

Some of the
differences between
higgins in pygmalion
and frank



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In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the ancient myth of "Pygmalion" was written down. The myth was about Pygmalion, a king of Cyprus, who was revolted with the women around him and decided to make a gorgeous statue of a woman that he named Galatea. He became infatuated and later in love with the statue when he had completed her, he prayed to Aphrodite to make it become real. Aphrodite breathed life into the statue and Pygmalion and Galatea got married. "Educating Rita" by Willy Russell and "Pygmalion" by George Bernard Shaw are both modern interpretations of this legend, though neither has the romantic ending of the myth itself.

Both plays are based on the idea of a person 'creating' someone else. Higgins 'creates' Eliza; Frank 'creates' Rita, not literally, like Pygmalion, but by sculpting their personalities and transforming them into something different. By educating Rita and Eliza, they are given more opportunities in life and will be more respected. Professor Higgins teaches Eliza how to act like a lady because he has a bet that he can pass her off as a duchess at the Embassy Ball in six months, which he does. Eliza becomes independent, and does not want to be a flower girl any more.

Rita is tired of her life as a hairdresser and wants to read more and understand books. Frank starts to teach her as part of her Open University course. Gradually she becomes more independent as well, and starts to think for herself. *Educating Rita* is set in the North in the 1970s, when the Open University had recently been set up by the Labour government. It provided opportunities for working class people who might have missed out on schooling. It was aimed at older people who wanted a qualification in

something and had full-time jobs, because it was possible to do work in the evenings.

Students at the Open University did not need any previous qualifications, and there was 'distance learning', which was learning using television or videos. There was a summer school for students as well. Pygmalion was written in 1910, when there was no Open University, and when the poor and working class were very much more looked down on than they are now. The poor were separated under two headings; deserving and undeserving, as Alfred Doolittle points out: "I'm undeserving, and I mean to go on being undeserving."

All through Pygmalion, Eliza is treated quite badly by Higgins because he considers her inferior. She is useful to him for collecting slippers, but nothing more. Eliza has no choice but to be a flower girl, because she is poor and working class, a "guttersnipe", as Higgins calls her, but with education she has many more options in life and ends up marrying Freddy, a middle class man who she would otherwise never have met. The plays are written in different ways. Educating Rita is a 'two-hander', a play with only two characters; whereas Pygmalion has a whole cast of characters, though only two major ones.

The plays are different because of the time at which they were written. The language used is different, and Educating Rita is very relaxed about swearing, whereas the one example of swearing in Pygmalion was very shocking at the time. However, they do have many themes in common. Both are about education and transforming someone into someone else by

teaching them something, making a different person with a mind of their own. Both plays are about snobbery, and both have an unromantic ending, though various films and adaptations of both plays have suggested it.

The musical adaptation of Pygmalion, My Fair Lady, had a romantic ending, and the film made of Educating Rita suggested that the two characters were attracted to each other. Professor Higgins and Frank have many characteristics in common. They are both teachers; 'creators' of a new person, and they both succeed in what they set out to do. Higgins passes Eliza off as a duchess and Frank succeeds in making Rita an educated person with more opportunities open to her in life. They are both very good teachers, though in different ways.

Higgins is remorseless and has no real respect for Eliza, as he shows when he constantly insults her; "draggled-tailed guttersnipe" and "squashed cabbage leaf". Frank is more sympathetic towards Rita and treats her with more respect, though he gets angry when she doesn't work. Frank is employed as a lecturer and tutor at a university, but Higgins is an amateur teacher, not paid, and phonetics is more his hobby than his profession. Neither of them conforms to the social expectations attached to them; Frank despises them, and consequently Rita is like a breath of fresh air to him, and Higgins simply does not care how others regard him.

Higgins is extremely self-confident, happy with himself and smug. Frank, on the other hand, is not at all self-confident, and is very unhappy with his life. He has become an alcoholic and thinks he is a failure. He likes Rita and allows her to talk a lot to him, because he finds her interesting and she

introduces him to a kind of life he knows nothing about. In *Pygmalion*, Higgins is the one who talks more, and is far more overbearing and dominating in his manner towards Eliza than Frank is to Rita.

Frank is a sensitive man, not a chauvinist like Higgins, who is a bachelor and is likely to stay that way for the rest of his life. He has no interest in women, or anyone, unless they are interested in phonetics, like Colonel Pickering. Frank has been married, and this shows that he can form relationships with other people and is more in touch with the outside world than Higgins. Both men are extremely intelligent, but Higgins is more sure of this fact than Frank. Higgins always believes himself to be right, whereas Frank is willing to accept other opinions.

Higgins is insensitive and brusque in his manner. In *Pygmalion*, Shaw is trying to convey certain ideas across to his readers. He was trying to show that the boundaries in society are artificial and can be faked, and that people are far more important than their social expectations. He wanted to write a play with a realistic ending rather than a romantic one in order to show what would happen in real life. Shaw was giving his opinion about marriage and how the personalities of the people involved affect whether it is successful or not.

In his opinion, a marriage between Higgins and Eliza would never work, because each would try to dominate the other, and because Higgins' personality was far more suited to being single than being married. However, a marriage between Freddy and Eliza would work, even though they held different positions in society, because they were suited to each other and

class made no difference to this. Willy Russell wanted to make a point about class boundaries as well. Frank is a middle class man who is quite a bit older than Rita, who is a young, working class woman not long married.

Even though they are very different on the outside, they get on very well because they are quite similar people. They are both interested in literature and naturally inquisitive, as we can see when Rita tells Frank that she wants to know “ everything”. Russell is also trying to show his readers that it is possible to change, to better yourself so that you have a better chance of succeeding in what you want to do. Educating Rita is semi-autobiographical and partly tells the story of Willy Russell’s life. He was a hairdresser himself for a while before he became a writer.

An actor playing Higgins or Frank would have to be able to convey a strong personality. In a famous scene like the teaparty in Pygmalion, for example, the actor would have to show how self-satisfied and smug he is using body language. In this scene, Higgins is often very rude to the rest of the guests, which shows how little he cares about anyone else. An actor would have to show this clearly, and exaggerate his actions. Frank is more insecure and less sure of himself, so the actor performing this role would have to be different from the one playing Higgins.

When George Bernard Shaw wrote his play, Pygmalion, he was partly basing his character Professor Higgins on himself. However, Willy Russell made Rita more like himself, which shows where the main difference between the Pygmalion figures lies. The stronger character in each play is the one based on the author, and as Frank was not based on Willy Russell, he is

immediately different from Higgins. Overall, I would say that Frank and Higgins do have a few similarities in the plays, but this is mainly to do with the role they play in the story rather than their personalities.

In one respect, Higgins and Frank are very similar. They both underestimated their pupil, and were surprised at the outcome of their teaching. Neither fully realised that the person they were helping to create would have a mind of her own, and would make her own decisions. Higgins is very surprised when Eliza throws his slippers at him, and Frank is also surprised when Rita makes friends with the students at the university. In a way, the original Pygmalion was more successful in his task because his statue was entirely created by him and was completely ruled by him.