

## ENGLISH: *EDUCATING RITA*

**2009 HSC: Individuals venturing into new experiences may encounter obstacles, but may also gain significant rewards.**

**Do you agree with this perspective?**

**In your response, refer to your prescribed text and at least one other related text of your own choosing.**

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The inevitable difficulties and barriers which exist during the transition from their old world to their new world may discourage the individual, yet only the determined will benefit. Willy Russell's play *Educating Rita* involves the audience as its central character, Rita, develops and transforms into an educated woman who has the opportunity to make decisions for the better. Education is depicted as the link between a limited world and a world which presents choices. Craig Ashby's newspaper article "A Getting of Wisdom", which focuses on Ashby's childhood and adolescence, adopts the principle that education offers an individual a wide range of opportunities which was never available to them before. Judith Wright's poem "Legend" concentrates on how a blacksmith's boy overcomes obstacles throughout his journey from a miserable and dark world to a world of light and colour. Each text effectively illustrates a clear distinction between the old world and the new and how the transition between these worlds consists of hardships and difficulties, but even rewards.

Russell's play *Educating Rita* presents a character who has a desire to escape, despite the inevitable obstacles she will encounter when venturing 'into the world'. During the 1970's, society expected women like Rita to start a family, not a university literature course. Her ignorance and lack of knowledge is shown through the stage directions when she barges through Frank's study door. Frank's door is a metaphorical and physical barrier, separating two different worlds: Rita's old world and the world she yearns to belong. It also foreshadows the difficult and unpredictable journey into an unknown world. Dialogue displays how Rita's social class affects her views and the way she presents herself. This is evident in her comments about an 'erotic' painting in Frank's study in the first scene; "look at those tits" and "turn people on". Dialogue also allows the audience and Frank an insight of Rita's personality, which is then judged upon. Even though Rita desires to become a well-educated young woman with choices and opportunities, it is clear from the beginning of the play that she will struggle to discover herself and that there will be a series of obstacles she will have to overcome throughout her progressive growth.

Similar to *Educating Rita*, "A Getting of Wisdom" describes the restrictions of Ashby's old world and how his view of education and its rewards have transformed. He provides his readers a detailed recount of his primary schooling and the limited education and lifestyle of country New South Wales, which corresponds to Rita's education and Liverpool in Russell's play. Ashby describes his old world as "the black dust of Walgett country", symbolising his indigenous heritage as well as a dismal environment where there is an absence of liveliness and opportunities. Since this article was written when Ashby has already overcome the difficulties of education, it allows him to reflect. The anaphora "I am proud" expresses his thoughts and feelings towards the educational journey he embarked and this is also evident in *Educating Rita*. Ashby claims that "education is the circuit-breaker. Education is the tipping point." This metaphor enhances education as powerful and as a life-changing reward, similar to the value education has in *Educating Rita*. *Educating Rita* and "A Getting of Wisdom" successfully present education as "the key to all the important aspects of life" and a method of escaping from their previous world which once trapped them. Individuals venturing into new experiences will experience hardship, but the rewards, which are inevitably a part of this transition, are the most significant.

The protagonist in Judith Wright's poem "Legend" is aware of the challenges he may encounter and these have the ability to deter or frighten. The poem consists of dark and light imagery and this juxtaposition depicts the contrasting worlds. The repetition of black, as seen in the similes "like an

old black hat, like a black hungry dog”, emphasises the darkness and loss of hope the boy encounters at the beginning of his transition. This also establishes the recurring motif and significance of colour. The cacophony and alliteration of harsh ‘b’ sounds in the opening line highlights and foreshadows his difficult transition. Barriers which exist in rustic landscapes such as “cobwebs... rivers... thorn branches” suggest that it is against nature to escape and proceed towards a better world. This is further reinforced by the personification of nature where “mountains jumped in his way” and “rocks rolled down on him”. This is similar to Rita’s venture into the academic world, which is deemed ‘unnatural’ or against the norm. The personification “the night ready to swallow him” adds to the idea that the blacksmith’s boy’s surrounding environment does not support this transition. Explicitly, the world which the boy attempts to escape from does not offer him any fulfilling rewards and aims to hinder his progress.

As Rita continues to progress and grow, she experiences a sense of marginalisation from her old world and new world. Rita’s exclamation, “I’m a half-caste”, emphasises her position of being trapped in the middle of two worlds. To make her self-discovery even more challenging, Rita seems to be overwhelmed with external and internal conflicts. Her husband, Denny, sabotages Rita’s growth by burning her books and essays because he believes that individuals with a higher education do not correspond with the ethics of the working class. This significant event is also an allusion to the Nazi book burnings during 1933, which occurred at least 35 years prior to the setting of *Educating Rita*. When Rita agrees to accompany her family to the pub, her mother starts to cry and proclaims that “we could sing better songs than those”. This quote is a metaphor for a better life and breaking out of their limited world. Frank’s study window acts as a metaphoric barrier separating the two worlds. Even though Rita can see through the window, she cannot open it. This means that Rita is tremendously close to the world she desires to be a part of, but cannot be included because she has not completely discovered herself.

Like *Educating Rita*, “Legend” explores adversities an individual encounters when venturing into an unfamiliar world and the rewards he or she gains after their transition. The confident and optimistic persona embarks on a journey to a new world which is completely different from his old and dull world. However, like Rita, the blacksmith’s boy is not deterred by the obstacles which confront him. Instead, he is determined to overcome these barriers in order for a better life. Repetition of “I can” accentuates his willpower to escape his old world. The high modal language reassures that his choice to pursue a different life will be achieved as long as he continues to rise above any challenge which attempts to daunt him. The recurring motif of a rainbow suggests a rewarding outcome which often follows a dark series of events, similar to how a rainbow often follows melancholy rain. In the final stanza, after the central character overcomes natural obstacles, “lizards ran out to see, snakes made way for him” and this demonstrates that nature, once hostile, is now reconciled to him. Wright’s poem demonstrates the difficulty one confronts during the transition from their old world to a new world and that an individual requires determination in order to pursue a rewarding life.

Rita believes that she discovers her true self and obtains choices when she is a part of the educated, middle-class world. She also gains a new perspective and understanding of literature and then uses this new skill to alter the way she reflects life. Rita is dressed in “new, second-hand clothes” and just arrived back from summer school in London. Her new clothes symbolise change and ‘second-hand’ ideas. The clothes may be second-hand and old, but they are new to Rita. Shadow characters, such as Trish, influence her opinions and this indicates that Frank is no longer Rita’s sole teacher. She even goes to the extent of disregarding Frank’s ideas and not informing him about her personal life. As her self-discovery and transition into the new world progresses, individuals see Rita’s transformation. Nevertheless, Frank opposes this and declares that Rita has not found a better life, just a different life where she reproduces different people’s judgments. This is represented by the word ‘song’ in the quote “found a better song to sing have you? No- you’ve found a different song”. When Rita moves into the new world, she realises that it offers her choices, which are something she never had because all she did was comply with society’s expectations. “I had a choice” and “I’ll make a decision. I’ll choose” suggest that options grant her more power which she gained throughout her self-discovery. Education unlocks countless possibilities and this non-physical reward is one Rita attains from her experiences.

The journey from an individual's old world to their new world involves countless problems and challenges. However, their willpower will allow them to surpass any obstacle and eventually reward them. Educating Rita, "A Getting of Wisdom" and "Legend" successfully convey this message through their central character's experiences. Each text demonstrates that the transition between the old and new worlds is the most difficult aspect of the whole transformation, yet this aspect is the most didactic.