

Educating rita by willy russell

Literature



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When the heroine of 'Educating Rita' begins her personal crusade to gain an education by pursuing an open university course in English Literature, although she realises it will be hard work, she does not have any idea what she will lose as well as gain when she achieves her goal.

There are only two characters in the play, Rita, the student and Frank, her tutor although many other people are important to the play and are referred to frequently. All the action takes place in Frank's study, on the first floor of a typical university building in the north of England.

Frank is a lecturer in English Literature, and needs the occasional bottle of whisky to help him cope with his students. He has never taken an Open University student before, and has taken Rita on, against his better judgement, to help pay for his drink.

Rita is a totally, uneducated, working class hairdresser, with a Liverpool accent, who is both forthright and funny, although she has a great capacity for self-criticism, and a strong desire to acquire knowledge. She simply wants to know 'everything.'

Although Frank has become quite smitten by Rita's fresh approach and original views, his reluctance to teach Rita is made worse by his cynicism and the fact he considers he is " actually an appalling tutor."

Rita, however, insists that he is the only tutor she wants. She can relate to him, he looks like a " geriatric hippy" and is " a crazy mad piss artist who wants to throw his students through the window"

Rita would probably not have felt so at ease with a conventional tutor.

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Rita has pre-formed ideas about what "real" students are like: this shows her innocent, yet street-wise naivety about higher education although she has the ability to choose between the background and upbringing she had, and the educated world. One day she questions herself

"Is this the absolute maximum I can expect from this livin' lark?"

Rita's knowledge of reading is limited to trashy novels like "Ruby Fruit Jungle", by Harold Robbins and when confronted with "Howard's End" by E. M. Forster she considers it "crap"

Rita has to learn the difference between 'appreciation and criticism'

She gradually begins to gain from her education. Rita has now read three novels: two of the literary kind, and one of the cheap fiction variety she is used to, where the main emphasis is on sex. Frank points out that not all books are literature, although she can read whatever she likes she must not mention the trashy novels in the exam. Rita realises her ignorance

"My mind's full of junk, isn't it? It needs a good clearin' out"

When Rita is confronted with "Suggest how you would resolve the staging difficulties inherent in a production of Ibsen's "Peer Gynt" Rita's answer is "Do it on the radio". Frank points out that one line is hardly an essay and rules have to be observed like an accepted ritual for writing essays and passing exams.

Rita's husband Denny is ignorant to her needs and ambitions. She realises she is a different person to the one that Denny fell in love with. She wants to

be able to understand ballet, opera, theatre and literature, not just discard them because she doesn't understand, to break away from her "working class culture" and to become stronger.

Her transformation has begun, and there is no going back. She wants choice of what to do with her life.

Rita persuades Frank to go to an amateur production of "The Importance of Being Ernest" as she has never seen a live performance of a play before. It is interesting to note due to ignorance and lack of education, Rita doesn't know the difference between an amateur and a professional production

"It's the same play, isn't it?"

The transformation continues as Rita actually goes to see a professional performance of Macbeth, on her own. Although she "thought it was going to be dead boring"

"It was bleedin' great"

She also persuades Frank to go to an art gallery with her.

Rita has been invited to a dinner party at Frank's home, but she is now educated enough to realise she is not yet competent enough to fit in with Frank's guests. She would have been seen as "someone who's funny, delightful, charming....." to which she objects. She would have wanted to talk seriously and with confidence to the others. Rita is now at the half way stage in her transformation, and now she is also unable to fit in with her own friends anymore.

Rita has written an essay on Macbeth, and although Frank thinks it's worthless from an examiner's point of view, he thinks it's a "totally honest passionate account." That is not good enough for Rita who immediately rips it up. She wants to be on the same level as all the other 'proper' students. Rita wants to discard completely her true identity, and the only thing remaining is her insatiable desire to learn, and she is now getting down to it.

Rita's character is changing: she is losing a lot of her individuality and uniqueness, but gaining much in education.

After returning from summer school Rita has gained in confidence in her own opinions and abilities. This is the biggest change in her so far. She has experienced life as a student, able to stand up in a lecture and ask questions, able to socialise with like-minded people.

Rita is still trying to change Frank. She has bought him a pen as a gift, only to be used for writing poetry. She wants to open his window, letting air in, he says

"It hasn't been open for generations" This is a sort of metaphor for the fact she wants to bring him new life. Frank is excited as he decides to introduce Rita to a good poet, Blake, But he is disappointed to learn that Rita has already been studying William Blake at summer school.