Educating Rita: Society, Education and Self-Reflection

Usa Padgate

Abstract

Educating Rita is a play written by Willy Russell, an English playwright from Liverpool. It was voted ‘Best Comedy of the Year’ when performed by the Royal Shakespeare Company in 1980. By 1983 it had risen to be the fourth most popular play on the British stage. In the same year it was transformed into a film and won the BAFTA Best Film Award as well as Academy Award nominations, proving its appeal and popularity on both sides of the Atlantic.

This paper aims at introducing Willy Russell’s work to fresh audience, especially students who are looking for reasons to acquaint themselves with English literature and teachers whose interests lie in finding materials that will help answer their students why we need such liberal education as literature.

The study gives an overview analysis of the interplay between society and literature exposed in the story of Rita’s education. It also explores the possibilities of adapting the literary allusions in the play into real-life education, with the all-presumptive assertion that ‘If Rita can do it, so can we.’ The exploration looks first into Rita’s working-class background and its effects on her education and then into means by which Rita’s ways of education, liberal education, can benefit students of all social backgrounds.

* Dr. Usa Padgate is currently an English instructor in Department of English, Faculty of Humanities, Naresuan University.
Forewords

*Educating Rita* is a two-character play written by Willy Russell, an English playwright from Liverpool. It was voted ‘Best Comedy of the Year’ when performed by the Royal Shakespeare Company in 1980. By 1983 it had risen to be the fourth most popular play on the British stage. In the same year it was transformed into a film and won the BAFTA Best Film Award as well as Academy Award nominations, proving its appeal and popularity on both sides of the Atlantic.

Willy Russell records that when making *Educating Rita*, he ‘tried very hard to write a love story’. The play, however, exhibits more than just a romantic agenda. In its multi-layers, it takes into account the heavy social issues of gender convention, class system, and education from which array aspects of sophistication, personal growth and relationships.

In all the multitude made possible for in-depth discussions by the richness of Russell’s text, this essay chooses to explore the idea of liberal education projected from different, and opposing, views and how liberal education may consequently effect mass education. The exploration is carried out under the all-presumptive assertion that ‘If Rita can do it, so can we,’ assuming that Rita’s social conditions and constraints are also faced by million others around the world disregarding the obvious cultural and geographical differences.

*Educating Rita: The Story*

Rita, or Mrs. Susan White, is a free-spirited 26-year-old hairdresser from Liverpool. She is married with no child and deeply dissatisfied with the kind of life she leads. Being born and bred working-class, she is sickened by the limited choice in life available to

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her class. The only way out, she realises, is to seek education and try to better her social status through it. She then decides, after a lifetime of taking school for granted, to enroll in an Open University literature programme with the hope to ‘find meself’ before indulging her husband by forcing babies into the world.

Her husband, Denny, disapproves of her resolution to acquire options in life. His ‘choices’ are limited to the different beers he can freely choose in a local pub. He burns her books when he finds out that she is taking the pill. Rita’s determination to pursue with the study costs her the marriage when Denny eventually leaves her.

Frank, Rita’s tutor at the university is a cynical, self-destructive, burnt-out professor – a perpetual stupor who seems to be unable to maintain relationships and whose frustrations in life show in his pronounced drunkenness and inability to write the kind of poetry he wishes to produce. Nonetheless, he is an experienced, intelligent teacher, and so unconventional that Rita finds him an equal match for her irrepressible desire to study and will not be shaken off by his suggestion that she gets another tutor in his place.

And so the tutorials start and continue. In time, Frank proves himself a much better teacher than he thought he was. Rita’s unpretentious enthusiasm revitalises her tutor’s dying passion for what he teaches. However, with Rita’s growing confidence as she becomes ‘educated’, Frank feels ironically more and more insecure. And when Rita acquires for herself other ‘teachers’, i.e. her tutors in the summer school and her classy flatmate Trish, Frank is obviously shaken by her divided devotion. He finds solace in bottles of whisky and gets himself expelled to teaching in Australia after about of quarrelsome drunkenness.
As Rita progresses academically, she loses the naturalness and spontaneity she once possessed. Instead she learns and adopts the necessary things that enable her to ‘talk about things that matter’—calculated and pretentious things that a cynical yet somewhat realistic person like her tutor disdains. Frank witnesses Rita’s transformation in sad abhorrence. In the process of becoming educated, Rita has lost the uniqueness that Frank most admires. In the end, Frank asks Rita to go to Australia with him, thus suggesting a fresh beginning for both of them: ‘It’d be good for us to leave a place that’s just finishing for one that’s just beginning.’ Rita, nonetheless, is evasive about starting life anew with Frank. She is now educated. She has choice. And she will choose: ‘I might go to France. I might go to mother’s. I might even have a baby. I dunno. I’ll make a decision, I’ll chose. I dunno.’

**Literature and Society**

Traditionally, literature is believed to reflect society and its people; a belief that stresses that literature is closely connected to society. Realistically, however, literature has been said to be of very little practical use to the people who make the society. This way of perception probably derives from the fact that the majority of the people who run the wheels of the society have very little contact, if at all, with literature. Those who do are looked at as a passive group of people – the ones who does not do any real ‘physical’ work. Literature, or simply the act of reading, is, and has been, regarded as a genteel habit of those who are provided for, thus able to spend time reading about life instead of living it. Therefore, it is no surprise that the society at large does not care much about the study of literature. If needs be for an education of some sort, it is done more often than not in professional schools. Liberal studies, the study of art for art sake, do not give a practical and instant reward that professional trainings offer.

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Thematically, ‘Rita’ represents the lower class – the mass – whose culture influences the operations of the society. As a working-class woman, Rita is socially as well as sexually confined. Her social backgrounds limit her choice of work as well as of all other things in life – circles of friends, language, romance, etc. Moreover, her gender subjects her to the domination of her husband, whose social backdrops demand constant display of masculinity, which results in occasional domestic violence. The first time Denny is presented on screen, he is seen ‘demolishing the house’ while Rita tries unsuccessfully to write an essay on Peer Gynt, thus suggesting his objection to her study as well as chauvinistic dominance that is prone to physical violence. This is confirmed when Denny burns Rita’s book and sides with Rita’s father, his male ally, during a father-daughter row. However, Rita is extraordinarily exceptional in that she refuses to submit to the limitations forced upon her by her birth and upbringing. She rebels against the convention of her class and bravely breaks away from it. Instead of having babies and settling down as her culture dictates, Rita decides to get an education, not just to get a better job or more pay, but to live a totally different kind of life.

On the other hand, Frank and his likes – Brian (Frank’s colleague), Julia (Frank’s girlfriend), Trish (Rita’s flatmate) – represent literature. Their academic formality masks their social pretense, as opposed to Rita’s natural vivacity that dominates her representation of the lower class. Frank’s contempt for the academic shows in the many bottles of whisky hidden just behind endless rows of literary masterpieces in his office – a place that so intimidates Rita on her first visit. The play starts with Frank browsing frantically through these classics profaning names of famous writers with his swearing words: “Where the hell ...? Eliot? No. ‘E’. ‘E’, ‘e’, ‘e’ ... Dickens.” He then takes a book out of a shelf to reveal a half-empty bottle of whisky on which he promptly indulges himself. Julia and Brian, Frank’s girlfriend and best friend, cuckold him using their respected status as university staff to further their romantic advances. Trish,

3 *Educating Rita*, p.1.
Rita’s classy flatmate, horrifies Rita by her suicide attempt. Up until then, Rita has looked up to Trish as her model of a self-contained, intellectual woman. When her flatmate tries to ‘top herself’, Rita’s illusion of the intellectual is shattered, and she comes to understand Frank’s cynical contempt for what, up to the moment, she has held most valuable – literature.

*Educating Rita*, as the title suggests, chiefly concerns the education of the female lead. As the story develops, Rita is given guidance on literary theories and conventional critical thinking. She learns to question and approach literature objectively and critically. The acquired ability to question provides a broader view of her options in life and gives her what she has set out to look for – choices in life. The story, however, goes beyond just Rita’s education. The meeting of Rita and Frank brings out not only mutual friendship, but also mutual intellectual support. Frank learns as much from Rita as she learns from him. While Rita gains self-confidence from the knowledge that her options are no longer limited by the choice of detergents in a supermarket, Frank regains self-esteem via Rita’s respect for him. He finally learns to respect and believe in himself – that he can be a good teacher, and that he deserves much higher self-esteem. Furthermore, he learns to respect his students as he comes to realise that one’s ability to learn is limitless, and that not all students can be as appalling as he may have thought. In all, *Educating Rita* stresses the importance of critical thinking and self-respect as a gate to self-esteem and social acceptance. It appeals to both the Ritas and the Franks – those who desire to assimilate into the world of the intellectual as well as those who is weary of it and longs to get out.

**Educating the Mass: If Rita can do it, so can we!**

True as it is, it does sound self-consciously snobbish to say that literary allusion is a ticket to social acceptance. Willy Russell demonstrates this belief in Frank’s cynical
dismissal of his own poetry: “this clever, pyrotechnical pile of self-conscious allusion is worthless, talentless, shit and could be recognised as such by anyone with a shred of common sense.” It is, nevertheless, facile to devalue literary allusions to mere worthless pretense. Surely the ability to interrelate the meanings and significance of different texts and give a new outlook to the referred objects without altering their essence shows the ability to think critically – to relate, adapt and adjust ideas– that is essential to any form of education. Take *Educating Rita* for instance, the play would not yield the same textual and thematic appeals without the conscious allusions to George Bernard Shaw’s *Pygmalion* and Mary Shelly’s *Frankenstein*.

Unknowingly embracing the technique of allusion, Rita unofficially changes her Christian name Susan to Rita after Rita May Brown, an American writer she admires. It is obvious that in renaming herself, Rita wishes to feel the qualities of the writer transferred to her (although the fact that Rita May Brown writes sexually explicit novels may help intensify the allusion in a way Rita may not have intended). Frank, in spite of his view against self-conscious allusion, is himself a master of this literary technique. He calls himself ‘Mary’ alluding his creation of the educated Rita to Mary Shelly’s creation of *Frankenstein*, thus expressing his regret in having created a monster – Rita. In addition, he pointedly assumes the names of famous female literary figures for Rita as a sarcastic response to her new-found pretense: “What is it now then? Virginia? … Or Charlotte? Or Jane? Or Emily?” It is doubtful if the profundity of this statement would be reached without the audience’s schematic background of the names Virginia Woolf, Charlotte Bronte, Jane Austen, and Emily Bronte. The practice of allusion is, therefore, integrated more deeply into real, and realistic, situations than it may seem to be at first glance. The fact that the method considered to be handled exclusively among literary people is indeed engaged in everyday circumstances proves somehow that basic literary skills are socially

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4 ibid. p.68.
5 ibid. p.69.
integrated and evident. Therefore, to educate the mass by means of literature is to encourage the learners to develop skills not at all alien to them. Yet, as is the case with all skills, it needs to be mastered by practice, which is conventionally provided in the higher education system.

**Liberal Education as a Path to Self-Realisation**

As in the practical usefulness of allusion, higher education may not be so exclusively upper-class as traditionally regarded. In spite of Frank’s and Rita’s contrasting views of higher education, its essence as an origin of everyday critical judgment is pronounced, thus making a point that higher education is mandatory not only to the privileged Franks, but also to the underprivileged Ritas. In order to secure social improvement, the mass must learn to think and judge critically: “You’ve got to change from the inside,” as Rita herself puts it. And higher education, if anything, provides basic training in critical thinking.

In *Educating Rita*, the different views of higher education are projected through Rita and other characters. Rita, despite her initial frightful reverence for higher education, sees it as a means accessible to all to unlimited choices in life. Frank, as well as others of his class and lower, sees higher education as a privilege for a limited number of the population. Although disillusioned and disenchanted by the academic, Frank still perceives higher education as an exclusive treat not available to people of Rita’s background. Spending the evening drowning himself in a pub makes him feel less pointless than spending it introducing a disadvantaged student to the world of higher education. He illustrates this in his remark about Rita’s enrollment in an Open University literature programme: “Why a rown adult wants to come to this place after putting in a hard day’s work is totally beyond me.”

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6 *Educating Rita* (1983), produced and directed by Lewis Gilbert, screenplay by Willy Russell.
Frank is not at all alone in thinking that the working class is not deserving of the kind of education he could give. Rita’s working-class folks including her husband Denny alienate her because of her new-found education. Like Frank, Denny knows that higher education will change his wife in ways that will negatively affect their relationship. The more Rita finds herself through education, the more outcast she becomes at home. Her husband resents her adopting Frank’s upper-class vocabulary – teasing her sarcastically when she says ‘actually’ – as it widens their marital gap. He burns Rita’s books when he finds out that she is still taking contraceptive pills and not willing to have children. For Denny, Rita’s education prevents them from forming a complete and satisfying family. He refuses Frank’s invitation to a party at his place in preference to spending the evening in a pub with Rita’s family because he does not feel that the world of the academic is his choice in life.

Although they share their belief in whom higher education is for, Frank and Denny differ in their contentment in life. Unlike Frank, Denny is content with his life. He is not highly educated, and so does not see that education could provide options that matter more than choices of beers in a pub or of detergents in a supermarket. His simple desire in life is to settle down with a wife and kids, and when this is denied by Rita’s refusal to have children, Denny leaves her. Frank, on the other hand, is bitterly disillusioned by the pretense of the academic. He himself embodies its falsity and longs to get out, yet is firmly locked within its domain by his education and upper-middle class background. When he tries to break loose and acts less than what is expected of him, he gets into trouble with the university and is consequently transferred to Australia. Both characters, Denny and Frank, display the imbalance of education and self-contentment. Each has too much of the one and too little of the other. This results in their confined views of themselves and of others.
To be free from such confinement, therefore, becomes the goal of higher education. Since liberation derives from a balance between education and self-contentment, it is necessary to enable students to see options available in life through aspects other than social and environmental, and to feel free to choose what is best for them. The kind of education suitable to those who, like Rita, are still looking for balance is none other than a liberal education. By definition, ‘liberal education’ is “concerned mainly with general knowledge and experience, rather than with technical or professional training”\(^7\). In practice, liberal education, as the name suggests, gives freedom to make decisions based on the knowledge and experience conferred by education.

As a hairdresser, Rita does not need a university degree to progress on her profession. Yet, what she longs to achieve is not choices between being a good or a bad hairdresser, but opportunities to be something else not commonly attained by a hairdresser. Her professional training confines and suffocates her as it dictates the path she is to lead her life. Having neither proper schooling nor self-contentment, Rita finds herself completely ‘out of step’. She realises that in order to find the missing balance, she needs to discover herself first, and liberal education comes into serious consideration as it is a kind of education that will expose her to a variety of choices in life, thus giving guidance to someone like herself who is still looking for directions.

Among the available selection of liberal subjects, Rita picks on literature supposedly out of her love for reading – or for “devouring pulp fiction,” as Frank once says. Her choice of study seems utterly unpractical to her family. Indeed, studying literature seems unrealistic to the mass, especially to those with a professional training background. They think of ‘literature’ as an end result of human creativity, not as a source of creation as literature can also be. They see literature as a form of entertainment with no connection to their daily struggle, not as a reflection of all kinds of human experiences in

which their struggles are represented, occasionally satired, frequently analysed, appreciated and learned. They tend to overlook the fact that the creators of literature are in fact as human as any of them, and their experiences as real. Without the knowledge of these creators’ literary achievements, the mass are likely to think of them as part of their unidentifiable crowds; Denny even thinks Anton Chekhov is Rita’s secret foreign boyfriend! However, what sets these groups of people – the professionals and the liberals – apart is not their ability to get on in life, but their ability to question what is going on around and about them. While both groups may succeed in meeting their respective demands and requirements, the professionals, by nature of their training, conforms to social expectations and acceptance whereas the liberals defy expectations and try to break free from the norms by questioning what is going on and searching for alternative solutions. By so doing, the liberals may leap across social borders of class, sex, and identity, and secure for themselves options not conventionally available to them.

Accordingly, those who study literature, Rita for instance, see literature as a question for which they must seek an answer, not a formulated instant answer to all human dilemmas. This ability to question, conjured by the study of literature, is pivotal to human learning and developing process since it is the foundation of all successful studies. As Jorn Bramann points out in *Educating Rita and Other Philosophical Movies*[^8], this way of thinking goes back to that of the time of Socrates who introduced to the West the idea that all basic assumptions need to be questioned, and that such questioning need to start with a humble admission of one’s own ignorance. “I know that I do not know” is central to Socrates wisdom[^9], in contrast to the self-contained professional training in which clear-cut learning steps are respected and assumptions taken for granted.

[^8]: Bramann, Jorn, *Educating Rita and Other Philosophical Movies*. (http://www/frostburg.edu/dept/phil/forum/PhilFilm4.htm)
[^9]: “I know that I do not know” is effectively repeated by Frank in his first scene with Rita when he tells her that: “Everything I know – and you must listen to this – is that I know absolutely nothing.” (*Educating Rita*, p.13.)
Beneficial as it surely is, professional training induces people to become singularly conscious of their trained skills, thus casting them out of other learning possibilities that could be attained. This is not a problem with some exclusive, well-paid professions, i.e. medical training and engineering, but with the majority of the mass depending on other professional trainings much less privileged, many a Denny are finding themselves ignorantly imprisoned in their contented social conformity believing that what they have is all there is for them. Ironically, the first thing they need to learn in order to choose what is best for them is to learn to question what they have taken for granted. However, they cannot question what is missing in their lives if they are unaware of its existence, as no questioning is possible without some knowledge of the objects in question. This is where higher education comes in as an introduction to liberal decisions and eventually to self-discovery.

Afterwords

Rita, as a working-class hairdresser, represents the professionally trained mass. Her subsequent decision on a higher education and eventual academic achievement stand for individual opportunities accessible to all through liberal education. Hers is a prime example of how one’s mind could be improved upon and of the infinite possibility of human learning ability. If in the end the individual ‘decides’ against his education as Frank has done, it is done because they have a choice on which to make a decision. This is what it is worth – liberation from their own disbelief in their self-worth and a chance to choose what is best for them.
References

Bramann, Jorn, *Educating Rita and Other Philosophical Movies*.  
[http://www/frostburg.edu/dept/phil/forums/PhilFilm4.htm](http://www/frostburg.edu/dept/phil/forums/PhilFilm4.htm).

