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PLAYFULNESS, IRONY, AND HUMOR IN WILLY RUSSELL'S PLAY EDUCATING RITA

Ali Hadi Mulla Al Adilee

General Directorate of Education at Diwaniyah, Ministry of Education, Iraq

E-mail: aali.eflu@yahoo.com

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ABSTRACT

Willy Russell is a British dramatist whose plays offer a new attitude towards life. *Educating Rita* as one of his most famous dramatic pieces accomplishes this goal through employing such comic features as irony, humor and playfulness. This article intends to analyze these elements in *Educating Rita* in order to reveal Russell's aim of writing this play. To do so, the writer has benefitted from the tents of Feminism because Russell employed Rita as a working class woman who has been deprived of an individual identity in order to reveal her attempts to free herself from the limitations that have been imposed on her due to her social standing and femininity. It will be concluded that Russell found irony, humor and playfulness as effective tools to achieve this purpose.

INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

Educating Rita is the name of a comedy by Willy Russell (born in 1947) as a well-known British dramatist. This play is performed by two actors and is set totally in the office of a University instructor. It is about the relationship between Rita as a 26-year-old working class hairdresser and Frank as a middle-aged university professor. Rita who is not happy with her job and life is looking for education in an Open University course in English Literature.

The play starts with the meeting between Rita and Frank as her tutor for the first time. Frank is an alcoholic lecturer who has been teaching to earn money for his drink. He is overwhelmed by Rita's energy and industriousness. However, Frank gets hostile when he sees that Rita is starting to take on the pretentiousness of the university life. Rita gets disenchanted by a friend's suicide and understands that her new position includes the same deceit and

shallowness from which she had formerly attempted to run away. The play finishes as Frank, sent to Australia on a study leave, is ready to accept the new changes.

Russell borrowed chiefly from Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* in order to write this play. *Educating Rita* is also regarded by many as a semi-autobiographical play. Russell was born in Liverpool in 1947, and left school at the age of fifteen. Before he started his education again, he became a women's hairdresser and a part-time singer/songwriter. Russell's other writings include *Blood Brothers* and *Shirley Valentine*. *Educating Rita* was also adapted for film and designated for a number of awards. Willy Russell is now one of the most renowned writers in the UK.

The problem that this study is going to address is how Russell's use of such features as irony and humor can lead the audience to understanding the themes of class differences or oppression and their effect on the educational system. In other words, the current research intends to make a connection between a number of literary figures and some of the main themes of *Educating Rita*.

Significance of the Study

Willy Russell has written some of the most distinguished plays of the world; however, his plays have not been analyzed thoroughly, and this article will be among the limited researches that have been carried out in this regard. The other point which results in this paper's significance is its attempt to analyze *Educating Rita* from a Feminist approach which is novel in this regard.

Review of the related literature

This part will be devoted to a brief explanation of the articles and researches regarding *Educating Rita*. However, it must be noted that the number of them is limited.

Arslan, S (2015) Educating Rita: The Muted Woman Raises Her Voice. Journal of

Educational and Social Research, 5(1 S1), 111-120.

This paper was a thorough investigation of Rita's fight to free her from the existing limitations through getting education in order to acquire her own way of thinking. Therefore, this research claims that by conquering the difference between "the reproductive body and contemplative mind", a woman can proclaim her refined self and the only way to achieve this goal is by an energetic membership in the academic life outside home. Thus, the subdued woman is able to raise her voice by demanding her own autonomous individuality.

Kant, K. (2012). The Power to Make Choices Education in " Educating Rita" by Willy

Russell. GRIN Verlag.

This book revolves around the power of education in a person's life as it enables them to free themselves from conventions and their pre-determined functions and responsibilities. The writer of this book discusses that it is clear from the very first stages of life that a woman's job is limited to doing the housework and nurturing her kids. And she thinks that doing these tasks is her "destiny"; therefore, just a few women and men may attempt to change these situations.

Geisler, T. (2007) "Educating Rita" als moderne Version des Pygmalion-Mythos. GRIN Verlag.

This book is written by a German writer and shows *Educating Rita's* adaptation of *Pygmalion* by Bernard Shaw.

Methodology: analysis of educating rita in the light of feminism

Educating Rita revolves around a female's interest in getting educated. Thus, Feminism can provide the writer with an appropriate methodology in order to study this play. Julia Kristeva (1986) as a well-known feminist once declared that in the past women would forget about their rights but the new generation of women are different, "The new generation of women is showing that its major social concern has become the symbolic contract as a sacrificial contract... And we consequently face a mass phenomenon – that they are forced to experience this sacrificial contract against their will" (p. 200). Rita can be alleged to be one of those in this new generation. In "Feminism and History" Judith M. Bennett (2006) pointed out that:

Women have a large part to play in this historical study of patriarchy, not merely as victims, but also as agents. Women's support has always been crucial to the endurance of patriarchy; hence, we must examine and understand the motivations of women who have colluded in their own oppression. (p. 67)

Moreover, since one of the main characters of this play is a woman who intends to get herself rid of a number of limitations, the analysis of Russell's application of such techniques as humor and irony plays an important role in a better understanding of themes like oppression of women in different aspects including education and class.

These techniques can actually show how the writer meant to satirize and condemn the ruling conventions of his society. Russell also used Frank as an educated character and Rita as an ordinary unschooled person in order to display a difference that would be helpful in his coping with problems of social limitations and the need to form an individual identity. According to Stephen Harold Riggins (1997),

For a person to develop a self- identity, he or she must generate discourses of both difference and similarity and must reject and embrace specific identities.

The external Other should thus be considered as a range of positions within a system of difference. (p. 4)

The present paper will mainly focus on the fact that both humor and irony are frequently used for satirizing because they are the two most widespread means that writers can make the most of in order to review the ruling ideology. Besides, Russell very well knew that satire uses humor to devalue the mannish emphasis on literary exclusivity.

DISCUSSION

Humor and playfulness in educating Rita

As already mentioned, *Educating Rita* is a comedy and such elements as playfulness, irony and humor play an effective role in its being viewed as a comic dramatic piece, because it is full of acerbic gusto and a gloomy desire for a different way to live and develop. Now, this part is an attempt to analyze these features in this play. First of all, it has to be noted that humor refers to the experiences that are meant to incite laughter and result in delight.

Class inequalities and the desire to get education form this play's main themes. These themes are exposed by both the characters of Frank and Rita and a number of techniques. *Educating Rita* is regarded as a humorous play and the very first scene is the representative of this issue. In this scene, Rita says: "Well that's no good always mean in' to, is it? Y' should get on with it; one of these days you'll be shout in' 'come in' an' it'll go on forever because the poor sod on the other side won't be able to get in" (Russell, 2001, p. 7). What leads to her sentences' being regarded as humorous is that she utters them in an ironic way, and the audience expects Frank to react angrily. Also, the spectators find this scene humorous, since Rita and Frank are completely different. Frank is a trained professor while Rita is an unprofessional student.

Rita is a frank, funny woman and the reason why Russell has used such a character in his play is due to her humorous nature as she isn't afraid to say whatever she thinks about. When she enters Frank's office for the very first time, she sees a picture on the wall and cannot help saying "it's very erotic" (Russell, 2001, p. 3). Then she immediately starts to defend her opinion by saying "there's no suppose about it, look at those tits" (Russell, 2001, p. 3). The audience finds this scene humorous since it is really shocking. Also, for a higher rate of humor, Russell tried to highlight Rita's Liver pudlian accent. Frank's reaction to Rita is also humorous because he is disturbed by Rita's self-assurance.

The second reason why this play is considered as a humorous one is that specific and sudden situations play an important role in producing this humorous effect. A scene in the second act proves this very well when the audiences know that Frank was once teaching a class, and unexpectedly he fell off the platform due to having drunk so much alcohol. This happening is only narrated and the onlookers do not see that; actually, we get aware of this event when Frank is explaining it to Rita. However, Russell's skillful imagery to

generate an image of Frank in the viewers' mind results in a humorous consequence. It can be stated that this is attractive for the audiences because it occurs out of the sudden.

Also, we can refer to some other examples of humor in the play. For instance, Rita herself is highly humorous. Not only this character, but also the situation in which this play happens is really awkward and comical. As an example, the writer can refer to the situation when Rita is studying the picture and says "It's very erotic." Then, Frank looks up and states, "Actually I don't think I've looked at it for about ten years, but yes, I suppose it is" (Russell, 2001, p. 3). Rita says, "There's no suppose about it. Look at those tits" (Russell, 2001, p. 3). This statement makes Frank cough and go back to searching for the admission paper because he is feeling awkward.

As well as humorous characters and situations, the language used by the protagonists is playful or humorous, particularly the language that is employed by Rita with her common liver pudlian slang and pronunciation which blatantly differs from Frank's stylish accent and his use of appropriate words. Once she says, "What am I?" and Frank says, "Pardon?" and Rita states, "What?" (Russell, 2001, p. 3). In addition, the last element that is believed to add to this play's humorous aspect is due to some cases when there is confusion or misinterpretation.

Rita: You've got to challenge death an' disease. I read this poem about fightin' death.

Frank: Ah – Dlyan Thomas.

Rita: No. Roger McGough. It was about this old man who runs away from hospital an' goes out on the ale. He gets pissed an' stands in the street shoutin' an' challengin' death to come out an' fight. It's dead good. (Russell, 2001, p. 7)

Irony in educating Rita

As well as humor, irony is an important feature. Irony is actually a rhetorical literary figure in which what appears, on the surface is different from what is actually the case. One of the most remarkable ironies that happen in this play is related to the issue that Rita may have switched a stiff range of social standards for another, because she is just attributing to the middle class's methods of thinking and acting rather than the lower class to which she belongs.

Rita is a working-class woman who desires to get rid of her conventional roles as a housewife. She regards education as the best way to achieve her aspiration. It can be claimed that Russell's application of humor or irony is to show the difference between Rita and Frank and Rita's sincerity in her relations. Frank's idea towards Rita shows that even an educated man like Frank think of women as inferior ones.

His ironic way of talking to Rita as an archetype of the females who attempt to study critical thinking and reading brings about the audience's making sure about Frank's narrow-minded masculine view towards women. According to

this viewpoint, women are not talented enough to acquire critical reading and thinking. According to men like Frank who live in a masculine society, a woman can obtain an identity just through a man, not thinking. This man can be her father or husband. Thus, a woman who has her own way of thinking is dangerous and must be repressed.

For example, Rita's desire to attain a free identity leads to so many glitches in her rapport with her husband. Although she tries hard to tell him why she wants to get educated, she cannot persuade her husband because when she says she wants "a better way of living her life", her husband misunderstands her and replies they should save money to go to a new house (Russell, 2001, p. 16). It is clear that her husband hates her getting education and her pursuit of a new character looks so meaningless for him. Nevertheless, Rita doesn't become disappointed and tries not to obey her husband's request to have babies by taking pills.

Even when Rita and Frank meet each other for the first time, she introduces herself as Rita, while her admission papers show that her real name is Susan and she has chosen the nickname of Rita due to her admiration of Rita Mae Brown as the novelist of *Rubyfruit Jungle* that she likes so much. Actually, her nickname shows her desire to become a writer and develop her own viewpoint. In their initial dialogue, when Rita is talking about the books that she had already read, the audiences realize that Frank does not know any of them. In fact, the books that are read by Rita show her being from the working class.

According to Arsalan (2015), the change that Rita is seeking is beyond the physical change that her customers are looking for (p. 115). She says that "But these women, you see, they come to the hairdresse's cos they wanna be changed. But if you want to change y' have to do it from the inside, don't y'? Know like I'm doin'" (Russell, 2001, p. 14). Thus, she wants to make interior changes.

Arsalan (2015, p. 117) has also acknowledged that Rita not only struggles to reach a free female self but she also attempts to know the real meaning of life which is lacking among the working class people; for example, when she talks about *Peer Gynt* to a woman at the hairdresser's, the woman thinks it is a new lotion. But, when Rita tells about the play, the woman says, "I wish I could go off searchin' for the meanin' of life" (Russell, 2001, p. 35).

At the beginning of the second act, we see that Frank is writing poetry, and Rita is in new clothes. Also, in scene two she tries to talk in a 'posh' accent which signifies her changing the way she is speaking. Rita thinks of education as a means to reach a higher social class which enables her to run away a dull life and be free in decision making.

As stated, Russell used *Pygmalion* as his source of inspiration. Both Eliza and Rita as the main characters of the two plays experience an identity change. In fact, what makes them comparable is that both come from the lower class of the society. Eliza is a young flower girl whose behavior is unpolished and

accent is cockney which leads to her being regarded as a second-class resident. On the other hand, Rita is a twenty-six-year-old, impetuous who works as a hairdresser and married to a Liver pudlian beer drinker who wants her to have kids and to be a good wife. She feels displeased with her marital status. Russell imitated *Pygmalion* in order to signify the importance of education in women's lives.

One of the cases which make *Educating Rita* ironic is when Frank speaks articulately about Macbeth's tragic flaw, while he has no idea that his own tragic flaws are influencing his activities and depriving him of any likelihood of modification. Another example of irony belongs to education because it seems that Rita may have switched an inflexible range of social standards for another; while she is merely giving credit to the middle class's thinking model instead of the lower class's.

Rita wants Frank to help her get educated since she's dissatisfied with her personality and life. She tells Frank that the people she lives with lack "culture." When Frank indicates that she comes from a "working-class culture" that merits its own appreciation, she is opposed to him by saying, "I don't see any culture; I just see everyone pissed or stoned tryin' to find their way from one empty day to the next" (Russell, 2001, p. 17). Actually, she is looking for the conventional accouterments of life as an intelligent person, because she believes that this will make her feel like somebody who isn't only living "from one empty day to the next" (Russell, 2001, p. 18).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The present paper analyzed the role of irony, humor and playfulness in *Educating Rita* by Willy Russell and noted that this British playwright found them as effective devices in disclosing his ideology in the power of education in a woman's life which can help her to free herself from her many conventional roles. It was discussed that Rita is a working class woman who is seeking some interior vicissitudes in order to establish her own viewpoint. Also, from the very beginning of the play, irony and humor are perceptible by the audience because they can see that Rita and Frank as the play's two main characters are complete opposites due to their cultural background and their different methods of speech. Frank employs ingenious language and good English 'There, you see, an example of assonance', while Rita utilizes everyday language 'Ta. I'll look after it. If I pack the course in I'll post it to y'(Russell, 2001, p. 12). These differences in culture and speech between the characters are understood straightforwardly by the audience and it is the dissimilarities that make Rita and Frank's correlation very humorous and ironic.

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