

Practically exploring play texts: *Blood Brothers, Act 1*

Rhianna Elsdon

KS3

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Introduction

This scheme explores Act 1 of the popular play text *Blood Brothers* as a stimulus. The scheme offers ideas on how to work with play scripts practically, with both on- and off-text ideas and activities. The activities outlined develop an understanding of the characters, plot and themes for the opening act. It incorporates ideas for exploring the whole text, if that is your intention.

The scheme is aimed at KS3, with Year 9 as a potential year group undertaking the activities. Many exam specifications at GCSE level in English and Drama use *Blood Brothers* as a text, and some of the activities could be adapted for use at KS4. By exploring just the opening act it could work as a parallel introduction with lessons in English. Questions for reflection and plenaries are intended to develop students' abilities in Drama primarily, but also in English.

Learning objectives

By the end of this scheme all students will:

- ▶ Have developed their understanding of how to develop characterisation and realise scenes according to a writer's intentions
- ▶ Have developed their ability to work in groups to develop character and perform scenes from a text
- ▶ Have explored the actor-audience relationship
- ▶ Have explored status in performance
- ▶ Have developed their ability to work effectively with scripts, including how to deconstruct meaning and interpret a writer's craft
- ▶ Have used a variety of rehearsal techniques and exploratory strategies to interpret characters, themes and plot within a play text
- ▶ Have explored the range of themes in the text practically and then through reflective question and answer opportunities.

By the end of this scheme some students will:

- ▶ Have developed their ability to direct others
- ▶ Have developed their creative writing skills and ability to write in-role.

Lesson 1: Developing an understanding of status in performance and its relevance to the play *Blood Brothers*

Learning objectives

By the end of this lesson students will have learnt:

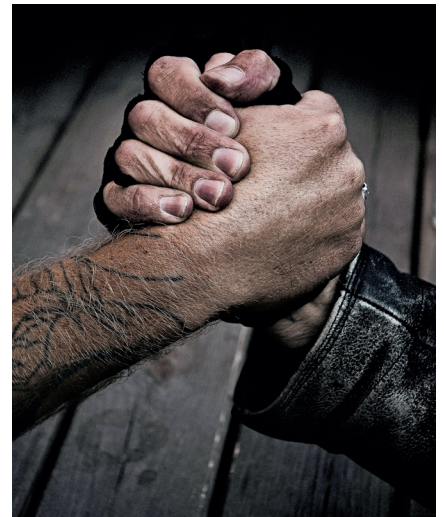
- ▶ How to work collaboratively with others in discussion and practical work
- ▶ How to develop characterisation skills – aural and physical
- ▶ How to communicate meaning/messages to an audience
- ▶ How to use exploratory strategies to develop understanding
- ▶ How status might be shown on stage.

Starter (10 mins)

Consider and be ready to justify the following questions related to status:

- ▶ What does the word status mean?
- ▶ What gives a person status?
- ▶ Who has the greater status in the UK, HM The Queen or the Prime Minister?
- ▶ Who has the greatest status in the world?
- ▶ How do we show status in performance?

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Resources

Blood Brothers play text (the edition used for page references in this scheme is published by Bloomsbury, 2016).

Key words such as posture, gesture, body language, eye contact, proxemics, use of voice – words as well such as tone and volume.

As a practical, turn the following into still images aiming to show status:

- ▶ Teacher and student
- ▶ Bully and victim.

Main activity

The following are things that happen within the play. Without knowing anything more at this time, in groups/pairs create the following scenes, paying close attention to status and using the questions to help you generate the material:

Two boys meet in a park, one is from a high status, wealthy family, the other is not. They are aged 7 and find out they have a birthday on the same day. What do they say? How can you show a difference in status in a realistic way?

The boy from the lower status family calls round the other boy's house to see if he will come out and play. He is met at the door by the mother. What is her reaction? Is she pleased that her son has a friend? What is her son's reaction as a result of any of her actions/reactions? What is the visiting boy like in the situation?

The same two boys are now aged 13 and they are throwing stones at windows when the police come. The lower status boy is well-known to the police. What happens when the police arrive? Which one was encouraging the throwing of stones? What is the reaction of the police to the boys – is it fair and equal?

Plenary

The devised scenes are shown to the whole class and are evaluated in terms of the successes in showing status realistically. Key words are used within the peer evaluation.

To finish the lesson, ask students to consider what they understand by the term 'blood brother'? What is its meaning/how do people become blood brothers? Why would someone choose to do this?

Lesson 2: Exploring the opening and its use of narration to communicate themes and narrative

Learning objectives

By the end of these lessons students will have learnt:

- ▶ How to work collaboratively with others in discussion and practical work
- ▶ How to develop characterisation skills – aural and physical
- ▶ How to communicate meaning/messages to an audience, including through use of narrator/direct address
- ▶ How to use exploratory strategies to develop understanding
- ▶ How the writer affects and establishes mood and atmosphere through the writing and staging.

Starter

Read the opening speech by the narrator. What information are we told about the events that will unfold in the story? How do we know it will be a tragedy?

Why might a writer choose to tell us the ending before we see it? What is the effect of a story told to us in this way?

Rather than have a narrator tell us the information that he does in the opening, how else might we have been given this information? What other creative approaches can you think of for staging this moment?

What mood/atmosphere does the narrator create based on what he has written and the style of writing?

When and where do you think the play is set and how is this made clearer/indicated within the writing?

Now read Mrs Johnstone's first lines. Why are they initially performed with her back to the audience as the stage directions suggest?

Read her outline of how her life has gone (the song) through to the entrance of the Milkman.

Discuss what information is given to us. What are the difficulties she has faced?

Main activity

Many times in performance this sequence is performed with the audience in some way seeing the action Mrs Johnstone describes/sings about.

In groups of 5, stage her 'song' as narration with someone reading as Mrs Johnstone and add movement from the rest of the group.

Ask students to look for surprises within this exercise, i.e. a teacher may show status over a student by helping/teaching, rather than telling them off, which will often be the still image students form.

Extension

Bring the still image to life for 10 seconds adding dialogue; this can either reinforce the status that is shown physically or in some way juxtapose it. Consider not just the lines spoken, but also, crucially, the delivery and key words related to this already discussed in the opening.

Extension

For higher ability students, ask them to stage it in a way that uses non-naturalism or stylised action. This could also include a Greek Chorus-styled layering and repetition of key words for example.

Groups could also as an extension create some additional dialogue, perhaps by her husband, or the person playing her younger self.

Perform and peer-evaluate reflecting on how successful groups have been in communicating themes and character, as well as the backstory to the play.

Plenary

Read the section through until Mrs Johnstone is cleaning in Mrs Lyons' house.

How is Mrs Johnstone's lower status to Mrs Lyons clearly communicated to us in the opening three pages?

Lessons 3 and 4: Exploring the dilemma of Mrs Johnstone

Learning objectives

By the end of these lessons students will have learnt:

- ▶ How to work collaboratively with others in discussion and practical work
- ▶ How to develop characterisation skills – aural and physical
- ▶ How to communicate meaning/messages to an audience
- ▶ How to use exploratory strategies to develop understanding
- ▶ How the writer foreshadows events and themes
- ▶ How to write in role to deepen understanding of characterisation and narratives.

Read from p. 7 onwards where Mrs Johnstone is cleaning Mrs Lyons' house and the audience learns that Mrs Lyons can't have children, and Mrs Johnstone has another on the way. Read up to p. 13 where the agreement is signed whereby Mrs Johnstone has agreed to 'sell' one of her unborn twins to Mrs Lyons.

- ▶ What is your reaction to the suggestion?
- ▶ Why does Mrs Johnstone even consider it?
- ▶ Why does Mrs Lyons even consider suggesting it might be appropriate?
- ▶ What comes through in terms of status in this scene?
- ▶ For whom do you have sympathy, if either?

Look at the moment with the shoes on the table. It is a superstition.

- ▶ What is a superstition?
- ▶ What are other superstitions to do with good and bad luck?
- ▶ Do you believe in superstitions?
- ▶ Why does the writer put in this moment of action?

Starter activity

In groups, create a mime for a good and a bad luck superstition; maybe it is one your family believes in, but no one else does? Like a game of charades, the audience has to guess which ones you have chosen by the mime – there are no objects or words allowed.

Main activity

Take the text from p. 10:

Mrs Lyons: Give one to me.

Mrs Johnstone: What?

Mrs Lyons: Give one of them to me.

Mrs Johnstone: Give one to you?

Mrs Lyons: Yes ... yes.

Once the lines have been spoken, your group is to form a conscience alley or do an 'angel and devil' sequence. In either case, the use of the form is to reveal all the internal dilemmas that Mrs Johnstone is going through.

Rehearse and show to the class.

Plenary

Evaluate the use of the exploratory techniques and forms added into the existing scene. How did they develop understanding of key themes and what depth in characterisation has been revealed? How could these explorations be used by an actor to inform the portrayal of the role?

Now that you know a bit more about both characters, which house would you rather grow up in? Who would you want as your 'mother'? Can you justify Mrs Johnstone's actions? Do you think giving up a child for adoption is a good thing in society as a whole?

With extended reading it could be that this is set for homework so as to free lessons for exploration. You could also choose to outline, using perhaps a PowerPoint, the key events rather than reading large sections.

Some other 'bad luck' superstitions are mentioned by the narrator on p. 8.

For higher level, ask students to fully research the significance of the superstition which has more than one historical connection.

This activity could extend across the two lessons and lines could be learnt for homework.

Extension

Write a monologue from the point of view of Mrs Johnstone. This makes clear her thoughts reflecting on what Mrs Lyons has said. Re-perform the scene with the conscience alley/angel and devil and then all the group freeze and one of the monologues is read by the person playing Mrs Johnstone.

Extension

Complete cross cutting to show the different ideas of the two women. Write a monologue for each, then in pairs perform the scene, but turn to the audience at the pivotal moment and mark the moment with the monologues being read. Cross cut back and forth at rehearsed moments that show the contrasts in the monologues, the emotions, and highlight the dilemmas and status of each character.

With these questions, sensitivity is needed as they may well raise relevant issues for students.

Lessons 4 and 5: Exploring the sacking of Mrs Johnstone using thought tracking to deepen understanding

Learning objectives

By the end of these lessons students will have learnt:

- ▶ How to work collaboratively with others in discussion and practical work
- ▶ How to develop characterisation skills – aural and physical
- ▶ How to communicate meaning/messages to an audience
- ▶ How to use exploratory strategies to develop understanding and performance skills – thought tracking.

Starter

Complete an improvisation with Mrs Johnstone returning home with her baby. She has given the other one away to Mrs Lyons as she agreed to do. Her other children were expecting twins to be coming back into their home.

What might Mrs Johnstone do/say in this situation? Improvise a scene of no more than 30 seconds.

Read the section with Mr Lyons, Mrs Lyons and Mrs Johnstone as they all fuss over the baby that Mrs Lyons is now pretending is hers; see pp. 16-17 up to the point where Mrs Lyons suggests to her husband that she will sack Mrs Johnstone for being poor at her work.

Main activity

In groups of 6 initially, stage the scene. Add to it thought tracking which is spoken by the additional members of the group.

Ask students to try to write thoughts that reveal true motivations and the things going on in the characters' minds that might not be the same as those things they are saying. For example, what would Mr Lyons be thinking in response to his wife's actions? For Mrs Lyons, what is at the heart of her reasons for getting rid of Mrs Johnstone from the house? What does she fear?

This is then shown to the class, with everyone at this stage still having scripts in their hands.

Discuss as a class which thoughts seemed especially effective.

How can this exploratory rehearsal technique help as we seek to stage the real scene without any thought tracking being heard by the audience?

Then in groups of 3, rehearse the scene as it is written using the thought tracking to help inform acting choices. Look to deliver effective characterisation by concentrating on physicality and use of voice.

In the second lesson, perform the piece and evaluate and reflect back again on how thought tracking has helped in developing characterisation and communicating the writer's intentions.

Plenary

What are your opinions now of the two central 'mothers'? Do you feel any sympathy for either? In what way is each 'mother' being both 'strong' and 'weak'? What were the difficulties in staging the scene for an audience? Are there any further stage directions you would have liked from the writer to help you interpret the scene and how to stage it?

Choose one or two to watch and discuss the use of dialogue and characterisation; was it realistic? How might the realism be improved?

If doing this with GCSE students, instead of planning the thought tracking, it is interesting to improvise the activity to see what thoughts spontaneously come out.

Learning lines could be set as a homework.

Extension

Perhaps use a student in role as a director for the staging of the work. Afterwards, ask the whole group to reflect what it is like to work as/with a director compared to working as actors without someone in this role.

For GCSE Drama students, ask them also to reflect on the role and function of a director and to consider the tensions/positives this can bring within a performance project.

Lesson 6: Exploring nature versus nurture and social influence in *Blood Brothers* through still images

Learning objectives

By the end of these lessons students will have learnt:

- ▶ How to work collaboratively with others in discussion and practical work
- ▶ How to develop characterisation skills – aural and physical
- ▶ How to communicate meaning/messages to an audience – nature versus nurture
- ▶ How to use exploratory strategies to develop understanding and performance skills – cross cutting.

Starter

Before reading, improvise the moment where Mrs Lyons sacks Mrs Johnstone.

What do you think each will say or do?

Watch one and discuss how realistic the interpretation is.

Read pp. 18-19. What is revealed in terms of status and money in this extract?

Did they say and do the things you expected?

Main activity

Time has passed. The boys Mickey – with Mrs Johnstone, and Edward/Eddie – with Mr and Mrs Lyons, are now aged 7 and have no idea of the other's existence.

In groups of 5, complete a photo scrapbook of 6 still images showing how you think their lives have been going for either Edward or Mickey in their very different homes. Come up with titles for the images.

Show these to the class and peer-evaluate the use of levels, proxemics, and physicality, including eye contact, posture and gesture. Is their meaning clear, or could it be clearer? Suggest improvements as well as complimenting groups for their work.

Turn one of your still images into a scene with action and speech. It must last at least one minute.

Match up groups so that those doing a scene for Eddie are matched with those doing a scene for Mickey. These big groups need to cross-cut back and forth and will show this to the class using a split stage. Try to think about really interesting points to pause the action and cross-cut.

Watch these cross-cut performances on split stages. What does this do in terms of tension and contrasts? What does this use of presentation highlight or make clearer?

Plenary

The play is looking at nature versus nurture as a theme. What do you know about this? For homework look up some basic facts and then apply this to *Blood Brothers*. What do you think the writer is trying to say about nature versus nurture?

How might money and social status have had an impact upon the lives of the separated twins?

Lesson 7: Exploring the moment of the separated twins Mickey and Eddie meeting and becoming friends, then Blood Brothers

Learning objectives

By the end of these lessons students will have learnt:

- ▶ How to work collaboratively with others in discussion and practical work
- ▶ How to develop characterisation skills – aural and physical.

Read pp. 22-25 where Mickey and Eddie meet and become Blood Brothers.

How realistic is the writing in your opinion?

In pairs, work on just the very first part with the stage directions ‘Bored and petulant Mickey’ through to ‘Mickey: (suspiciously) Hello.’

Through physicality, as well as voice, create tension in this first meeting. The audience should not know, as the action unfolds, how this is going to go; we shouldn’t immediately believe they are going to become friends or that they are even going to speak.

Rehearse and show – and peer-evaluate. Who has been especially successful in drawing the audience in through the well-paced, tense opening moments of this scene?

Main activity

Rehearse the moment (pp. 24-25) they become Blood Brothers, from ‘Mickey: Ey ... we were born on the same day ...’ through to ‘Edward: And share ...’.

Then create a scene that fast forwards to home that night for one of the boys. What is the mothers’ reaction? Do they instantly realise who the other boy is that their son has met? Do they overreact? If so, in what way?

Rehearse and then show. Try to use dialogue appropriate to the characters that is based on all the activities and reading you have done so far.

Plenary

Why would these two very different boys become friends? What might be their motivations?

Lessons 8 and 9: Bringing key moments to life to conclude the exploration of Act 1

Learning objectives

By the end of these lessons students will have learnt:

- ▶ How to work collaboratively with others in discussion and practical work
- ▶ How to develop characterisation skills – aural and physical
- ▶ How to communicate meaning/messages to an audience
- ▶ How to use exploratory strategies to develop understanding and performance skills – hot seating.

Read pp. 26-27 where Mrs Johnstone enters to see Mickey and Eddie playing, through to ‘Mrs Johnstone: Go home before the bogey man gets y ...’.

Does her reaction surprise you?

What do you think Mickey and Eddie make of her reaction?

Hot seating

Students take it in turns to play characters up to this point in the play.

- ▶ Mickey
- ▶ Edward
- ▶ Mrs Johnstone
- ▶ Mrs Lyons
- ▶ Mr Lyons.

In role, students respond as the characters whilst their partner asks them questions. Alternatively, this could be done as a whole class exercise with all students asking questions of one person who sits at the front being in role as one of the characters.

After these are done, in groups of 5 students complete a role on the wall for a character who has been hot seated (except for Mr Lyons). On the outside of the outline they write how the person appears to others, key phrases the person has said, what others would think of them based on things people know. Inside the

Extension

Maybe ask some pairs to develop through improvisation the scene not going the way it does; what if the boys don’t become friends because there are too many differences between them?

outline is how the person really is – the things they try and hide from others, their vulnerabilities, maybe their hopes and fears; again quotes can be used for this.

These are then shared with the whole class and any differences in opinion can be discussed.

Once again – students consider how doing this and hot seating might help an actor preparing to play one of the roles and also how it has developed their own understanding of the characters.

Main activity

To bring the analysis and exploration of Act 1 to a close, groups are given different key moments through to the act's conclusion.

One group performs the section just read with Mrs Johnstone, Mickey, Edward and Sammy.

Others can perform the following sections:

- ▶ pp. 28-29, Mickey calls round for Edward, 'Mrs Lyons goes to answer the door' through to 'Oh my son ... my beautiful son'.
- ▶ p. 33, Mickey again tries to get Edward to come out to play, this time with Linda, 'They go as if to Edward's garden' through to 'Mickey, Edward and Linda exit'.
- ▶ pp. 36-37, 'Mickey, Eddie and Linda are standing in line' through to 'The three children exit'.
- ▶ pp. 37-38, 'The Policeman goes to confront Mrs Johnstone' through to the end of Mrs Johnstone's song.
- ▶ p. 38, 'The Policeman confronting Mrs Lyons' through to 'Edward leaves his home'.
- ▶ pp. 38-39, 'Edward knocks at the door' through to 'Edward: Goodbye'.
- ▶ p. 39, 'Mrs Lyons: Well, Edward ...' through to 'Mrs Lyons forces a smile'.
- ▶ p. 40, 'Mickey rings the doorbell' through to 'Mickey wanders away...'

The sections are of differing lengths and therefore can be given to support different abilities, however, some sections are long and could be cut in half to still provide ample challenge for students.

As this is the final part of the scheme the intention is for a performance 'exam' to conclude activities.

- ▶ Students could write their own success criteria to show their understanding of what they need to consider and achieve when seeking to perform as a writer intends.
- ▶ Students could take the scripts and learn and gather necessary props and maybe signature costume.
- ▶ The students should peer and self-assess, reflecting on their improvements in characterisation throughout the scheme.

The final lesson could then reflect back on key questions in terms of the meanings and themes in the Act:

- ▶ What do you think will happen next?
- ▶ What has the writer shown us about social class and status?
- ▶ Is the location and time period that the writer intended important to understanding the text or could this be set anywhere and still be relevant today?
- ▶ Which house would you rather grow up in and why?
- ▶ Who do you think is the 'better mother' and why?
- ▶ What have we learnt about the idea of nature versus nurture?