

Themes - Superstition

Mentioned earlier, Russell establishes Mrs Johnstone's belief in superstition when Mrs Lyons puts her new shoes on the table. Russell highlights her belief and Mrs Lyons disbelief is a significant difference between them. It perhaps suggests that superstition is more typical of the uneducated Mrs Johnstone, and is ridiculous to the more educated Mrs Lyons.

The narrator's references to superstition throughout the play ensure it remains constantly in the audience's minds. Show below examples of superstition in the play & the reasoning to why they say it.

| Superstition | Why, what does this try to show? |
|--------------|----------------------------------|
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Fate & Superstition Checker

Act One, p23: Mrs Lyons warns Mrs Johnstone about the superstition of separating twins.

Act One, p45: Mrs Lyons becomes superstitious, frightened to find a pair of shoes on her table.

Throughout Act One and Two: The narrator reminds the audience of the power of superstition.

Initially, Russell uses Mrs Johnstone's superstition to reveal Mrs Lyons' manipulation of her. Mrs Lyons warns Mrs Johnstone: *'you do know what they say about twins, secretly parted, don't you?'* (Act One, p 19)

Russell use superstition to suggest Mrs Lyon's mental fragility: at the start of the play, Mrs Lyons laughs at Mr Johnstone's superstition about putting shoes on the table; towards the end of Act One, she herself 'sweeps' a pair of shoes from a table, place there by Mrs Lyons, who has just suggested that she *'should see a doctor'*. (Act One, p35).

He also uses superstition to show Mickey's enduring influence over Edward, even after the Lyons family have moved away. Edward is upset to see a magpie which he believes brings because *'Mickey told me'* (Act One, p40).

Each subsequent reference by the Narrator then reminds the audience of the ending which they have been shown in the opening moments of the play. Russell uses superstition and the twins' certain fate to build dramatic tension as the play progresses to its inevitable, tragic conclusion *'the devil's got your number.../he's callin' your number up today/ Today/Today/TODAY!'* (Act Two p80)

Superstition or Class

At the end of the play the Narrator gives us a choice: do we blame superstition or class? Throughout the play he constantly draws our attention to superstition, as you have discovered.

Study the rest of the Narrator's speeches and songs and make a list of all the references to superstition. Remember to include the page number. Insert any thoughts/notes linked to why/ what it tries to show.

| Reference to superstition | Why, what does this try to show? |
|---------------------------|----------------------------------|
| | |

Devil and fate.

Some directors make the Narrator a dark figure who seems to hover over the action, knowing what is going to happen and almost nudging the characters towards their fate. Make a list of all the references to the devil and fate. Remember to include the page number.

| Reference to the Devil and fate. | Why, what does this try to show? |
|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| | |

Do you think Russell believes in superstition as it is mentioned throughout the play? Explain your reason for your answer.

YES NO

Superstition or class

At the end of the play, the Narrator undermines the significance of every reference to superstition in 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' (Act One, p 82).

This strongly suggests that Russell has imply used superstition and fate for dramatic purposes: to reveal character and character development, to suggest the influence of characters over each other, and, above all, to manipulate the audience's response to the events depicted on stage. Perhaps though he suggest in Mrs Johnstone's initial belief, and in Mrs Lyons' conversion to superstition, that we can all be brought to believe in things which provide a degree of certainty and inevitability when facing an uncertain and difficult future.