

CHARACTERS Mrs Johnstone

Five key things about Mrs Johnstone

1. Russell **focuses our attention** on Mrs Johnstone at the start of the play. She is the first character we meet and the Narrator, who introduces her, asks the **audience** to 'judge' her.
2. Mrs Johnstone is a **working-class** single mother, with very little money.
3. She is **persuaded** to give one of her unborn twins to Mrs Lyons.
4. Her life improves when she moves away from **Liverpool**.
5. She tries to **prevent the death** of Mickey and Edward.



What do we learn about Mrs Johnstone at the start of the play?

- Mrs Johnstone was married but her husband left her for a younger woman.
- She used to look '**lovelier than Marilyn Monroe**' but is now old before her time.
- She has seven children and is pregnant again – with twins.
- Mrs Johnstone has debt and money problems, which have led to her milk delivery being '**cut off**' and no food for her children.
- She has a job cleaning Mrs Lyons' '**lovely**' house.

How does Mrs Johnstone develop?

- Mrs Johnstone allows herself to be manipulated and then bribed by Mrs Lyons (Act One).
- She shows herself to be a loving mother (Acts One and Two).
- She is optimistic about her move out of Liverpool as a new start and tries to change her situation (end of Act One/start of Act Two).
- She overpowers Mrs Lyons and refuses to be bullied and bought by her again (Act Two).
- She is sympathetic towards Linda's affair with Edward (Act Two).
- Mrs Johnstone admits to her earlier crime in order to try and defuse the final scene and prevent the boys' deaths.

Five key quotations

1. Initial description of Mrs Johnstone: *'She is aged thirty but looks more like fifty.'* (Act One)
2. Mrs Johnstone is poor: *'If I'm careful we can just scrape by'* (Act One)
3. Mrs Johnstone is superstitious: *'you never put shoes on the table.'* (Act One)
4. Mrs Johnstone is loving: *'She takes him. Cradles him, letting him cry'* (Act One)
5. She struggles to accept the deaths of her sons: *'Tell me it's not true. Say it's just a story.'* (Acts One and Two)

Note it!

Russell hints that Mrs Johnstone is Catholic through her picture of the Pope. This helps explain her fear of going against something she 'swore' to do on the Bible.

Exam focus

How can I write about Mrs Johnstone at the start of the play? AO1 AO2

You can comment on how Russell presents Mrs Johnstone as unkind and unlikeable.

At the start of the play, Russell presents Mrs Johnstone as an unlikeable character. When the Narrator introduces her he calls her a 'mother so cruel', leading the audience to expect a selfish and unloving, unlikeable mother. The use of the adjective 'cruel' builds tension and expectation but is misleading and the audience comes to realise she is after all a sympathetic character.

Topic sentence refers to specific point in play

Relevant quotation is fluently embedded

Explains in more detail

Analyses Russell's choice of language

Now you try!

Finish this paragraph about Mrs Johnstone later in the play. Use one of the quotations from the list.

Russell shows Mrs Johnstone to be a loving mother when

THEMES Class

Five key things about the theme of class

1. The **Johnstones** represent the **working class**; the **Lyons** represent the **middle class**.
2. Russell makes a clear link between **class, money and power**.
3. **Different life opportunities** are shown to be available to the different classes.
4. Russell suggests people from **different classes look and behave differently**.
5. The Lyons and the Johnstones are **stereotypes of their class** so that the audience is in no doubt of their social status.

How are the different classes presented?

- Mrs Johnstone, representing the working class, struggles to pay her bills and is under threat from **'the welfare'**.
- Mrs Lyons represents the middle class. She lives in a **'lovely'** house, has a cleaner and can ask her husband for money.

What is the link between class, money and power?

- Mrs Lyons has power over Mrs Johnstone because she employs her.
- Mrs Lyons uses her wealth to persuade Mrs Johnstone to give her a baby, then twice attempts to bribe her further.
- The Lyons can afford to move to the countryside quite easily. In contrast, Mrs Johnstone cannot even afford to keep both the twins.
- Edward goes to private school, then on to university and a professional job. Mickey attends a secondary modern school and, with no further educational opportunities, ends up in a factory **'makin' up boxes'**.



How is social class associated with behaviour?

- Mrs Johnstone believes a son brought up by the Lyons wouldn't swear.
- The language used by the Policeman shows his prejudice and class-based expectations of the boys' behaviour.
- The Johnstones fulfil a stereotype of working-class people being scruffy. Mickey sings about wanting to **'wear clean clothes'** like Edward.

Five key quotations

1. The Narrator blames class for the play's **tragedy**: **'could it be what we, the English, come to know as class?'** (Act Two)
2. Mrs Johnstone on the benefits baby Edward will have: **'[He] wouldn't have to worry where his next meal was comin' from.'** (Act One)
3. Mrs Lyons thinks Edward is different from Mickey: **'like a horrible little boy, like them. But you are not like them.'** (Act One)
4. Edward's middle-class attitude towards work: **'So you're not working. Why is it so important?'** (Act Two)
5. Mickey is jealousy of Edward's life: **'I could have been him!'** (Act Two)

Note it!

Debt is a recurring theme. Mrs Johnstone cannot pay her bills and the Narrator regularly talks about a **'price being paid'**, referring to it as a metaphorical debt owed for the decisions made.

Exam focus

How does Russell explore the theme of class? AO1 AO2

You can use Mrs Johnstone's and Mrs Lyons' song to write about class.

Russell explores class through song in Act One, with Mrs Johnstone listing the things she is unable to offer a child. Her line, 'He wouldn't have to worry where his next meal was comin' from', indicates how she lacks the money to provide basic care for her children. The song highlights her poverty and the 'worry' in her life. This helps to justify her actions and gains the audience's sympathy while implying that the middle-class Mrs Lyons seems a better prospect as a mother.

Topic sentence/point

Relevant quotation embedded

Explanation of the quotation

Analysis of effect on audience

Now you try!

Finish this paragraph about the theme of class. Use one of the quotations from the list.

Russell emphasises the impact of class on the play's tragedy when the Narrator says