Text 24: Play
Composer: Willy Russell

‘Educating Rita’

Synopsis

The play Educating Rita, written by Willy Russell, tells the story of how a 26 year old woman seeks to become educated in the hope of obtaining more choices in life. Rita, whose real name is Susan Mae Brown, is unsatisfied with the routine dreariness of her current life as a middle class hairdresser and ferociously wants to improve herself and change her life. By enrolling herself in an English Literature course offered by the Open University, Rita begins her journey of discovering herself and finding where she belongs in the world.

The opening scene of the play introduces the responder to the confines of Frank’s office in which the entire play is set. The description of the setting of Frank’s office communicates that he has been in his office for quite a while. The office is simple with a picture of a nude religious scene on the wall and contains book-laden shelves, a desk in front of a bay window and another desk covered with papers and books.

The play opens with Frank rummaging through the bookshelves in his office looking for his hidden supply of alcohol. Frank is delighted when he remembers that he has hidden his bottle of whisky behind the “Dickens” section of his library, but before he is able to have a swig of his drink, he is startled by the phone ringing. The fact that Frank quickly takes a swig of his whisky before picking up the receiver reveals that his need to drink is a greater priority than the person on the other end of the line. Frank refers to the person on the receiver as “darling” who the responder later learns is his girlfriend Julia. Mid-conversation, there is a knock at the door and in enters Rita. Even though she is unsure of herself, Rita enters Frank’s domain and delivers a barrage of abuse at Frank for having a broken door handle.

The ensuing conversation between Frank and Rita touches on the “erotic” picture on Frank’s wall, on Rita being an Open University student as opposed to being a “real” student, on smoking, on poets, on swearing and on life. Frank is quite taken back with Rita who clearly states that she wants Frank to teach her “everything”. The scene ends with Frank declaring that he does not want to be Rita’s tutor, especially since the hours clash with the time he would normally be at the pub. Even though Frank offers to get Rita another tutor, Rita has taken a liking to the “crazy mad piss artist who wants to throw his students through the window” and asserts that she will be back the following week.

As the play progresses, the responder learns more about each of the characters and experiences how they develop and change. Rita is quite open with Frank about her life. She reveals to Frank that her husband Denny is pressuring her to have a baby, yet she wants to discover herself first and be free to make her own choices. Her determination to change and better her life is so great that she lies to Denny about stopping her birth control pills.

Denny, on the other hand, is against Rita going to University and shows no interest in her studies. He believes that Rita does not need an education, rather she needs a baby. Understandably Denny is enraged when he discovers that Rita is still taking the pill and responds by angrily burning her books. His retaliation and dismissal of her yearning to belong to a better life reveals that they have diverging views of what is important. Rita does not want to belong at home with a baby; rather she wants more from her life than she currently has.
At first, Rita struggles with her studies and what is expected of her. She has had little schooling and has never sat any official examinations. She swears and uses inappropriate language for “educated” people. She is totally unfamiliar with the names of the novelists that Frank initially talks about. She is unaware of the conventions of writing formal essays and wrestles with the notion that not all poets are considered “proper” in the eyes of educated people. This demonstrates how different Rita is from the academic world – yet it is this difference that makes Rita appealing to Frank. However, Frank is reluctant to educate Rita as Rita would have to change - change the way she is, change her personality and suppress her uniqueness. Frank does not want to do this.

Rita is intrigued with the “proper students” who sit on the lawn outside of Frank’s office. She wants to belong to their world but Rita feels inferior to them as she is not educated like them; nor is she confident enough to fit in with them. This is further emphasised when Frank invites Rita to his house for dinner. Frank genuinely believes that Rita will enjoy herself, but Rita is insecure about going. Despite turning up to Frank’s place, Rita is too scared to go inside. She peers through the window and sees everyone having a good time and comes to the realisation that she does not belong due to the formality of the event and her own insecurities. Instead, she goes to the pub where Denny is, to the place where she once belonged, to the place where she no longer wants to be. Rita struggles with her search of finding a balance between what she aspires to and where she belongs.

A turning point in the play is when Rita shares her experience at the pub with Frank. When Rita arrived at the pub, she joined Denny, her family and friends who were drinking and singing heartily. Even though Rita was amongst her family and joined in on the family cheer, she was unhappy and to a degree felt like a stranger in her own world. It is this scene whereby Rita questions where she truly belonged. Amongst all the cheer, she also noticed her mother crying. This reaffirmed to Rita that she had made the right choice, particularly when her mother turned to her and said ‘Because we could sing better songs than those’. This informs the responder that her mother acknowledges and understands her search for a better life and that she needs to pursue what will make her happy. Thus Denny’s ultimatum to Rita to stop her studies and “come off the pill” or she can “get out altogether”, forces Rita to make a choice. She chooses to move to a new world and leave her old world behind, Denny included.

While Rita is working through her own turmoil, she does start to move forward under Frank’s tutelage. Rita also has a similar impact on Frank, eventually. At the opening of the play, Frank is stale and unenthusiastic. A one-time eager poet, Frank has since lost his will to teach, his will to write and change. From the outset, his drinking is a problem and complaints are made that Frank attends lectures drunk. Frank’s addiction highlights his dissatisfaction with himself, his life, and where he belongs. Frank’s life revolves around his stale office (the window of which has not been opened for some time), the pub and his home. As Rita becomes more educated, knowledgeable and confident, she also becomes less reliant on the motionless Frank.

When Rita returns from Summer School, she proudly reports to Frank that she stood up in a lecture and asked a question in front of two thousand other students and how she kept asking questions. This shows the growth in Rita, in her own self-confidence and belief in herself. She is changing, while Frank is staying the same. Frank buys Rita cigarettes, but she has quit. Frank buys her a book of poems by William Blake, but Rita has already studied them. Rita is moving on without Frank and is independently fitting in to the academic world and building her own temple of knowledge and success.

Rita moves in with a flatmate named Trish and stops working at the hairdressing salon, but does not tell Frank. Frank feels hurt, angry and left behind as there was a time when Rita would tell him “everything”. However, Rita does not want to talk about “irrelevant rubbish” but would rather talk to “young” and “passionate” people, ones who are not trapped. Rita has changed, and assumes that Frank would try to change too. She tells him to stop drinking and sympathises with his students when he turns up to a lecture drunk and falls over the “rostrum”. Rita tries to motivate him to write again by buying him a pen specifically for writing poetry.
After reading some of his poems, Rita declares to Frank that they are "brilliant... profound (and) full of style". Frank cannot bear to hear her words anymore and asks her to leave. Rita furiously responds by referring to Frank as "Mr Self-Pitying Piss Artist" who "squanders every opportunity" and declares that she does not need him anymore. Rita no longer belongs with Frank and in some respects, she is no longer even satisfied with being Rita, as she tells Frank "Nobody calls me Rita" anymore, and walks out of his office.

The final scene of the play opens with Rita walking into Frank's office and her action of lighting a cigarette. This is significant as Rita quit smoking when she changed from one place of being to another. The fact that she has started smoking again shows that she has partially changed back to the original person she was. Frank, on the other hand, is finally moving pursuant to an ultimatum from the university to either go to Australia for two years, or have his employment terminated. Frank chooses Australia and even asks Rita to go with him. As for Rita, well Rita still has choices to make. She is unsure of where her life will take her or of where she will finally belong, but she has choices, and this is what she wanted. Life is not always about reaching a destination but about making a journey. The play concludes with Rita finally giving Frank the hair cut she promised him in their very first lesson.

How is the concept of belonging represented in the text?

**Belonging at work**
- Does Frank belong to the University? He does not like to teach and jokes about how he would like to throw some of his students through his window.
- Rita changes from being a hairdresser to a waitress – part of her journey is finding where she belongs, but the greater part is having the choices to find out.

**Belonging to a family**
- Rita is married to Denny. Denny wants Rita to have a baby, Rita does not want to, she wants to find herself first.
- Rita's father puts pressure on her to have a baby.

**Belonging to an identity**
- Both Rita and Frank are dissatisfied with their lives.
- Rita does not know who she is. She does not know where she fits in or where she belongs. She does not know what to do with her life, but she wants to become educated so that she will have more choices available to her.
- Frank, while being educated, has become stale and lifeless. He has a failed marriage, is in a lukewarm relationship with Julia, has a drinking problem; he knows this, yet chooses to do nothing about improving his life.

**Belonging to society**
- Rita is from a middle class background. She works as a hairdresser and does not have an education. Yet she is passionate about getting an education so that she can better her current life.
- Rita struggles to fit in. She does not feel confident enough to speak with the students at the University; she doesn't want to see Frank's friends at dinner; and she does not want to go back to the life she has with Denny.
- Frank's movements in society are limited to three places: the University, the pub and his home. The people he meets or associates with occur through these places.

**Belonging to the University**
- Rita is not confident in going to University. She is scared to talk to the other students as she does not feel intelligent enough to fit in. By the end of the play, this has changed.
- Frank works at the University, teaches the students, but does not value what he does or the students that he teaches. This is emphasised by Frank breaking protocol and not only drinking in his office, but turning up to lectures drunk.
Task 1: Timeline
Chronologically sequence the events in the play that shape Rita’s sense of belonging and not belonging as she struggles to find her place in her world.

Task 2: Short Answer Question
The action in ‘Educating Rita’ takes place solely within Frank’s office. How does this impact on the concept of belonging for Frank and Rita?

Task 3: Short Answer Question
At the end of the play, where does Rita belong? Provide examples from the text to support your response.

Task 4: Letter of Concern
You are a parent of one of the students that attends Frank’s lectures. Your son / daughter came home from University and told you that Frank turned up to a lecture drunk. Write a letter of complaint to the Dean of the University stating how Frank no longer belongs there.

Task 5: Essay Question
Reflect on your studies of Belonging and compose a 1000 – 1500 word essay exploring how composers portray the concept of ‘Belonging’ through their construction of character. Refer to your prescribed text and Willy Russell’s play, ‘Educating Rita’ as well as one other text of your own choosing.

Task 6: Interview
Imagine that you are a journalist working for an English teacher’s magazine that is distributed to High School English Faculties in NSW on a quarterly basis. You have been asked by the Editor of the magazine to interview the composer of ‘Educating Rita’, Willy Russell. The focus of your interview is to demonstrate how the composer positions his readers, particularly HSC students studying the Area of Study topic ‘Belonging’. Your response should include an orientation, followed by at least 10 questions and 10 responses and a conclusion. Your response will be featured as part of a cover story on ‘Belonging’ to be published in the next issue of the magazine.

Task 7: ESL focus: Character Study
- Briefly describe the role of each character in the play in your workbook.
- There are only two characters in the play. We learn about Denny and Trish from what Rita tells Frank. Select 5 quotes from the play which best describe each character.
- Which character in the play do you believe is the most interesting? Why?

Character profile
1. Name:
2. Role:
3. Personality:
4. Audience’s perception of the character:
5. How does the character’s role represent the concept of belonging?
6. Quotes that support your answer in question 5.