

# How does Willy Russell dramatically present Rita's change in *Educating Rita* essay...

[Literature](#), [Russian Literature](#)



Educating Rita was written by Willy Russell and first appeared on stage in 1980. It tells the story of a twenty six year old hairdresser from Liverpool, “Rita” White, who wants to break away from her stereotype, and to “discover” herself. She thinks that by going on an English literature course at the Open University, she will be able to achieve this. However, during her course at the university she unknowingly teaches her tutor as much about life as he teaches her about literature. In this essay I will attempt to show the way in which Willy Russell uses several different dramatic devices to present the change in “Rita” dramatically.

Firstly, the playwright, Willy Russell, has partly based the character of Rita upon himself by giving her the kind of background that he had, the fact that it is semi-autobiographical makes it dramatic because it makes the storyline more realistic and relevant. We know that it is semi-autobiographical by examining his “personal essay” at the beginning of the play. Here he tells us that at his school “there were gangs with bike chains and broken bottles and truck spanners”.

This description of school life is very similar to Rita’s, who describes her school life as “broken glass everywhere, knives and fights. p17 act 1 scene 2. The fact that he has based this character on himself can be seen to be one of the reasons for him writing the play, to inform people of the difficulties faced by working class families regarding education. Also, he has, by doing this attempted to show how difficult it is to change from one lifestyle to another and how an “education” can’t always change your person. However, there are also other reasons for him writing Educating Rita, it can be seen

that throughout the play, Willy Russell tries to get his own opinions about modern education across to the audience.

There are several points that he gets across to the audience in the play, all relating to the difference between the classes and their attitudes to different parts of life. He tries to show the point that, at the time of the play being written, there were several fundamental differences between the views of the different classes. Firstly, he shows us that middle class people had a better chance at a good education because they not only had more money, but also as a class had an attitude to education that allowed for children to enjoy and excel in education.

Whereas the working class attitude to education was that to be educated was to be snobbish or, as “ Rita” describes it; “ for the whimps” and that if she’d have become educated she would have become “ different from me mates, an’ that’s not allowed. ” Showing clearly a main part of working class attitude to education and even a sense of peer pressure. Also, this lack of education in the working classes led to another difference between them, that to be working class was to limit your choices in terms of not only employment but also, as we see in the play, culture.

Another main difference that Willy Russell tries to get across to the audience is that of the role of women and how it differs in working and middle classes. This is in terms of their education, career and also motherhood and marriage. This difference can clearly be seen in the play in the way that Denny and Frank treat “ Rita”. This idea of differences between the classes is

central to the play because it means that as there is a lack of education in the people that “Rita” knows and where she lives, leads to her believing that if she becomes educated she will “Find Herself” and change her entire person.

Whereas she actually finds that rather than it being the fact that she is now educated changing her life, it is the fact that she could choose to become educated that changes her. And this links in with a women’s role within the different classes, because in her working class situation she had no choice but to become a mother and work in the hairdressers all her life. Whereas Frank offers her the choice to become educated and to change herself this way. Firstly, the way that “Rita” changes in the play can be seen by several different events.

These are: her marriage break-up, her move in with Trish, her change in job and her style of speech and patterns of behaviour. The way that Willy Russell has structured the play so that the changes come one after another means that her change is gradual and not sudden. Also there is a distinct and deliberate change in “Rita” in the first and second act, or before and after her visit to summer school. These changes in her character also affect her relationship with Frank, and as “Rita” changes herself, so she also alters her friendship with Frank.

To start with, Rita’s break from her husband Denny is the first real change we see in her. This dramatically shows change in her character because it is the first step in her education. She is breaking away from the role as a

woman that she has in her working class environment. It is also dramatic because it is inevitable; we know from the start that in order to gain an education she will have to split from Denny because he represents everything that she wants to leave behind, this can be seen when “ Rita” is talking to Frank about Denny, “ He hates me comin’ here. It’s like drug addicts, isn’t it?

They hate it when one of them tries to break away. It makes me stronger comin’ here. That’s what Denny’s frightened of. ” P 31 act 1 scene 4. This suggests again that she is trying to break away from the life that she has always known. Her attempts to break away from her usual life can also be seen by the fact that she refuses to buy herself a new dress showing how she really wants to leave her old life behind and all that she associates with it, for example “ I haven’t had a new dress in twelve months. An’ I’m not gonna get one either not till – till I pass my first exam” p18 act 1 scene 2.

This shows that she is clear in her mind about what she wants now and how she feels she won’t be “ educated” until she passes her first exam because then she will be able to wear the dress of an educated woman. The fact that she doesn’t want to buy a new dress can also be linked into symbolism within the play. This is because throughout the play Willy Russell has used the idea of “ a new dress” to show how easy it is to make changes to your appearance and the way that you act, but that it is more difficult to make fundamental changes to your life.

And therefore as she is refusing to buy herself a new dress she is showing that the change that she is making is not a superficial one. However, at the start of Act 2, when she has returned from summer school, she has made several superficial changes as well as becoming “educated” she now buys second hand clothes “like the students” and has changed her job to a more intellectual one, she now works at the bistro with Trish. This complete personality change at the start of Act 2 is very dramatic because she has almost gone too far in her transformation.

She has tried so hard to fit in with people that she has lost sight of what she set out to achieve for example at the start of act 2 scene 2 “Rita” is speaking in a “peculiar voice” and points out that “I have merely decided to talk properly. As Trish says there is not a lot of point in discussing beautiful literature in an ugly voice.” P 56 act 1 scene 2. This shows how she has changed, but she is again being trapped in a position, just as she was when she lived with Denny, where she feels she must behave in a certain way and that she should dress the way that her peers do.

This is used to show that she now prefers literature to real life she is so caught up in her new life cannot realise that education and culture do not bring automatic happiness. It can also be seen that Rita’s change is shown dramatically by the idea that she loses sight of what is important and therefore loses herself and her personality is also shown in Act 2 scene 4 when Rita and Frank are talking about her Blake essay, “What I’m saying is that it’s up to the minute, quite acceptable, trendy stuff about Blake; but there’s nothing of you in there.

And this shows that at this point in the play she has lost her original spontaneity and uniqueness that Frank liked and that she can no longer distinguish or even realise a difference between acquired knowledge and wisdom and her own knowledge and wisdom. Another way in which Willy Russell presents change in Rita is that he emphasises the change in Rita's accent and how she uses less colloquialisms. This can be seen by the quote used previously and shows how her confidence has risen.

She tries very hard to “talk properly” and the sudden change is very dramatic. She has also gained a lot more confidence over the time that she spends at summer school. We can see this by the stage directions that Willy Russell has given, this is because throughout the first act Frank sits on the swivel chair and in Act two scene four p 63 “she goes to the swivel chair and sits” showing how not only has she gained confidence but there has also been reversal of roles.

This can be seen by the fact that throughout the play the swivel chair has been used to symbolise the fact that Frank was the teacher and that he had the intellectual upper hand, however when Rita chooses to sit there it shows how the roles have reversed. It can also be seen when they are talking about “Ruby Fruit Jungle” and Frank refers to it as excellent to which “Rita” replies “Oh go away, Frank. Of its type it's quite interesting. But it's hardly excellence.

This also signifies a reversal of roles because she is now humouring his enjoyment of the book as he did of hers at the beginning of the play. This is

a dramatic change because the roles of teacher and student have been reversed both literally and symbolically and Frank begins to resent her. Therefore, to conclude, I think that the playwright has dramatically presented change in Rita in several different ways, all of them effective. He has also been very consistent in presenting the change, in that he even shows change through symbolism in the stage directions.