and Linda get on, reminding her that there is a tragic ending coming. Sammy tries to get a 'fourpenny scholar' or child's fare when he is too old but the conductor insists he pay full fare. Sammy produces a knife and tries to steal all the fare money. Mickey and Linda are left together and she declares her love for him.

### Analysis

Mrs Johnstone's teasing of Mickey at the beginning of this scene gives the impression that they have a close relationship. The stage directions show Mrs Johnstone '*laughing*' as she teases him about Linda and she chases him out of the house by threatening him with a 'big sloppy kiss'. The bus conductor, played by the Narrator, speaks directly to Mrs Johnstone as the Narrator and questions her happiness by asking whether she has 'forgotten the past?' and then there is a reminder that we already know how everything is destined to end. The imagery of debt is used 'No one gets off without the price bein' paid' to serve as a premonition and a threat. The phrase is then neatly turned to return the Narrator to being the bus conductor as he says 'No one can embark without the price bein' paid' as he starts to collect fares.



**Dole** – informal term for unemployment benefit.  
**Decimalisation** – changing of money system to one based on tens.

The 'fourpenny scholar' child's fare gives a clue about the setting of the play as 'fourpenny' makes it before **decimalisation** in 1971.

The audience have already been told at the beginning of Act II that Sammy has been in trouble for arson and he quickly gets in trouble on the bus by refusing to pay a full adult fare. The seriousness of the situation quickly escalates as Sammy aggressively swears 'fuck off' and then '*produces a knife*'. Mickey is then stuck in the middle of his brother and his friend Linda as Sammy expects him to get off the bus with him but Linda encourages him to stay with her saying 'you've done nothin'' and on this occasion Mickey listens to Linda and Sammy leaves without him.

Some Liverpool or Scouse dialect is used in this scene: Sammy uses a Scouse word 'no-mark', which means a nobody or someone who is useless, to insult Mickey. Linda then refers to Sammy as a 'soft get' meaning that he is stupid or silly. Linda then says 'you better hadn't do anything soft, like him', which foreshadows Mickey's eventual involvement with Sammy in the robbery.

The scene ends on a lighter note when we find out that Linda announced that she loved Mickey 'in assembly' in front of 'five hundred others'.



## Edward is suspended pp. 50–51

Summary

Edward speaks to one of his teachers and mentions there are plans for Edward to go to **Oxbridge**.

Edward refuses to give the teacher his locket and ends up **suspended** for swearing.

### Analysis

In contrast to Mickey, Linda and Sammy's Liverpool or Scouse accents and dialect in the previous scene, the way that Edward and his teacher speak is very formal. The teacher uses phrases and words such as 'rather big for your boots', 'tyke', 'dorm' and 'flogged', which seem **archaic** and emphasise the upper-middle-class world of the boarding school.

After refusing to hand over his locket Edward swears at the teacher: 'you can take a flying fuck at a rolling doughnut!'. This use of **taboo** language immediately aligns him more closely with Mickey, from whom he learnt his first swear words, than with the world of his boarding school.



**Oxbridge** – a portmanteau word that stands for Oxford University and Cambridge University.

**Portmanteau word** – a word made by joining together the beginning and end of two different words.

**Suspended** – to be temporarily excluded from school, probably for a few days.

**Archaic** – old-fashioned.

**Taboo language** – words that are inappropriate for certain contexts – in this case swearing in front of a teacher at school.

## Mickey and Linda are suspended pp. 51-2

### Summary

Mickey and Linda are in a Geography lesson; Mickey is asked a question by the teacher but he doesn't know the answer. Another student, Perkins, does know the answer and is obviously a very keen student anxious to please the teacher and learn. He repeats 'Sir, sir' several times as he tries to get the teacher's attention but the teacher completely rejects him, calling him a 'borin' little turd'.

Mickey complains that the lesson is 'borin' and he can't see its relevance to him getting a job later. Linda, conforming to the pattern established when they were seven years old, stands up for Mickey and ends up calling the teacher 'y' big worm!' and, in parallel to what has happened to Edward, they both get suspended.

### Analysis

The same actor plays the teacher in the previous scene with Edward but the two schools are quite different. Mickey's school is described as a '**Secondary Modern**' and as '*all boredom and futility*' but there is also a lot of humour in the scene.

#### Secondary

**Modern** – school where students who don't pass the 11+ go instead of a grammar school.



**Did you know?** Russell taught for a year in a school and he has said that he remembers the exact question Mickey is asked from school.

In some ways the twins' experiences at school can be seen as opposites: Edward seems to be doing well and his school is preparing him for a top university, whereas Mickey doesn't seem to see the point of learning and anyone who wants to do well is detested by students and teacher alike. They do have some things in common though: both are insulted by their teachers, albeit for different reasons. From a social point of view Edward seems lonely - is it boys from his 'dorm' that have told the teacher about his locket? - whereas Mickey has a devoted friend in Linda.

#### Discuss...

*Is Russell's depiction of this type of school a stereotype? Is his depiction of Edward's school in the previous scene a stereotype?*

Edward has returned home from school and Mrs Lyons is shocked by his suspension. She asks to see the locket and at first assumes that Edward has a girlfriend. When she looks at the photo inside she is shocked because she thinks it is Edward with Mrs Johnstone. Edward tells her it is Mickey but refuses to tell her where he got it, saying to her that 'everybody has secrets'.



### Analysis

This is a tense scene due to the dramatic irony of the origin of the locket. When Mrs Lyons opens it and realises that it contains a picture of Mrs Johnstone there is music to signify the enormity of the discovery and she reacts physically to the shock, and the pauses in Edward's speech 'Mummy ... Mummy what's wrong ... Mummy!' show that he is struggling to get her attention. Mrs Lyons thinks that the photo is of Edward with Mrs Johnstone, which the audience know is because they are twins, but Edward does not seem to notice the clue as he dismisses her as being a 'silly old thing'. Edward's refusal to tell Mrs Lyons where he got the locket links to the idea of secrets. His unanswered question 'don't you have secrets?' alludes to the secret of his birth and separation from his twin.

The narrator then sings 'Secrets' and a chorus from 'Shoes Upon The Table' as a reminder that Mrs Lyons can't escape because the devil 'always knows where to find you'.

## Mickey and Edward meet again pp. 54–57

### Summary


Mickey and Linda are walking across the fields. She flirts with him but he is too shy to reciprocate. Edward and Mickey see each other at a distance and sing a duet 'That Guy' where they both wish to be each other. At the end of the song they recognise each other and talk about girls and Edward suggests they go to the cinema to see 'Nymphomaniac Nights and Swedish Au Pairs'. Mrs Lyons watches them leave together and gets her coat and follows.

### Analysis

The song 'That Guy' conveys the common insecurities of teenagers about their appearances. Both boys complain about their own appearance but admire the other's which shows how there is really nothing wrong with either of them. The song creates a lot of sympathy for both boys as they are portrayed as normal teenagers, just like any of us.

Mickey's opening line to Edward 'gis a ciggie?' harks back to when they first met aged seven and Mickey said 'gis a sweet'. Edward is as generous as he was back then and Mickey realises who he is. Mickey laughs at Edward's 'posh voice' and Edward is impressed that Mickey is friends with Linda, saying 'Wow, was that Linda?', which sets up their later rivalry over her.

Edward seems the more confident of the two in this scene. While Mickey says 'words just disappear' when he tries to talk to Linda, Edward is able to perform a 'mock' **Mills and Boon** type seduction with phrases such as 'my loins are burning for you' and 'lay my weary head between your warm breasts'. Edward suggests that Linda may say 'be gentle with me', which is exactly what she did say just moments before.



**Mills and Boon** – a publisher of romantic novels. The novels have a reputation for being formulaic and overblown.

The scene ends with the narrator singing another verse and chorus of 'Shoes Upon The Table'. These short clips of the song serve as a refrain to these happier scenes, a reminder that tragedy is to come. The devil has moved from 'walking past your door' a couple of scenes ago to 'leanin' on your door' and so is getting progressively closer.


## Going to the cinema pp. 57–59

### Summary

Mickey and Edward go to find Mrs Johnstone to get some money to go to the cinema to see the adult or pornographic films *Nymphomaniac Nights* and *Swedish Au Pairs*. Mrs Johnstone seems pleased to see Edward and checks with him that he still has her locket. The boys try to pretend they are seeing other films but Mrs Johnstone works out what they are going to see and laughs at them.

### Analysis

This is a very positive scene with Edward and Mrs Johnstone obviously pleased to see each other again: Edward comments at the end of the scene 'she's fabulous your ma, isn't she'. There is comedy when the two boys say different film names at the same time 'Dr Zhivago's Magnificent Seven' which reveals that they are lying about the film they are going to watch. (*Doctor Zhivago*, the 1965 film adaptation of a Russian novel, is an epic romance. *The Magnificent Seven* is a classic western made in 1960.) Mrs Johnstone teases them about what they are going to see, calling them 'randy little sods' and threatening to 'throw a bucket of water on them' and that they need '**bromide**'. All of which creates a really light-hearted, positive atmosphere between the three of them.



**Bromide** – a drug that works as a sedative, calms people or puts them to sleep.

## Mrs Lyons threatens Mrs Johnstone pp. 59–61

Summary

Mrs Lyons turns up at Mrs Johnstone's house having followed Mickey and Edward there. She accuses Mrs Johnstone of following them to the country and offers her money to move away but Mrs Johnstone refuses. Mrs Lyons becomes desperate and attacks Mrs Johnstone with a knife. Mrs Johnstone manages to get the knife away from her. Mrs Lyons curses Mrs Johnstone before Mrs Johnstone throws her out.

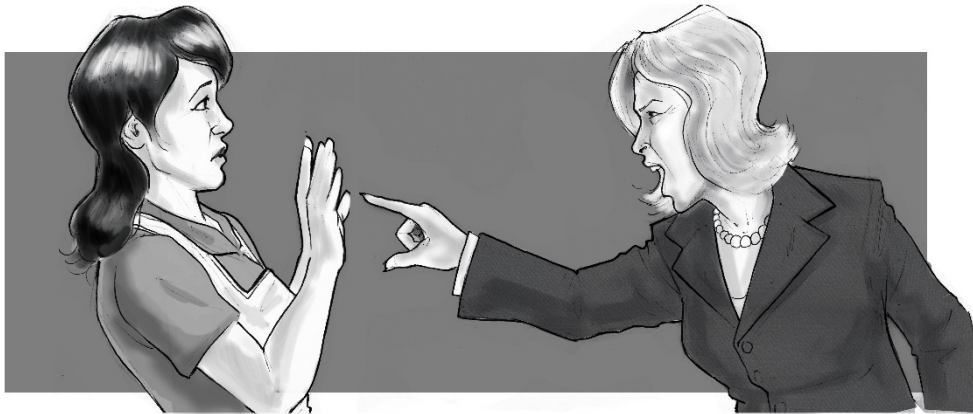
### Analysis

The scene starts with Mrs Johnstone singing a few lines from 'We Go Dancing' showing that she's happy before Mrs Lyons arrives. The rest of the scene demonstrates Mrs Lyons' mental deterioration.

Mrs Lyons' questioning of Mrs Johnstone shows that she is paranoid. She doesn't believe that the Johnstones were 'rehoused' and is adamant that wherever she goes Mrs Johnstone will follow. Mrs Lyons' offer of money to Mrs Johnstone to move recalls the money she gave her to leave her job when the twins were born, but this time Mrs Johnstone says she won't be 'bought off'.

Mrs Lyons' speech becomes erratic; it has pauses and repeats words '... always and forever, and ever like, like a shadow ...' which reveal her desperation as she finds a knife and tries to stab Mrs Johnstone. The attack is like a dance as each movement is '*punctuated by a note*'. Mrs Johnstone says to Mrs Lyons 'YOU'RE MAD, MAD', the use of capitals implying that these words are shouted. Mrs Lyons curses Mrs Johnstone and calls her a 'witch', which shows how much she has changed since she laughed at Mrs Johnstone's belief in superstition at the beginning of the play.

The scene ends with a chant offstage that confirms that Mrs Lyons has 'gone mad'. These references to madness serve as precursors to the narrator's 'Madman' song at the end.



**Mickey, Edward and Linda together ('Summer Sequence') pp. 61-64**

Summary

Mickey and Edward come out of the cinema and are 'overcome with their celluloid/erotic encounter'. They are reminiscing about what they have just seen ('tits, tits, tits') when Linda and her friend enter. Mickey tells the girls that they have been to watch *Bridge on the River Kwai* but Linda trumps this by saying they've been to *Nymphomaniac Nights* and *Swedish Au Pairs*. Linda stays with the two boys and her friend leaves. They meet a policeman and repeat the joke about 'Adolf Hitler' and 'Waitin' for the ninety-two bus'. While the narrator recites 'Summer Sequence' the three friends spend their summers together, acting out happy memories at the fairground and the beach, until they are eighteen.

### Analysis

After the tense atmosphere of the previous scene the comedy of the twins coming out of the cinema relieves the pressure. Edward's repetition of 'tits, tits, tits' and the way he tries to cover it by turning it into 'tits a lovely way | to spend an evening' when he sees Linda presents his character as far more fun-loving and mischievous than previously. The lamp post serves as a useful prop for his larking about and has connotations of romance and exuberance through drawing on its inclusion in Gene Kelly's iconic dance to 'Singin' In The Rain' in the film of the same name.



Their childhood friendship is evoked when the policeman enters and Edward repeats the 'Adolf Hitler' and 'waitin' for the ninety-two bus' answers he gave seven years previously and the three friends' escape solidifies the impression of their immediate closeness. Other memories are then referenced when they shoot at targets, although Linda is no longer the sharpshooter she was and instead becomes caught between the two boys. The narrator uses the line 'the price she'll have to pay' to refer to Linda, when previously it has referred to Mrs Johnstone and Mrs Lyons, to show that all three women will be affected by the tragic end, although Linda is exempt from any blame as she is caught up in it by 'just being there'.

As the Narrator's lines move from them being fifteen to sixteen and then seventeen, a camera is used as a device to allow them to have some fun playing around in front of it. The language of 'Summer Sequence' then changes to include 'broken bottles' and 'oil in the water', images of destruction among the more positive lines 'everything is possible' and 'young, free and innocent'. The sense of foreboding continues as the narrator has four lines that all start 'and only if' to remind us that the carefree life they are enjoying cannot continue.

## Edward goes to university pp. 64–67

### Summary

Now aged eighteen, Edward tells Linda that he is going away to university and asks if she is ever going to get together with Mickey. Edward declares his love for Linda by singing 'I'm Not Saying a Word' and then orchestrates Mickey and Linda finally getting together. Mickey and Linda kiss and then say goodbye to Edward, they all agree that they will get together again at Christmas.

### Analysis

At the end of 'Summer Sequence' the change of mood is established when Linda's joke about 'looking for a good time' falls flat. It seems that their long holiday (that has covered four summers) has finally ended now they are eighteen and Mickey is 'workin' overtime' and Edward is about to leave for university.

'A street walk' and the line 'looking for a good time' refer to a stereotypical depiction of a prostitute.

Edward's song 'I'm Not Saying a Word' expresses both his love for Linda and his restraint on behalf of Mickey. Edward's use of romantic phrases and images like 'shall I compare thee to a summer's day' and references to 'flowers', 'country lanes' and 'rainy days' provide a stark contrast to Mickey's unromantic 'Linda for Christ's sake will you go out with me?' and the ending of the scene has a bitter sweet poignancy as Mickey and Linda's happiness has left Edward alone.

**Did you know?** 'Shall I compare thee to a summer's day' is the first line of William Shakespeare's famous love poem Sonnet 18. Find out more about it at <http://www.shakespeare-online.com/sonnets/18detail.html>

## Linda's pregnant p. 67

### Summary

The Narrator tells us that it is now October and Mrs Johnstone tells Mickey he should get to work so that he doesn't end up without a job like Sammy. Mickey tells Mrs Johnstone that Linda is pregnant. He tells her that they plan to get married before Christmas and she agrees that they can live with her. Mickey rushes off to work as he is worried because they are '**layin' people off**'.

### Analysis

The Narrator's lines contain a premonition of the tragedy to come through the use of the seasons. The positive connotations of summer now 'fade' and winter brings 'the rain' and 'the bogey man'. Mrs Johnstone takes Mickey's news of Linda's pregnancy calmly, saying that she would be a '**hypocrite**' if she was angry with him.

Mrs Johnstone's comment that Mickey hasn't 'had much of a life' with her foreshadows his complaint right at the end of the play that he wishes he'd been the one given away but, at this point, Mickey asserts that he is happy with his life.

'**Layin' people off**' or a lay-off is when workers are made redundant, usually because the employer can't afford to keep them.  
**Hypocrite** – someone who pretends to be something they're not – Mrs Johnstone became pregnant very young like Linda so she is in no position to judge them.

Mickey losing his job is mentioned twice in the scene: at the beginning by Mrs Johnstone and then at the end by Mickey, which leads neatly into the next scene and 'Take a Letter Miss Jones'.


## Sign of the times pp. 68–69

### Summary

Mickey and Linda get married. Mr Lyons dictates letters to his employees making them redundant and blames the recession. The workers form a dole queue that everyone, even Mickey and Miss Jones, joins.

### Analysis

The upbeat nature of the song 'Take A Letter Miss Jones' belies the destructive nature of what is happening in the scene. **Euphemisms** such as 'premature retirement' and 'surplus to requirements' are used for the redundancies or lay-offs.



**Euphemism** – a word or phrase used instead of an offensive, rude or hurtful one.

The lines that blame 'the world situation | The shrinking pound, the global slump, | And the price of oil' refer to the economic recession in the 1970s. Lines such as 'it's just another | sign of the times' and 'unemployment's such a pleasure' represent the unfeeling attitude of those in positions of power, such as Mr Lyons. It is not until the focus is on an individual, Mickey, that the real effects are acknowledged; he is described as 'walkin' round in circles' and 'old before his time' which prepare the audience for Mickey's attitude to Edward in the next scene.




Edward returns from university and is keen to spend time again with Mickey and Linda. His high spirits jar with Mickey, who is struggling with not having a job. Edward tries to give Mickey money but Mickey is offended by this. He tells Edward that the contrast between their two lives is too painful for him and he asks Edward to leave.

There are then two conversations that happen at the same time: one between Edward and Linda and the other between Mickey and Sammy. Edward declares his love for Linda while Sammy persuades Mickey to help him on a robbery. Linda tells Edward that she is married to Mickey and expecting a baby and he returns to his university friends. Mickey tells Linda that he is going to take her out but when Linda realises that Mickey has agreed to help Sammy, she shouts at him 'no!'.

## Analysis

This scene is the first time that social class and circumstances make enough of a difference to come between the twins. Edward's life at university has been unaffected by the economic situation whereas Mickey has lost his livelihood. Edward's expectations about 'the action, the booze, the Christmas parties, the music and the birds' elicit an aggressive reaction from Mickey who calls him 'a dick head!'.

Mickey's description of his life since he lost his job expresses how painful he is finding it, with the height of his desperation shown in his admission that 'he'd crawl back' to his old job 'for half the pay and double the hours'. The 'pause' in the stage directions, at the end of this description, symbolises the gap that has grown between them, as Edward's response then shows how little he understands about Mickey's life. Edward sees the lack of a job as an opportunity to be 'bohemian' and rebellious; he says he would 'tilt my hat to the world and say "screw you"'.  


**Bohemian** – unconventional or different from normal behaviour.

**Tilt my hat** – to tip your hat means to take it off to show respect and deference – if you tilt it instead it means something more rebellious; to wear your hat slightly off centre, to be different and not deferential, and disrespectful. It implies a jauntiness that is cheeky.

**Entitlement** – the right to have or do something.

**Split stage / split scene** – when two different scenes or dialogues are presented at the same time on the same stage. Attention switches between the two scenes as their lines are interspersed.

Mickey's response, that he doesn't 'wear a hat' turns the hat into a symbol of **entitlement**.


Mickey feels that he doesn't have the same means to be cheeky or unconventional that Edward has. Mickey sums up the differences between them by calling Edward 'a kid' and dismisses their earlier friendship and closeness as 'blood brothers' as 'kids' stuff' and pushes Edward away (metaphorically) by threatening him, saying 'go on... beat it before I hit y'.

The action then divides in two and a **split stage** or **split scene** is used with Sammy speaking to Mickey and Edward speaking with Linda.

This split scene emphasises the tragedy of Mickey's decision to join in Sammy's criminal activities; a decision that will precipitate a downward spiral of events in his life. At the same time that he is allowing himself to be persuaded, due to his desperation for money, 'fifty quid for an hour's work' (about £500 in today's money), Linda is rejecting Edward's advances and staying loyal to Mickey. It makes Mickey's betrayal of Linda, by getting himself into trouble, all the more dramatic.

Mickey uses the phrase 'we're goin' dancin'" to show that he is feeling positive about getting hold of some money but Linda's reaction shows the audience that something is likely to go wrong.

## Discuss...

Are there any reasons that we might sympathise with Mickey's decision to get involved in crime? Is this just a weak and bad decision or does he have good motives? Would he have agreed if he hadn't just seen Edward?  


Mickey keeps look out while Sammy tries to rob a garage but ends up shooting a man and, although they both run home and hide the gun, the police soon find them and arrest them both.



### Analysis

The Narrator's opening lines of 'Robbery' are two pairs of rhyming couplets which, along with the references to superstition, a 'black cat', and a card game, with 'a joker' and 'the dealers [sic] dealt the cards and he won't take them back', suggest a strong sense of inevitability about the disaster about to unfold. The final line returns to the idea of debt and a penalty being due for the twins being separated at the beginning.

Sammy's lines reference the games they played as children but contrast them saying that the gun is 'not a toy' and he's not 'playin' games'. Now the gun is real and 'y' don't get up again if one of these hits y". The Narrator repeats their childhood games saying 'if you counted to ten and kept your fingers crossed | It would all be just a game' but, of course, it's not a game, they're no longer children and there are serious consequences to their actions.

As the two brothers are arrested Linda is left in a state of shock saying 'but I've ironed him a shirt' reminding us that this was supposed to be a good day when they went out dancing.

Mrs Johnstone sings another verse of 'Marilyn Monroe' and tells us that Mickey has been sent to prison for seven years. This time Marilyn Monroe serves as a symbol for Mickey's struggle with his mental health in prison and we see a doctor examining him. Linda visits him in hospital and says she doesn't like him taking his tablets but Mickey insists he needs them. Mrs Johnstone sings the final verse of 'Marilyn Monroe' as Mickey leaves prison before his seven years are up due to good behaviour but is still not well.

## Analysis

Mickey's tears, which started in the previous scene just after Sammy shot the man at the garage, continue in this scene to illustrate his weakened state of mind. He '*stands quietly crying*' in his prison cell and Mrs Johnstone sings that 'he couldn't stop the tears'. The pills the doctor gives him stop him crying but Mrs Johnstone shows that he is not happy by singing that 'they stop his mind from dancing'.

Linda's visit to Mickey in prison introduces the tension between them over his tablets. Linda calls them 'junk' but Mickey repeats 'I need' several times to show his dependency.

Mrs Johnstone's final verse describes Mickey as 'fifteen years older' even though he has been in prison for less than seven years. The overall picture of Mickey is very bleak as the effects of the drugs mean that his 'speech is rather slow' and he is compared to being 'dead | Like Marilyn Monroe' with 'no cause for dancing'.



**Did you know?** At this time valium would probably have been prescribed (now called diazepam) to treat anxiety; those taking this drug can become dependent on it.

Linda arrives home carrying lots of shopping bags and tells Mrs Johnstone that she's managed to get Mickey a job but she won't tell her how. Linda mentions their daughter Sarah, who is now at school and so must be around 5 or 6 years old. It seems Mrs Johnstone is just as worried as Linda about Mickey still taking 'those pills' and they both hope that the job and a new house will help him give them up.

There is then a short jump forward in time as Mickey and Linda are in their own home, not in Mrs Johnstone's. Mickey is getting ready to go to work but can't find his tablets because Linda has hidden them. He demands them back saying that he can't manage without them. Mickey reveals he has worked out that Councillor Eddie Lyons has got him his job and their house, just like he used to give him sweets and cigarettes. He says he needs to take his tablets so he 'can be invisible'. Linda gives him his tablets and he leaves for work.

### Analysis

Linda's life is presented in a very negative light in this scene. The stage directions describe her as '*weighed down by shopping bags*' and as '*weary*'. Mrs Johnstone tries to ask her three times about how she got Mickey a job but Linda just gives her vague answers about 'someone' she knows and 'some feller', which create suspicion.

Mickey's dependence on his tablets is represented through his urgent search for them and then through his aggressive behaviour towards Linda. He describes how he felt when he stopped taking them 'I was shakin' an' sweating so much' which are classic symptoms of withdrawal.

Mickey's attitude towards Edward is evident here when he recalls everything that Edward has given him, from 'sweets an' ciggies' to 'a job and a house'. He clearly resents the fact that he has had to rely on Edward for these handouts because he had 'none of me own'.

Mickey and Linda's relationship seems to be at breaking point when Linda says that she doesn't love him when he's taking his tablets and Mickey says that he takes them so he can 'be invisible' which is tantamount to admitting that he doesn't really think life is worth living.



## Edward and Linda pp. 78–79

### Summary

The Narrator's lines to 'Light Romance' describe Linda's unhappiness and she goes to a telephone, calls Edward and they arrange to meet. Their happier past is evoked when Edward 'mimes firing a gun'. They kiss and walk hand in hand. There is a split scene to Mickey, who resists taking a tablet, and then the attention returns to Linda and Edward happy together. The split scenes are brought together by Mrs Lyons, who points Linda and Edward out to Mickey.

### Analysis

The Narrator contrasts the 'young girl' Linda with the woman she has become. The phone call to Edward is presented as the girl wanting to 'get free' and the idea of a 'song' or 'melody' is used to represent the happiness that the girl remembers and wants to rediscover. The risk of this is highlighted in the final two lines by the suggestion that there will be a 'price' for this happiness.

Mrs Johnstone's singing that accompanies Linda and Edward's assignation is mournful in tone and seems sympathetic to what they are doing. Words like 'nothing cruel', 'nothing wrong', 'foolishly' and 'fools' suggest that their actions are not malicious. Despite this it is still clear that they are doing wrong; she sings that 'they should have gone | Their separate ways' and that they knew they were breaking the rules. Their betrayal of Mickey is conveyed through the split scene and the dramatic irony created when the audience sees him stop taking his pills at the same time as they are together.



**Did you know?** The 1995 Cast Recording of *Blood Brothers* includes extra lines for the Narrator at the beginning:

*They think she's just a mother  
With nothing left inside  
Who swapped her dreams for drudgery  
The day she was a bride.*

*But the dreams were not forgotten  
Just wrapped and packed away  
In the hope that she could take them out  
And dust them off one day.*

While these lines are not officially part of the text studied for the exam they do show us that the contrast between Linda's younger self and the life she finds herself living now is important.

### Discuss...

*How much sympathy do you have for Linda in this situation?*



Many of the lyrics in 'Light Romance' are the same as in 'Easy Terms' in Act I, which Mrs Johnstone sings just before she gives Edward away. This repetition strengthens the idea that 'the price' that is mentioned throughout the play is about to be paid as the inevitable tragic end unfolds.

Mickey, having just seen Edward and Linda together, is hammering on Mrs Johnstone's front door. He enters the house and takes Sammy's gun from its hiding place. Mrs Johnstone sees him and starts screaming his name. The Narrator starts to sing 'Madman' while Mickey runs around desperately. Mrs Johnstone finds Linda, who guesses that Mickey is headed for the town hall and Edward.



### Analysis

Mickey's hammering on the door signals a dramatic change in atmosphere. The music is louder and faster than the previous scene and the characters are screaming and shouting. The characters' movements reflect the pace of the music as first Mickey, then Mrs Johnstone and Linda, run.

The Narrator's song 'Madman' repeats the lyrics of 'Shoes Upon The Table' with its references to the devil, and at this point in the play the devil is no longer 'walking past' or looking in or even 'leaning on' the door but is 'runnin' right beside' Mickey and then is 'screamin' deep inside' so has moved to being part of Mickey himself. It seems as if the betrayed Mickey, with Sammy's gun, has become the devil that is going to exact the price that has been owing since he was separated from Edward at the beginning of the play.

The tension climaxes at the end of 'Madman' when the narrator repeats the word 'today' three times, the final 'TODAY' is in capitals to imply a greater volume and then the tension is cut by an abrupt end to the music.

The action moves to the town hall where Edward is talking to the rest of the council. Mickey appears in the **stalls** and walks towards the stage, pointing the gun at Edward.

Mickey keeps walking until he is up on the stage facing Edward. There is panic from the other councillors on the stage and Mickey tells them to leave. He then explains to Edward that he had stopped taking his pills for Linda but then Mrs Lyons had told him about Edward and Linda. Edward denies that anything is going on, saying that they are 'just friends'. This angers Mickey and he shouts at Edward that they were friends once and accuses Edward of being Sarah's father. Edward denies this.

At this point two policemen enter the theatre from the back of the **auditorium**.

One of the policemen speaks through a loudhailer and tells Mickey to put the gun down. At this point Mickey seems to calm down. He says that he can't shoot Eddie and that he's not even sure if the gun is loaded, but then Mrs Johnstone walks up the **central aisle** towards the stage calling to Mickey not to shoot.

She tells Mickey that Eddie is his twin brother and that she gave him away. Mickey screams 'I could have been him!' and his gun goes off, shooting Edward. The police open fire on Mickey and he is killed too.

## Analysis

Edward's address to the rest of the councillors just consists of general points about something that another councillor is meant to have said previously. All focus and attention is quickly drawn to Mickey, who is walking through the audience with a gun. Members of the audience may start to react like the council audience on the stage, with shock, until they realise that it is part of the play.



Once Mickey is on the stage the pace really slows, indicated by the stage directions '*eventually*' and '*pause*' between Edward and Mickey's lines. The dramatic tension is built when Edward and Mickey are left alone on the stage, as they were when they first met as seven-year-old boys. Mickey feels completely betrayed by his 'blood brother' but seems to calm down until Mrs Johnstone tells him that that Edward was given away. We might expect that it is the twin that was given away that feels the most anger at the situation but here it seems to be reversed. Mickey's anger at his mother is that he wasn't given away; he sees that had his and Edward's upbringings been reversed then he would have had better chances in life and wouldn't have ended up in such a hopeless situation that left him, a few short scenes ago, wishing he didn't exist (when he says he takes his tablets so he 'can be invisible').

**Stalls** – area of seats on the ground floor of a theatre nearest the stage.

**Auditorium** – the area of the theatre where the audience sits.

**Central aisle** – the passageway between the seats that runs up the centre of the auditorium.

There is quite a lot of doubt built into whether Mickey really intends to kill Edward. Just before Mrs Johnstone arrives Mickey says that 'I thought I was gonna shoot y'" to Edward, but then admits that he can't do it and that he doesn't 'even know if the thing's loaded'. When he shoots Edward the stage directions say that he '*waves at EDWARD with his gun hand*' and '*the gun explodes*' which could mean that it was an accident. After Edward is shot Mickey faces the police and shouts 'no', which could refer to what he has just done or could be directed at the police telling them not to shoot him. The overall effect is that the deaths almost didn't happen, which maybe makes the fact that they did all the more tragic.

In performance - this part of the play when performed is quite shocking and the audience reaction is often quite extreme - when the gun goes off it is common for many to jump and scream and then sometimes laugh - out of embarrassment or shock. The final lines of the scene, the policeman talking through the loudhailer, give time for the audience to settle down for the Narrator's final lines and the final rendition of 'Tell Me It's Not True' .





The Narrator addresses the audience with a question about their judgment on the play:

*And do we blame superstition for what came to pass?  
Or could it be what we, the English, have come to know as class?*

He then repeats the first four lines from the prologue but with the slight change that now instead of 'of one womb born, on the self same day' we have 'how they were born, and they died, on the self same day'.

Mrs Johnstone then sings 'Tell Me It's Not True', which pleads for what has just happened to have been part of a story, film or a dream; for it not to have been true. The whole company joins in for the final stanza.

## Analysis

The Narrator's questions give us the crux of the whole story. Were the twins' deaths inevitable and unavoidable due to their secret separation? Or could they have lived if their social circumstances were more equal? Everyone has to come to their own judgment about this, think back through Mickey's life and choices and Edward's life. Russell probably hoped to promote debate about all these things.



### Discuss...

*Who or what is to blame for Mickey and Edward's deaths?*

The final song is ironic because it is a lament that wishes that what just happened wasn't true, when what just happened wasn't true. The real question is whether the fact that it is only a play changes the meaning. Mickey and Edward's story may only be fiction but, if we accept that it was class that was to blame, then much of what happened to them could be true. While we could tell Mrs Johnstone that what just happened isn't true the meanings or messages of the play will still remain.

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# Characterisation

## Narrator



The Narrator is a **choric character**.

The Narrator is the first character, in fact the sole character, we see on the stage at the start of the play. He enters and exits the stage frequently, highlighting points of tension and serving as a point of transition between the scenes. When he appears and sings verses from 'Shoes Upon The Table' ('You know the devil's got your number'), the audience knows that another piece of the action has just fallen into place to lead to the tragic end. He is there when Mrs Johnstone agrees to give one of the twins to Mrs Lyons and comments that they've 'overlook[ed] the fact' that 'a debt is a debt, and must be paid' and he's there when Edward becomes friends with Mickey and Linda. As the bus conductor, he reminds Mrs Johnstone that 'no one gets off without the price bein' paid' and he's there when Sammy and Mickey commit their robbery. Towards the end of Act II it specifies in the stage directions that he '*watches LINDA*' when she telephones Eddie; this draws attention to this moment as being the turning point that precipitates the chain of events that lead to the inevitable end.

Some productions have the Narrator observing the action from the side or above on a balcony, making him a constant, foreboding presence. He is typically dressed in a dark suit making him seem like an undertaker, which adds to the atmosphere of tragedy. He could be seen as the devil of his song, or symbol of the devil, a bogeyman, that is going to exact the final price.

The Narrator also takes several small parts in the action including: the milkman; the gynaecologist; the bus conductor; the teachers and different roles during the three friends' teenage summer together. This fits with the ensemble style, typical of work written for and at The Playhouse Theatre, as well as lending a threatening presence to these otherwise more comical scenes.

**Characterisation** is the ways in which the traits of the characters are conveyed to the readers or audience.

**Choric character** – a choric character comments on the action and usually doesn't take much part in the main action. The idea of a chorus (a group of performers) comes from Greek tragic drama where they could take part in, comment on or provide the poetic or musical parts of plays.

**Ensemble style** – where different members of the cast play many parts.

## Mrs Johnstone

At the beginning of the play Mrs Johnstone is a single mother of seven children who is described in the stage directions as '*aged thirty but looks more like fifty*', although in her opening song Mrs Johnstone describes herself as 'twenty-five' but looking 'forty-two'; either way she is young but her life has aged her prematurely.

At the beginning of the play the Narrator says that the story is of 'a mother, so cruel, | There's a stone in the play of her heart' and invites the audience to judge her for themselves. Mrs Johnstone is depicted as a tragic figure through her comparison to Marilyn Monroe; her **tragic flaw** is perhaps her gullibility but she could also be seen as the victim of her circumstances, a single mother with little money who tried to give one of her children the chance of a better life.



**Tragic flaw** – a defect or fault within the character of a hero or heroine that leads to their failure or disastrous end.



## Mrs Lyons

Mrs Jennifer Lyons is the middle-class contrast to Mrs Johnstone: she has a big house, plenty of money, a husband but no children. Mrs Lyons' vulnerability is revealed through her verse in the song 'My Child' in which she confesses her dreams of having her own child.

She is presented as quite manipulative, asking her husband for a substantial sum of money which she says is for things for the baby and nursery, and then using the money to pay Mrs Johnstone to leave. She then threatens Mrs Johnstone with prison and when that does not seem to work, makes up the superstition that twins 'secretly parted' will 'immediately die' if they ever learn that they are a twin.

She is portrayed several times as violent. When Mrs Johnstone says she will take Edward, Mrs Lyons '*roughly drags her out of the way*'. She hits Edward '*hard and instinctively*' when he swears and tries to attack Mrs Johnstone with a kitchen knife when she refuses to leave Skelmersdale.

Mrs Lyons' mental state is shown to gradually disintegrate during the play. One key way this is conveyed is through the way she reacts to superstitions. At the beginning of the play she laughs at them but then as she becomes more desperate about losing Edward, she starts to believe them. She is referred to as a 'mad woman' by kids' voices (offstage) in a chant just after she threatens Mrs Johnstone.

## Mr Lyons

Mr Lyons is distant from the most of the domestic scenes in the play. He always seems to be rushing off to work, the stage direction when we first meet him just after the twins have been born has him '*glancing at his watch*' and then saying 'I've got a board meeting. I really must dash'. He is traditional about the division of their responsibilities, feeling that the decisions about their home are his wife's 'domain'.

Unlike Mrs Johnstone, Mr Lyons is treated with respect by the policeman, who calls him 'sir' and the two men are able to resolve Edward's 'prank' over a drink. Mr Lyons' final scene is as a managing director who is making lots of workers, including Mickey, redundant. He sings 'Take A Letter Miss Jones', which takes quite a cavalier approach to laying people off, blaming 'the times', 'the world situation' and 'the recession'.

Throughout the play Mr and Mrs Lyons represent a comfortable middle class, who are never troubled by money troubles or financial insecurity. Edward inherits this secure existence, enabled by his private school and university education.



## Mickey

Mickey (Michael) Johnstone is the twin that stays with his mother Mrs Johnstone. He is the youngest of the Johnstones and seems to suffer at the hands of his older brother Sammy. At seven Mickey is streetwise, shown through his knowledge of swear words and the fact that he has a penknife, but when playing with the other kids Mickey gets singled out and has to rely on his friend Linda for protection and comfort.

Mickey at fourteen is presented as a typical teenager, self-conscious about his appearance and starting to be interested in girls. The scenes on the bus and in the classroom show that Linda is still supporting and defending him. When he leaves school his narrow range of job opportunities is represented by him having a boring factory job making cardboard boxes, which disappears when the economy turns bad. The effect that losing his job has on Mickey is presented by his aggression towards his blood brother when Edward returns from university. This turns to depression after his involvement in the robbery, when Sammy shoots the garage worker, as he is described in the stage directions as having '*tears streaming down his face*' and is '*silently crying*' when he is arrested and continues crying when he is in prison.

While in prison he is compared to Marilyn Monroe because she struggled with depression and was prescribed medication. Mrs Johnstone's song continues to narrate his release from prison but describes him as looking 'fifteen years older' and having slow speech, presumably the effects of the medication he is taking.

Mickey could be seen as the tragic hero of the play, his disappointment with his life leading to his plan to shoot Edward for taking Linda. The real tragedy happens, however, when Mrs Johnstone arrives, Mickey has just said that that he couldn't shoot Edward and that he wasn't even sure if the gun was loaded when his Mum tells them that they are twins. Mickey's fury at this, his rage that if he had been given away instead of Edward then he would have had a better life, causes his gun to go off, killing Edward.

## Edward



Edward is the twin who is taken by Mrs Lyons to bring up as her own. Mrs Johnstone, Mickey and Linda all immediately shorten his name to Eddie, which shows us the more informal life he would have had if he had stayed with Mrs Johnstone.

Edward's social status or class is represented by the way he speaks, especially when compared to Mickey. His accent and his higher level of vocabulary represent his middle-class upbringing. When the twins meet aged fourteen Edward says 'shag the vicar' and Mickey laughs at his 'posh voice'. Edward is presented as more confident about expressing himself than Mickey as, due to his superior education, he has a wider, more mature and more expressive vocabulary; he is able to create a parody of romantic clichés about how to speak to girls because he's 'read about it', saying 'my loins are burning for you' and describing Linda's imagined reply as a 'husky ... be gentle with me, be gentle'. Edward appears more confident overall, he is the one who suggests they go and watch '*Nymphomaniac Nights* and *Swedish Au Pairs*' and who dances around shouting 'tits, tits, tits' in the street afterwards, and who jumps around the lamp post and says 'Adolf Hitler' to the policeman. He also orchestrates Mickey and Linda finally getting together just before he goes off to university, despite the fact that he loves Linda too and is able to articulate his feelings much more eloquently than Mickey when he sings 'I'm Not Saying A Word'.

Although *Blood Brothers* purports to be 'the story of the Johnstone twins' more of Mickey's story is told than Edward's. Edward's more privileged upbringing is there to serve as a contrast to Mickey's working-class life and to demonstrate the sort of life Mickey could have had if he had the same opportunities. Still, Edward's life is not presented as perfect: his dad is absent a lot as he is at work; he is teased by other students at school and bullied by his teacher; his relationship with Mrs Lyons is sometimes difficult; and he loses the girl he loves to Mickey.

### Discuss...

Why does Mickey wish he could have been Edward?



## Linda

Linda is the same age as Mickey and Edward and lives close to Mickey. She comes across as feisty and confident, unafraid to stand against the larger groups of older kids in defence of Mickey. Linda receives the ultimate compliment a seven-year old-boy can give from Mickey when he introduces her to Edward saying 'she's a girl but she's all right', and she turns out to be a crack shot with Sammy's air gun, hitting the Peter Pan statue every time.

During the 'Summer Sequence' there is a premonition of what is to come when the scene freezes as she is between the two twins playing piggy-in-the-middle as the narrator says 'who'd tell the girl in the middle of the pair | The price she'll pay for just being there'. Here Linda is presented as an innocent victim caught up in the tragic story of the twins.

After Mickey comes out of prison Linda's physical appearance and demeanour has changed. The stage directions describe how she '*is weighed down with shopping bags and is weary*' and her renewed contact with Edward is described by the Narrator, at the beginning of 'Light Romance', as her trying to rediscover the 'girl inside the woman'.

At the end of the play Mrs Johnstone retakes the central position between the two boys that had been occupied by Linda.

## Sammy

Sammy is Mickey and Edward's older brother, Mrs Johnstone's seventh child. When he is ten Sammy cuts a very impressive figure, according to his younger brother. Mickey admires him for having 'two worms and a catapult | An' he's built an underground den'. Other attributes include spitting, playing with matches, going to bed late, drawing 'nudey women' and weeing through next door's letter box. There is already, however, a slightly darker side to Sammy, even at ten - he takes Mickey's toys, including his gun and his car, which he breaks, and Mickey says that 'y' have to be dead careful if our Sammy gives y'a sweet' because 'if our Sammy gives y' a sweet he's usually weed on it first'. Mickey also tells Edward that when Sammy was little and had been left in the care of his big sister Donna Marie, he 'fell out the window an' broke his head' which meant that he had to have a plate put in it (this would be a metal plate put in to replace a broken or missing piece of skull). Sammy takes a lead role in 'Kids' Game' in the opposite gang to Mickey and Linda and tends to come out on top, producing a '*bazooka*' when faced with a gun and making a bomb as Professor Howe. Linda is the only one who gets the better of him when she threatens to tell her mother 'why all her ciggies always disappear when you're in our house'.



Unfortunately the move to the country doesn't seem to improve Sammy. We learn from Mrs Johnstone's opening in Act II that 'our Sammy burnt the school down' and then he robs the bus conductor at knifepoint. The character Sammy is always hovering in the background of Mickey's life as a warning of the road he shouldn't take; both Linda and Mrs Johnstone warn Mickey not to be like Sammy.

Sammy is aligned with guns from the start of the play. He steals Mickey's toy gun and it is Sammy's air gun that the twins and Linda use to shoot at Peter Pan and it is the gun that he hides after the garage shooting that Mickey fetches when he goes after Edward at the end of the play.



**Did you know?** – In the touring production of *Blood Brothers* Linda is made to stand out from the other children because her dress is bright red.

### **Policeman**

There is a policeman in a few key scenes. It does not really matter if the same actor from the chorus plays all the policemen each time or if different actors do, as it is the role which is important rather than whether or not it is the same person. The first policeman, who appears when the children are seven, is used to demonstrate how the Johnstones and the Lyons are treated differently by someone in authority. A policeman is also there to celebrate at the end of Act I when the Johnstones are moving away because he feels that will be 'a sharp drop in the crime rate' when they're gone. After the cinema trip their run-in with a policeman shows that Edward, Mickey and Linda have grown up a bit as they are now able to give him the slip. There are two policemen at the very end of the play who are used to create an authentic crisis situation by entering through the auditorium. It is police guns that kill Mickey.

### **Donna Marie**

Donna Marie is older sister to Sammy, Mickey and Edward. She is there really to remind the audience that there are older siblings than Sammy and Mickey living with Mrs Johnstone. The only other time Donna Marie is mentioned is to indicate how much time has passed between the acts as Mrs Johnstone says that her older children have left home and that Donna Marie already has three children of her own.

### **Perkins**

Perkins is one of the students in Mickey's class in the school scene. He is a keen student and is eager to answer the question about the Boro Indians. The teacher's rude and dismissive response, he says 'shut up Perkins, y' borin' little turd', illustrates the dire atmosphere in the school.

### **Miss Jones**

Miss Jones is Mr Lyons' secretary at the factory and is writing the letters that are laying the workers off. The irony of the song is that eventually she gets one of the letters herself.

### **Sarah Johnstone**

Sarah is Mickey and Linda's daughter; she never appears on stage but Linda checks that Mrs Johnstone has picked her up from school ('did y' get our Sarah from school') and so illustrates that five or six years must have passed while Mickey was in prison.

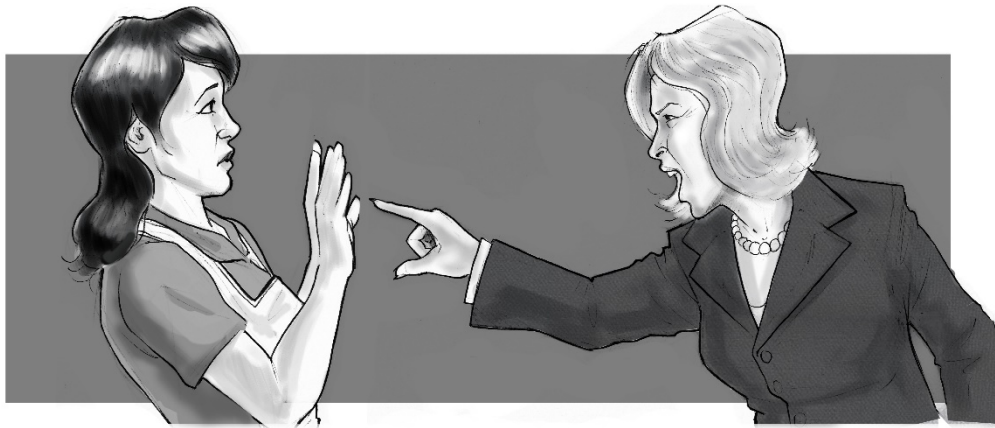
# Relationships

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## **Mrs Johnstone and Mrs Lyons**

At the beginning of the play Mrs Lyons seems to hold most of the power in the two women's relationship. She is the employer and she is able to control and manipulate Mrs Johnstone through threats and through a created superstition. However, this control slips away from Mrs Lyons as she becomes paranoid about losing Edward to his birth mother Mrs Johnstone. When Mrs Lyons tries bribing and threatening Mrs Johnstone later in the play Mrs Johnstone refuses to give in, even when attacked with a knife.

At the end of the play it seems that Mrs Lyons' desire for revenge causes her to point out Linda's infidelity to Mickey, which leads to Mickey going after Edward with the gun. Mrs Johnstone is the one left grief-stricken and distraught between her two dead twins.



## **Mrs Johnstone and Mickey**

Mrs Johnstone and Mickey seem to have a good relationship through the play. Despite not being able to offer him all the toys he wants when he is a child, there is good-natured teasing when Mickey is a teenager. Mrs Johnstone supports Mickey when Linda becomes pregnant and they need somewhere to live.

However, at the very end of the play Mickey rejects his mother, revealing that he resents the life he has led and wishes that he could have been Edward.

## **Mrs Johnstone and Edward**

Edward is taken from Mrs Johnstone by Mrs Lyons just after he is born. After their first meeting, when Mrs Johnstone sends him away, their relationship seems close. Mrs Johnstone gives Edward a secret locket which represents the connection between them.

## **Mrs Lyons and Edward**


Mrs Lyons is very over-protective of Edward, sacking Mrs Johnstone to keep her away from him and not wanting him to go out to play. Mrs Lyons' relationship with 14-year-old Edward, in contrast to Mrs Johnstone's with Mickey, is a little stilted and awkward. She is trying to teach him how to waltz and then when she kisses him goodbye he tells her to 'stop fussing', and when he is suspended from school and she sees the locket he keeps the secret about where he got it from her.



## Mickey and Edward

After being separated at birth Edward and Mickey next meet when they are seven, and despite the differences in their upbringings they immediately become friends and blood brothers. When Mrs Johnstone and Mrs Lyons find out that the boys have met they both do their best to separate them but the boys continue to seek each other out.

During their teenage years they become very close, as demonstrated by 'Summer Sequence' and it is only when Edward leaves for university and Mickey loses his job that they drift apart. The **love triangle** between the twins and Linda causes tragedy when Mickey finds out that Linda and Edward have begun an affair. Mickey goes to confront Edward with a gun and it is only then that they find out they are twins and Mickey shoots Edward.




**Love triangle** – a romantic relationship involving three people. This could be two rivals for the love of another, but usually implies that there is some kind of relationship (not necessarily all of them romantic) between all three people.

## Mickey and Linda

Linda is Mickey's friend and protector when they are seven-year-olds playing on the street. At 14 she continues in this role but in addition has become his love interest too. Her not-so-subtle advances include saying she loves him in assembly and asking him to put his arms around her waist. Linda then attempts to make him jealous by saying that she thinks 'another feller's gorgeous', the irony being that the other boy is Edward, who she ends up having an affair with. In the end gets fed up with Mickey and tells him that he 'gets on [her] bleedin' nerves'.

### Discuss...



*The love triangle is a common device used in fiction; for example, Romeo, Juliet and Paris – can you think of any other examples? Why is it a good dynamic for a writer to use in a plot?*

Eventually it is Edward who has to force Mickey to ask Linda out and then their relationship progresses at a lightning pace with Linda quickly becoming pregnant and then their marriage.

When Mickey comes out of prison Linda organises a job for him and a home for them but Mickey is resentful as it is only with Edward's help that this has been possible. It is Linda's affair with Edward that pushes Mickey into madness

as he retrieves the gun and goes after Edward.

## Edward and Linda


Edward is introduced to Linda by Mickey when they are seven but it is not until the 'Summer Sequence' that they spend a lot of time together. Edward declares his love for Linda in 'I'm Not Saying A Word' but when he understands that Linda loves Mickey he ensures they get together before he leaves for university.

Linda turns to Edward for help when Mickey comes out of prison and then phones him and begins an affair with him during Mrs Johnstone's song 'Light Romance' when they are described as 'two fools | Who know the rules, | But break them all'.

## Mickey and Sammy

Mickey looks up to Sammy when they are young, admiring his spitting and his worms. However, he is also a little afraid of Sammy as he takes his toys and only gives Mickey a sweet if he has 'weed on it first'. When Sammy gets in trouble on the bus he tries to get Mickey to go with him but Linda stops Mickey. Later, when Mickey is unemployed and broke he cannot resist Sammy's promise of 'fifty notes' for helping with a robbery. Involvement with Sammy results in Mickey's seven-year prison sentence and his descent into depression.

## Settings and Props



**Setting** – the settings are the times and places in which the story takes place.

## Settings

### Time

No specific dates are given during the play but there are a few clues:

- Marilyn Monroe was a star in the 1950s and died in 1962.
- In the 1960s there was large-scale rehousing of tenants from the centre of Liverpool to places such as Skelmersdale.
- Decimalisation was in 1971.
- The films *Doctor Zhivago* (1965) and *The Magnificent Seven* (1960) were both released in the 1960s.
- The economic recession that caused major job losses was in the 1970s.

Using these we can estimate that the twins were born during the 1950s, moved to the country in the 1960s and Mickey loses his job during the 1970s depression. This means that he would have come out of prison in the late 1970s.

### Places

Act I is set in Liverpool in the 1950s and 1960s. The only shows Mrs Johnstone's front door and inside Mr and Mrs Lyons' house. Some of the action takes place in between these two on the streets and in the park. A simple opposition is operating where middle-class life seems to take place mostly inside the home whereas working-class life happens mostly outside.

Act II is set in Skelmersdale from around 1960 and probably moving into the early 1980s. We still have the street immediately outside Mrs Johnstone's new front door and then other locations such as the courtroom, the bus, the schools, the factory, the prison and the town hall are indicated by the judicious use of props such as tables and chairs.

## Props

### Guns

Mickey's toy gun serves to illustrate his treatment as the youngest in the family. In his first few lines on stage, aged seven, he complains to his Mum that 'Sammy's robbed me other gun' but his Mum just says it's because he's 'the youngest'. Linda's confidence and the confidence she gives Mickey is shown when together, still aged seven, they take Sammy's air gun to shoot at the Peter Pan statue. Eddie's leaving gift for Mickey is a toy gun, which shows how close they have become in a short time as he understands exactly what Mickey enjoys playing with.

Sammy's possession and use of a real gun or 'shooter' in the garage robbery shows how serious his criminal activity has now become. The seriousness is emphasised when Sammy says 'y' don't get up again' which refers back to their childhood games when they could always jump up again. Now, however, it is different and the result is lengthy prison sentences.

It is Sammy's gun that fulfils the made-up superstition about twins separated at birth dying when they find out about each other. Mickey fetches it when he finds out about Linda and Edward and it goes off when he finds out that Edward is his twin.

The guns start off being 'just a game' and something fun but then they become symbols of destruction as Sammy's real gun lands Mickey in prison and in the end guns kill both Edward and Mickey.

## Knives

The penknife that Mickey has as a seven-year-old indicates that he is streetwise and is important because he uses it to cut his and Edward's hands to make them blood brothers.

The two other knives are used to create threatening and violent scenes. The first is when Sammy threatens the bus conductor with a knife when he is stealing the fares, foreshadowing the more serious violence with a gun later. The second shows how unstable Mrs Lyons has become because she threatens Mrs Johnstone with a kitchen knife.

## Shoes

Shoes are used to illustrate superstitious beliefs and who believes them. **Error! Bookmark not defined.** Mrs Johnstone insists she removes them but Mrs Lyons laughs at the superstition. Later, just before the end of Act I, Mrs Lyons' deteriorating emotional state is symbolised by her 'rushing' at the table to remove shoes that Mr Lyons has placed there. It seems she now believes in the superstition that she laughed at earlier.



## Camera

A camera is used to create a happy atmosphere for the three teenage friends during 'Summer Sequence' as they take pictures with each other. It shows that they want to have a record of this time together.

## Tables

The table is a really useful prop because it can be used to create a formal sense of a room. It is used in the Lyons' house, most notably to put shoes on to illustrate belief in superstition. It is then used in the town hall scene at the end to separate the councillors from their onstage audience. The table could also be used to create the courtroom scenes. Smaller tables or desks could be used in the school scene to create a classroom.

## The locket

The locket, which is a gift from Mrs Johnstone to Edward and contains a photo of her and Mickey, serves as a symbol of his connection to her and his past. This symbol of his connection to his past and his refusal to give it up results in his suspension from school and precipitates Mrs Lyons' deterioration in mental health and her threatening and destructive acts.

## Streetlight

The streetlight is used to create a street scene after Edward and Mickey have been to the cinema. It could imply romance, reminiscent of Gene Kelly's scene in the 1952 film *Singin' In The Rain*, as it sets the scene for the romance between Linda and the two twins.

## Telephone

The telephone symbolises the connection between Linda and Edward. It is the way that they communicate and arrange to meet when they start their affair.

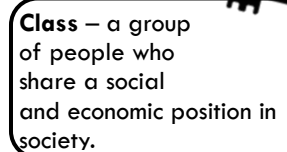
# Themes

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## Class

At the end of the play, straight after the twins die, the Narrator asks two questions:

‘And do we blame superstition for what came to pass?  
Or could it be what we, the English, have come to know as class?’



**Class** – a group of people who share a social and economic position in society.


Willy Russell is quite clear, in the extract from his letter to Chris Bond, reprinted in the Methuen Edition of the play (pp. 95-96), that he wanted to show that ‘class splits these two brothers, that class keeps them apart, that class killed them’. Mickey’s cry, when he finds out that Edward was given away; ‘I could have been him’ conveys his anger at the circumstances of his own life. Edward’s middle-class upbringing has given him a better education and a secure job and Mickey is angry that his working-class upbringing gave him none of the same opportunities but instead offered him insecure employment and exposure to crime and criminal behaviour. Mickey’s lack of opportunity, compared to Edward, means that he ended up spending many years in prison, has become dependent on drugs and thinks that he has lost his wife. It is the chronic unfairness of this, when both brothers started off in life exactly the same, that leads to their tragic ends when the gun in Mickey’s hand explodes.

The play does not, however, present a simplistic view of class where the middle-class way of life is better than the working-class one. Edward’s private school is not perfect, he is teased and suspended for having a locket and Mr Lyons sometimes seems more interested in work than his family. Despite being deprived of financial security and educational and work opportunities, Mickey does have the love and support of his mother and Linda and, while ‘Kids’ Game’ does show that the working-class kids are a bit rough, it also looks great fun. Mrs Johnstone may be old before her time but she is shown to be happy with her life in Skelmersdale when she rejects Mrs Lyons’ offer of more money to move.

By portraying both positive and negative sides to middle-class and working-class life neither is shown to be better than the other, instead it is the inequality of opportunity that is to blame.

## Superstition

Belief in superstition is seen, at the beginning of the play at least, as an indication of being working class. Mrs Lyons laughs at Mrs Johnstone for being superstitious and then tells Edward that the 'bogey man' is something a 'silly mother' might tell her children about, but her fragile emotional state is demonstrated when Edward is missing by her suddenly pushing the shoes that Mr Lyons has put on the table to the floor. Edward mentions the superstition about magpies just after they move to the country to show that, despite Mrs Lyons' hopes, he hasn't lost his connections to the Johnstones and their beliefs just because they've moved away.



**Superstition** is an irrational belief based on things such as omens or charms or luck.




The Narrator refers to other superstitions in the song 'Shoes Upon The Table' straight after Mrs Lyons makes up the superstition about twins separated at birth, and superstitions are repeated at key points during the play to build tension. The link between the Narrator and superstition makes him a kind of bogey man in the play and so superstition serves as a useful means of creating a sense of threat and tension, and in the end Mrs Lyons' made-up superstition about separated twins dying comes true.

**Did you know?** – Malevolent spirits such as bogey men, sprites and goblins are prevalent in folklore and in folk songs so Willy Russell would have been used to having these kinds of devices in songs he heard, sang and wrote. Examples of traditional ballads can be found at: [www.contemplator.com/folk.html](http://www.contemplator.com/folk.html)

## Nature versus nurture


The use of twins being separated makes the nature vs nurture question more prominent than if it had been just siblings or friends who were being brought up in different types of homes. Nurture is made the focus because the two boys had an identical starting point (nature). Edward's confidence, eloquence, education and success are clearly portrayed as being down to class rather than any innate qualities. In the same way Mickey's unemployment, involvement in crime, depression and then violence are laid at the door of his class (nurture) rather than a character flaw (nature).



**Nature versus nurture** is the question of which is more significant – an individual's innate or natural qualities or abilities (nature) or the external opportunities or circumstances (nurture) of their experience.

## Fate


The twins' tragic fate is set from the very beginning of the play in the prologue when the narrator says that they 'lay slain'. Like in all tragedies there is no sense that it is ever possible for them to escape from this end, the only question is how events will unfold to lead them there.



**Fate** means that the course of events and their ending are inevitable or predetermined.


## Debt/repayment

Mrs Johnstone seems to be perpetually in debt to finance companies and catalogues for all her possessions. At the beginning of the play she is unable to repay what she owes so her things are repossessed.



**Debt** – an amount of money or an obligation that has to be paid or performed.

This idea of living with debt and the need to pay for what you have is extended into the rest of her life too. She describes her relationship to the twin she is going to give away as being on 'borrowed time' in the song 'Easy Terms'. As soon as she agrees to give away one of her twins the Narrator describes it as a 'reckoning' and the phrase 'a debt is a debt, and must be paid' is repeated through the play.



**Reckoning** – calculating the total or paying a bill.

The twins' death is the price that Mrs Johnstone and Mrs Lyons have to pay for the secret deal they make about separating them, and Linda has to pay the price for loving them both by losing them both.

## Escape

Despite the inevitability of the tragic end of *Blood Brothers* the theme of escape is present in places. Mrs Johnstone justifies giving away one of her twins by imagining that she is allowing him to escape from the grinding poverty of her life because he 'wouldn't have to worry where his next meal is coming from'. Mrs Johnstone dreams of escaping to somewhere where she can 'start all over again' and this comes true, to a certain extent, when they move to Skelmersdale at the end of Act I. Linda's affair with Edward is seen as her trying to escape from her hard life as Mickey's wife. The Narrator says:

*There's a girl inside the woman  
Who's waiting to get free  
She's washed a million dishes  
She's always making tea.*

But he also warns there is a 'price' for 'letting the young girl out' as her affair with Edward leads to Mickey coming after him with his gun.

## Motherhood

The contrasting characters of Mrs Johnstone and Mrs Lyons raise the theme of motherhood. Mrs Johnstone has a large chaotic brood and can't offer them financial security, the most basic of material possessions or control them all, but does say she 'loves the bones of every one of them'. While Mickey's life chances are nothing compared to Edward's he does seem to enjoy a warm relationship with his mother; Edward comments 'she's fabulous your ma'. When Mickey and Linda need somewhere to live after they're married Mrs Johnstone does not hesitate to let them stay with her.

While Mrs Lyons is able to offer Edward 'a bike with both wheels on' and dreams of caring for a child, in reality there is not the same closeness between them as there is between Mrs Johnstone and Mickey. She says to Mrs Johnstone 'I never made him mine' and Edward seems naturally drawn to the Johnstones.


While nurture might seem to win over nature when it comes to education and job opportunities, the link between the biological mother and her biological child is presented as stronger than the one between the adoptive mother and child. Or could it be that the working-class family is being presented as closer than the middle-class one?

# Ideas and Messages\_

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## **Fairness of opportunity**

The twins' story illustrates the ways in which the working class are deprived of the same choices and chances that the middle class enjoy. Russell highlights the differences in their experiences of education, the way they are treated by the police and the job opportunities that are available, or not available, to them.



The **ideas and messages** of the play are the meanings that are inherent in the story, the significance or purpose of the play to the author, readers and audiences.

The Narrator's question to the audience at the end - about whether it is superstition or class that is to blame - is designed to draw our attention to the different opportunities that different class backgrounds have offered them, and it is clear from Mickey's anguished final cry 'I could have been him!' that Mickey blames his environment.

## **Crime and punishment**

Mickey, as a working-class boy, is shown to be far more vulnerable to harsher treatment by the police, the courts and the penal system, than Edward. Mickey's desperation for money when he is unemployed is something that Edward, a middle-class boy, never experiences and so the temptation towards criminal behaviour is something that only the working-class twin even encounters.

## **Violence**

Violence permeates both families in the play and runs as a threatening undercurrent from the very beginning. This is presented through the use of the guns and also the knives. It is not just Sammy who uses violence but also Mrs Lyons, who hits Edward when he is a small boy and then attacks Mrs Johnstone with a knife when the boys are teenagers. Although Mickey kills Edward, the police then kill Mickey, which means that the fatal violence at the end is enacted by both the working-class man and figures in authority. The violent acts and violent ends cut across the class barriers both in those who perpetrate them and those who are the victims.

# The Writer's Use of Language

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## **Spoken language**

Russell sees working with spoken language as something that strongly references working-class culture. He said in an interview that 'most of the working class culture, conventions, codes of behaviour have been carried and passed on orally, whereas middle class culture is largely a literary culture'. His background in folk music gave him a tradition to draw on that he says used a different language to 'high art', and writing plays allowed him to tell stories in this 'folk and street' language.

His use of the Liverpool dialect and accent was also a conscious decision and he has said that before he and another playwright, Alan Bleasdale, started writing plays in this accent 'the only thing you could do in Liverpool was be funny'. (*Willy Russell and His Plays*, by John Gill, 1996)

## **Repetition of key phrases in the songs - 'bogey man' 'dancin' '**

Repetition of key phrases, especially in the songs, works to give the play a strong structure as their appearances and reappearances link all the different episodes in the story together to emphasise the inevitable progression towards the tragic end.

Dancing is a phrase that appears frequently in the happier parts of the story. The superstitions, the bogey man and the devil are repeated by the Narrator to signal key points of tension and signal advancing tragedy.

## **Differences in vocabulary by different classes**

Different vocabulary and accents are used to signify the different classes. This is used for comic effect when Mickey and Edward are seven and Edward appears to trade his sweets for swear words, and later when Edward is able to draw on his wider vocabulary and eloquence when talking about girls. It is also used to make more serious points about the unfairness of the system in the way the policeman talks to the two families and the way that the terrible consequences of unemployment for the working-class are disguised in 'Sign Of The Times'.

## **Economic terms (debt and the price paid for actions)**


The metaphor of debt and a 'price being paid' is used throughout the play to stand for the consequences that Mrs Johnstone and Mrs Lyons, Mickey, Edward and Linda will all have to face due to the twins being 'secretly parted'. The image of a life overshadowed by debt is a pertinent image for the impending tragedy as it highlights the difference in the financial circumstances of the two boys.



# Form


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*Blood Brothers* draws on the conventions of different genres: tragedy; epic; musical. Its form was also influenced by the theatre for which it was written, *The Everyman*, which had a particular style.



**Form:** the form of the play is the way that it is made rather than what it is about. Form includes techniques and genre conventions.

## Tragedy




**Tragedy** – a play that ends in disaster and misfortune. Traditionally it was concerned with those in positions of power such as gods and kings, but tragedies can also deal with the lives of ordinary people. Tragedies are supposed to make the audience feel pity and fear. They can also be understood to be a form of protest as they create anger against whatever has created the disaster. Tragedies are often constructed around a hero or heroine whose mistake or error or weakness creates the circumstances that lead to their tragic downfall or end.

*Blood Brothers* uses some of the conventions of a tragedy. It ends in the calamitous deaths of the twins and draws on the emotions of the audience. Mickey at the very end, just before his final line, is '*uncontrollable with rage*' which conveys anger at the circumstances that have led to that point.

Where *Blood Brothers* differs from a traditional tragedy is that there is no one clear tragic hero and no one flaw that leads to the tragic end. Mrs Johnstone's lack of control over her own children and spending could be said to lead to the tragedy; Mrs Lyons' desperation for a child and her continuing desperation to prevent Edward from slipping away could be the cause; Linda's love for both brothers contributed to the end; or the class system, Mickey's involvement in crime and dependence on drugs; all these could be the weaknesses that lead to the twins both dying.

## Epic theatre




**Epic theatre** originated in Germany in the 1920s and is most famously linked to the playwright Bertolt Brecht. Brecht said that epic theatre should appeal 'less to the spectator's feelings than to his reason'. Epic theatre plays tended to have a clear political or social message and often invited judgment through the use of a chorus or a narrator. The narratives moved away from the **unities** of time and place and were instead a series of episodes.

**Unities** refer to a narrative covering one main plot (unity of action), being set on a single day (unity of time) and being in just one place (unity of place).

*Blood Brothers* shares as many conventions of epic theatre as it does tragedy. The narrator addresses the audience and directly invites our judgment both at the beginning and the end of the play. There is a political theme about equality of opportunity and it does not conform to the unities.

## Musical



**Musical theatre** presents a plot or narrative through dialogue, songs and music. The music is popular or modern music rather than operatic. The musical's history can be traced through light, comic or ballad opera as well as vaudeville and English music hall theatre. Historically the content was comic or satirical rather than serious or tragic. These genres are all popular rather than high-art entertainments.

Russell's use of the musical genre to tell the story of *Blood Brothers* is interesting because it draws on a popular form rather than an elite one to tell a story about class.

### **The Everyman style**


Russell describes the Everyman style as being 'more cinematic than theatrical'; it used lots of short scenes and moved locations and times easily and fluidly. Everyman plays could have lots of characters because the ensemble cast would double up on parts. The staging tended to be very simple but effective; for example, using chairs to form a bus and then a classroom. In the production notes to the Samuel French publication of the play (London: Samuel French, 1985 ISBN 0-573-08064-X) it instructs that the changes between different places and time spans should be 'indicated by lighting changes, with the minimum of properties and furniture'. Russell returns to this form of drama when writing *Blood Brothers* even though he had not written in this style for many years.

# Structure

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## Two acts

The play is organised into two acts. Act I takes place in Liverpool and Act II takes place in Skelmersdale.



**Structure:** the structure of a text is the way that the different parts of the story relate to each other; for example, the order in which the story is told or that characters or events might contrast.

## **Prologue and inevitable end**

The prologue introduces the story and tells us the tragic end.

This provides an overall structure for the story as the events that unfold are all going to lead to this inevitable end. The repeated references to superstitions, the bogey man, the devil, and a price needing to be paid serve to foreshadow, and hold all the events together that are progressing towards, the slaying of the twins.

## **Episodic structure**

The action of the play stretches across approximately 25 years, starting in the 1950s and finishing in the late 1970s. The episodes are not evenly spaced but jump between key points. We start around the twins' birth and then move to when they are seven years old, fourteen years old and then eighteen years old before finishing when they are around twenty five (Mickey serves less than seven years getting out early for 'good behaviour' but it is unclear how much time passes between him coming out of prison, getting a job, moving house and then seeing Edward and Linda together). The gaps of seven years provide some regular structure but it is not adhered to consistently as we see them at eighteen. It says in the Samuel French edition of *Blood Brothers* that 'the whole play should flow along easily and smoothly, with no cumbersome scene changes' (London: Samuel French, 1985 ISBN 0-573-08064-X) and the quick episodes and large gaps in time provide a fast-paced and tense narrative.

## **Contrasts**


The play is structured to contrast the two lives of the twins. The Johnstone and Lyons families and homes are contrasted, the twins' use of language is contrasted, the policeman's approach to the families is contrasted and the twins' differing educational experiences are contrasted. These pairings are not quite as strong in the later episodes of the play as the focus is on Mickey's life and the way its disintegration leads to the tragic end.

# Contexts

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## Willy Russell

Willy Russell was born in 1947 into a working-class family in Liverpool. He left school at sixteen and worked as a hairdresser, then in a factory as well as writing and singing folk songs. His wife, who he married in 1969, was from a middle-class family and they encouraged him to return to education and he trained to be a drama teacher. He has written for radio, television and the stage, plays and musicals, and has written poems, songs and a novel.




**Contexts** - the contexts of the play are the external circumstances that have influenced the play.

Useful detailed information about Willy Russell can be found at: <http://www.willyrussell.com/>

## Class

Russell grew up in the post-war years that saw great upward mobility due to the need for more **white-collar** and managerial workers. As more people from working-class backgrounds got jobs in the media and the arts there was a greater focus on working-class issues and stories. By 1983, when Russell wrote *Blood Brothers*, Margaret Thatcher had been prime minister for four years and many people felt that the progress that had been made by the working class was being eroded.



**White collar** – an office worker, rather than blue collar, which means a factory or manual worker.


Russell has said ‘I don’t write specifically about the working class, I write about characters who come from it’ (Willy Russell, *Willy Russell and His Plays*, p. 26) and although he denies being self-consciously concerned with class he did say that his ‘sympathies are inevitably with a group of people, a section of society who’ve drawn the short straw’.

## Wider reading

- BBC article on social mobility: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-14721315>
- A philosophical look at class: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-12279627>
- What about class divisions today? Have a look at this recent BBC research project into class and see if it changes your mind: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-22000973>
- For opinions on Margaret Thatcher see: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-22073484>
- ‘What is Thatcherism?’ on BBC news site: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-22079683>

## Folk music


Russell sees his years in the folk-song movement as crucial to his development as a writer. He sees folk music as unapologetically working class, saying that he found ‘sustenance ... in discovering the whole body of music that was nothing to do with high art and yet was enriching’ (*Willy Russell and His Plays*, p. 8). Folk songs find drama in **ballads** about ordinary people and folk songs also draw heavily on different regional dialects. Russell cites Stan Kelly’s song, ‘Liverpool Lullaby’ as belonging to this tradition ‘because it was a self-conscious socialist movement working in the language of working people’ (*Willy Russell and His Plays*, p. 3). Russell sees the theatre as having a lot in common with folk music; he didn’t see it as high art and literary, he saw it as ‘a sprawling old circus, an old tent, a market place, a flea-pit’, as **Rabelaisian** (*Willy Russell and His Plays*, p. 41).



**Ballad** – a song that tells a story.

**Rabelaisian** – from the name Francois Rabelais, a French Renaissance writer, it means work that is comic, exaggerated and over the top and rude.

## Drama



**Kitchen-sink drama** – plays which centred on working-class life; rather than being set in middle-class drawing rooms they were more likely to be set in a working-class kitchen.

**Angry Young Man** – a term used to describe a slight stereotype of a man in the 1950s who was unhappy with the established ways of doing things.

David Edgar writes that theatre plays in the 1950s were ‘that of the drawing room or indeed the country house, the generic form the light social comedy or the whodunnit’.

This changed in the 1960s due to ‘the abolition of stage censorship’, ‘the expansion of state subsidies to small-scale theatre’ which led to ‘the explosion of alternative theatre spaces’. Without these three factors the plays that Russell saw, was inspired by and then wrote, would not have existed.

The **Kitchen Sink** dramas that either featured or were written by an **Angry Young Man** of the 1950s, typified by John Osborne’s *Look back in Anger* (1957), paved the way for the working-class dramas of the 1970s. Seeing John McGrath’s play *Unruly Elements* was a turning point for Russell because he saw that plays in the Liverpool idiom about working-class lives could be produced for the theatre.

## Key Term Glossary\_

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<b>accent</b>	The way that words are pronounced. Can be dependent on area, social group or age.
<b>air pistol</b>	A weapon that shoots a pellet using compressed air
<b>Angry Young Man</b>	A term used to describe a slight stereotype of a man in the 1950s who was unhappy with the established ways of doing things
<b>archaic</b>	Old-fashioned
<b>auditorium</b>	The area of the theatre where the audience sits
<b>ballad</b>	A song that tells a story
<b>blasphemous</b>	To use language in a way that is disrespectful towards gods or religion
<b>blood brothers</b>	Blood brothers feature in many traditional tales from across the world. Blood is used, usually in a ceremony, to symbolise a permanent bond of loyalty between men.
<b>blue collar</b>	A factory or manual worker
<b>bogey man</b>	A bogey is an evil or mischievous spirit, a bogey man is an imaginary creature that comes to take away naughty children
<b>bohemian</b>	Unconventional or different from normal behaviour
<b>bromide</b>	A drug that works as sedative, calms people or puts them to sleep
<b>central aisle</b>	The passageway between the audience's seats that runs up the centre of the auditorium
<b>characterisation</b>	The ways in which the traits of the characters are conveyed to the readers or audience
<b>chorus</b>	A chorus (a group of singers or actors) was an essential part of Ancient Greek theatre. In some plays they would comment on the action; in others they might take part in the action or they could perform the songs. Where an individual actor performs as the chorus they can be called the choric or choral character.
<b>class</b>	A section of society whose members share the same social and economic position
<b>cliché</b>	An expression that has been overused so that it has lost its original impact
<b>context</b>	The external circumstances that have influenced the play
<b>cross-rhyme</b>	A rhyming pattern where every other line rhymes (e.g. cat/dog/bat/frog). Notated as abab in a rhyme scheme
<b>debt</b>	An amount of money or an obligation that has to be paid or performed
<b>decimalisation</b>	Changing of money system to one based on tens
<b>dialect</b>	A particular type of language spoken in a certain area
<b>dole</b>	Informal term for unemployment benefit

<b>dramatic irony</b>	When the audience understands the importance or meaning of something that happens or is said but the characters do not
<b>dumb show</b>	A mime that was used to show the audience the main action of the play before it started
<b>ellipsis</b>	The omission (leaving out) of one or more words for effect. Can be marked by three points (...)
<b>ensemble style</b>	Where different members of the cast would play many parts
<b>entitlement</b>	The right to have or do something
<b>epic theatre</b>	Epic theatre originated in Germany in the 1920s and is most famously linked to the playwright Bertolt Brecht. Brecht said that epic theatre should appeal 'less to the spectator's feelings than to his reason'. Epic theatre plays tended to have a clear political or social message and often invited judgment through the use of a chorus or a narrator. The narratives moved away from the unities of time and place and were instead a series of episodes.
<b>euphemism</b>	A word or phrase used instead of an offensive, rude or hurtful one
<b>fate</b>	The belief that the course of events and their ending are inevitable or predetermined
<b>foreshadows</b>	Hints at and prepares the audience for an event later in the play
<b>form</b>	The way that a text is made rather than what it is about. Form includes techniques and genre conventions.
<b>gynaecologist</b>	A doctor who specialises in treating women
<b>hypocrite</b>	Someone who pretends to be something they're not
<b>ideas and messages (of the play)</b>	The meanings that are inherent in the story; the significance or purpose of the play to the author, readers and audiences
<b>kitchen-sink drama</b>	Plays which centred on working-class life; rather than being set in middle-class drawing rooms they were more likely to be set in a working-class kitchen
<b>layin' people off</b>	When workers are made redundant, usually because the employer can't afford to keep them
<b>love triangle</b>	A romantic relationship involving three people; this could be two rivals for the love of the other, but usually implies that there is some kind of relationship (not necessarily all of them romantic) between all three people
<b>magnesium</b>	A flammable metal
<b>Mills and Boon</b>	Mills and Boon is a publisher of romantic novels. They have a reputation for being formulaic and overblown.
<b>mime</b>	Acting without words
<b>musical theatre</b>	Presents a plot or narrative through dialogue, songs and music. The music is popular or modern music rather than operatic.
<b>myth/mythical</b>	A story that is not true but which contains a psychological truth
<b>narrator</b>	The person whose voice tells the story

<b>nature versus nurture</b>	The question of which is more significant - an individual's innate or natural qualities or abilities (nature) or the external opportunities or circumstances (nurture) of their experience
<b>never never</b>	An informal term for hire purchase agreements when you pay for something you've bought by making small, frequent payments (usually weekly or monthly)
<b>Oxbridge</b>	A portmanteau word that stands for Oxford University and Cambridge University
<b>plot</b>	The events that make up the storyline of the play
<b>portmanteau word</b>	A word made by joining together the beginning and ends of two different words
<b>precursor</b>	Something that comes before to announce or prepare for what follows
<b>premonition</b>	A sign that something, usually bad, is going to happen
<b>Rabelaisian</b>	From the name Francois Rabelais, a French Renaissance writer, it means work that is comic, exaggerated and over the top and rude
<b>reckoning</b>	Calculating the total or paying a bill
<b>rhyming couplet</b>	Two adjoining lines that rhyme (e.g. cat/sat)
<b>scapegoating</b>	Making someone else take the blame for something they didn't do
<b>secondary modern school</b>	Where students who don't pass the 11+ go instead of a grammar school
<b>setting</b>	The times and places in which the story takes place
<b>split stage/split scene</b>	Two different scenes are presented at the same time on the same stage. Attention switches between the two scenes as their lines are interspersed.
<b>structure</b>	The structure of a text is the way that the different parts of the story relate to each other; for example, the order in which the story is told or that characters or events might contrast
<b>superstition</b>	An irrational belief based on things such as omens or charms or luck
<b>suspended</b>	To be temporarily excluded from school, probably for a few days
<b>symbol</b>	An object that stands for something else
<b>taboo language</b>	Words that are inappropriate for certain contexts - in this case swearing in front of a teacher at school
<b>tilt my hat</b>	To wear your hat slightly off-centre, to be different and not deferential and disrespectful. It implies a jauntiness that is cheeky.
<b>tragedy</b>	A play that ends in disaster and misfortune. Traditionally it was concerned with those in positions of power such as gods and kings, but tragedies can also deal with the lives of ordinary people. Tragedies are supposed to make the audience feel pity and fear. They can also be understood to be a form of protest as they create anger against whatever has created the disaster. Tragedies are often constructed around a hero or heroine whose mistake or error or weakness creates the circumstances that lead to their tragic downfall or end.



<b>tragic flaw</b>	A defect or fault within the character of a hero or heroine that leads to their failure or disastrous end
<b>unities</b>	Refer to a narrative covering one main plot (unity of action), being set on a single day (unity of time) and being in just one place (unity of place)
<b>white collar</b>	An office worker

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