

What impression of  
rita does willy russell  
create in act one,  
scene one essay  
sam...



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he first scene in *Educating Rita* is, arguably, the most essential to the play. It is the scene that has to captivate the audience's attention, so that they want to see what will happen in later scenes. It is also (perhaps most importantly) the one that gives us our first insights on the main - indeed the only - characters we see; that is, Rita and Frank, and shapes our perceptions of them throughout the rest of the story. These characters must seem believable and also attention-grabbing - so that we want to see what will happen to them later on.

Therefore, it is in this scene our first impressions of Rita, the title character, are created; and then in later scenes, we see how she develops as a person. ' I'm comin' in, aren't I? It's that stupid bleedin' handle on the door. You wanna get it fixed! " These are the first words we hear Rita say as she makes her entrance into Frank's study. An image of her is immediately created, both from her words and from her accent, clothes, and general appearance. She looks and sounds like a ' stereotypical' Liverpudlian - brash, confident, loud - the only thing missing from the stereotype is whether she is ' thick' or not.

We are perhaps a little shocked by her entrance as we are made to wait for it (so suspense is built up) - and the fact that she comes in complaining loudly about the state of Frank's doorhandle, despite the fact that she is the student and Frank the teacher. This unexpected authority reversal is opposite to our notions of teacher-pupil respect and this helps her entry create a lasting impression. It is obvious this is also unexpected to Frank as he is left staring at Rita, slightly confused, for a moment until he regains his composure and mumbles an answer.

Rita then reprimands him for not acting on his intentions to get the handle fixed, retaining the air of role-reversal. However, this image of the brash, bold, overconfident Liverpudlian (as we learn later) is just compensating for Rita's nervousness and anxiety over starting the OU course in the first place. The exchange that follows shows how their backgrounds frequently lead Frank and Rita to confuse each other, which is one of the main sources of comedy in the play.

An expression such as "And you are?" is one not usually used in 'working class' situations - so Rita mistakes its meaning, and answers "I'm a what?". Frank then finds the form with Rita's name on it, and we then discover that 'Rita' is a pseudonym. The reason for this could be Susan's desire to make a fresh start, and therefore choosing a new name to do it under. This resolution is somewhat marred by the source of the name she adopts - imitating Rita Mae Brown, the author of a 'fantastic' yet undeniably trashy novel. This illustrates Rita's initial inability to differentiate between books and literature, a skill which she learns later on.

However, most of the play deals with (not so surprisingly) educating 'Rita'; that is, the person Susan White decided to become and indeed developed into - so for the purposes of this essay she will remain Rita. Our idea of the stereotype is quickly unravelled as Rita begins to comment on different issues. She makes witty observations such as "degrees for dishwashers" - commenting on the fact that the Open University will take anyone on for a course - which, along with her inquisitive questions and obvious desire to learn, lead us to realise that she is an intelligent (albeit poorly educated) woman.

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More about this education is learned in Act 1 Scene 2, where Rita describes her schooling as “ripped up books, broken glass everywhere, knives and fights” and explains how peer pressure and what was expected of her by her family led her to fall into the view that “studyin’ was just for the whimps” and that she couldn’t be different from her friends. Rita then describes what she was expected to be ‘into’ - that is, music, clothes, and “lookin’ for a feller... the real qualities of life”, and when she realised that she could be living a more (intellectually as well as personally) fulfilling life; “y’ have to decide... change of dress or a change in yourself”.

This is one of the turning points in the play - perhaps the main one, as the others are stages in Rita’s education, where she attains the next level of understanding in her search to find ‘herself’. We get the impression that Rita, although opinionated and clever, lacks the tools and skills with which to express herself in a conventional way. The main purpose of the first scene is to introduce the audience to the two main characters, and to show how their relationship begins - in fact gets off to a flying start.

Rita and Frank, despite their class difference, are comfortable with each other almost immediately. This gives us an insight into how their friendship is based on mutual understanding that goes beyond education and backgrounds, and means that they are still friends at the end of the play. Frank is struck by Rita’s enthusiastic, honest attitude, and describes her as “the first breath of fresh air in this room for years”. Despite this understanding, Frank still treats Rita with perhaps less respect than she deserves. He learns to appreciate her more later on - but in the earlier scenes is still amazed by her lack of knowledge.

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He perhaps does not realise this – and his slightly patronising attitude may be due to a subconscious knowledge of the class divide between them. When Rita asks, quite suddenly, what assonance is (a basic technique), Frank laughs, perhaps before he has thought about it. We see that Rita, although aware of her deficiency in factual knowledge, is still proud – “ Don’t laugh at me”. The difference in class – although not providing much of a barrier for Rita and Frank in most cases – is nevertheless evident as they talk about different issues.