

Extended Essay – English A2

Research Question:

To what extent the characters Eliza Doolittle and Susan “Rita” White—from the plays “Pygmalion” and “Educating Rita” respectively—are similar in terms of their ambitions, efforts, and expectations.

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Abstract:

The aim of this extended essay is to compare and contrast two characters in two different plays—George Bernard Shaw’s “Pygmalion” and Willy Russell’s “Educating Rita”—in terms of the difficulties they face, their ambitions and efforts, and their expectations from the course. Despite taking place in different times, these two plays share common themes such as education and self-development. “Pygmalion” takes place in the Victorian era in which social distinctions are seen between the classes. On the other hand, “Educating Rita” takes place in a much more modern world. In this time there isn’t as much class distinction and life conditions are better than during the Victorian era. These two different approaches to the self-development of individuals have common points as well as contradictory ones. These important differences and similarities are the subjects of this essay.

137 words

Introduction

Both plays, “Pygmalion” by George Bernard Shaw and Willy Russell’s “Educating Rita”, focus on the theme of educating lower class individuals. Although their plots are similar on the surface, some crucial events are differing from each other. Also, these plays are varied in lots of ways, such as the aims and characters of the students and their educators. These differences make the progress of each story significantly different.

“Pygmalion” is about a flower girl’s attempt to become a lady of refinement, despite being absolutely poor and living in hard conditions. Shaw criticises class distinction in this play by showing that even a flower girl could be a lady under the right conditions. He shows the development of the flower girl – Eliza Doolittle – through her behaviour and manner of speaking. From the words she uses and the things she does, we frankly see her becoming a lady.

The reason for this education is an absurd one: a bet between Higgins and one of his friends. Eliza doesn’t demand such a course, however when Higgins offers her the chance, she doesn’t refuse it. She works hard to become a lady, so as to be a respected member of the society.

This play has an entertaining mood intertwined with romance between Higgins and Eliza. In the first chapters of the book, Higgins sees Eliza as a test subject, as can be observed from his behaviour. He neither sees Eliza as an individual, nor does he recognize she has emotions too. He uses the phrase “unfortunate animal” for Eliza due to the sounds she makes when she first tries to say her alphabet. However, the education strengthens her dignity and this charms Higgins. The strong character she has after beginning her education makes Higgins fall in love

with Eliza. Though at first glance Higgins succeeds in his goal which is creating a lady from Eliza, he fails in persuading Eliza to live with him. For when Eliza becomes a lady, she also gains her independence as she is capable of responding to her own needs.

On the other hand, “Educating Rita”, by Willy Russell, is about the education of a determined and ambitious girl named Rita. Rita’s life conditions are slightly better than Eliza’s, thus her aim in attending this course is quite different. Her aim in this education is to gain her freedom from her repressive husband and friends by being a lot more enlightened than them. The other main character in this play is her teacher, Frank. Actually, at the end of the play, the change in Frank is more significant than the one undergone by Rita. Throughout the plot, Rita gains self-confidence and explores herself, which ends up with a considerable change in her interests.

The style of this play creates a humorous atmosphere, which is especially achieved through the accents of Frank and Rita. Their accents are totally the opposite of each other in terms of the impressions they leave. Frank’s accent is a posh one, which is a result of his literary status, whereas Rita’s is a colloquial one. Also, in expressing these contrasting accents, different words are often used for the same concepts.

The Case of Eliza Doolittle

The only reason for Eliza accepting to be a part of this course is to have a more elite life as a lady. During the process, Eliza has lots of difficulties, such as the influence of her background. Even though she tries hard, her previous experiences make the goal a lot trickier to achieve. For example, her former accent is an ill-mannered one with lots of weird sounds, such as “Garn, aaaah-ow-oo!” This is one of the hardest things for Higgins to overcome in accomplishing his

achievement. Also her pride makes the course harder because Higgins wants her to practice even the easiest things, such as saying the alphabet in order to create a good base for her further education. This makes Eliza feel ashamed of her situation. “I know my alphabet. Do you think I know nothing? I don’t need to be taught like a child.”¹ This is a clear example of her anger due to the humiliation.

From the dialogue between the gentlemen on the street and Eliza, we understand that she is not satisfied with her standard of living. Of Lisson Grove, the area in which she was born, she says: “It wasn’t fit for a pig to live in; and I had to pay four-and-six a week.”² She uses the word “pig” for herself, which reinforces the fact that she doesn’t like the life she has. However she doesn’t want lots of money or a luxurious lifestyle, she just wants to sell her flowers in a decent shop as a respectable lady. Even before the course, she loves her job but hates the conditions; therefore her dream is to work in a classy flower shop which she owns. She doesn’t seek diamonds, expensive cars or villas, but only an honourable life.

Due to these unsatisfying conditions, Eliza agrees to take part in this experimental education. She thinks that afterwards she will be a respected lady and belong to the highest social class, which had lots of benefits in the Victorian era. To start with, being a lady provides her the opportunity for an elite lifestyle, as being respected within society is vital for this. Also this process will give her the chance to make a fresh start to her life, as she will be like a new person.

From the dialogue exchanged between Eliza and the other characters it is obvious that respect is what Eliza needs, and she seeks this through education. Even when she comes to Higgins’ house

¹ P. 49, Shaw, *Pygmalion*, Longman Literature, 2006.

² P. 12, Shaw, *Pygmalion*, Longman Literature, 2006.

as a poor flower girl, she mentions her intention to pay for the lessons by saying: “Why shouldn’t I? I know what lessons cost as well as you do; and I’m ready to pay.”³ This is the proof of her pride which causes her to offer to pay for the lessons even though she can’t. She expects being a lady to give her a respected social status. Indeed, she wants to earn that respect through her education, job and character. As a result she thinks being respected, which is essential to becoming a lady, is the first thing she needs to achieve. Therefore her behaviour is shaped by this intention.

The Case of Susan “Rita” White

Rita’s aim in attending an educational course is a lot different than Eliza’s, as crucial things are different in these two plays, such as the era, the characters’ backgrounds, the social structure, and their surroundings. These differences alter the motivations behind the desire to learn and hence Rita’s mood during the process and the obstructions she faces in her education are different to Eliza’s.

Differences Between the Characters

To start with, this play takes place in later years than “Pygmalion” and conditions are very different. In the time in which “Pygmalion” takes place, in the Victorian era, there are greater class distinctions within society. Though this harshly affects the life standards of the society, in Rita’s time there isn’t so hard a situation. People are more equal and they have every right to

³ P. 24, Shaw, Pygmalion, Longman Literature, 2006.

make their lives easier, including the right to do any job they want. To earn money Rita works as a hairdresser. Also, in the time “Educating Rita” takes place, hobbies are mostly related to self – development, for example sports, music, arts and literature. However literature is a little more revered than the others and it is seen as one of the essentials for being a cultured person. So this is the reason why Rita chooses the literature course. Through this course she will in a way gain social status.

Rita aims, through education, to improve herself and gain self-confidence by passing an exam which most people of her background couldn't pass. She sees people who are interested in literature as significantly more cultured than the other members of society. Their accent is even different from the others, and this different lifestyle impresses Rita. Frank, the educator, is deeply interested in literature which leads him to write poems and those unique properties can therefore be seen in him. His accent, interests and lifestyle are quite different to Rita's. In one of the first lessons Rita takes from Frank, he suggests a book to her—“Howard's End”—and Rita suggests one to him, which is called “Rubyfruit Jungle”. Later on they discuss those books in terms of the positive and negative sides of them. During this process, we clearly see that Rita's and Frank's understanding of literature is quite different to each other. Rita likes a children's story whereas Frank prefers a serious novel. Rita seeks entertainment in a novel; on the other hand, Frank prefers didactic ones. Differences between Frank and Rita can be clearly observed from the conversations between them such as the one when they talk about famous poets. Frank asks Rita if she knows Yeats, the poet, and she asks whether it is a wine lodge. This part is a clear example of how they differ from each other in terms of their interests, because Frank recognises Yeats as an important person, however Rita hasn't even heard of him.

Similarities Between the Characters

Similarly to Eliza, Rita knows her cultural level and she realizes that essays she writes are quite far from what she needs to produce to pass the exam. In the lesson in which they discuss books, Frank asks her to write a critical essay. A week later Rita brings the essay and at the moment she hands it over she uses the word “crap” in reference to it. This situation is a result of Rita’s awareness of her level of culture. She recognises that she knows almost nothing about literature and that’s why she decides to attend the course and is so eager to learn. She realizes that her life, and the lives of those around her, is an ordinary one which is shaped by primitive needs.

In one lesson she expresses her reason for attending the course with a philosophical approach, and this quotation expresses the “primitive” needs of her surroundings:

“...there was always somethin’ in me head, tappin’ away, telling’ me I might have got it all wrong. But I’d just play another record or buy another dress an’ stop worryin’. There’s always somethin’ to make you forget about it. So y’ do, y’ keep goin’, tellin’ yourself life’s great. There’s always another club to go to, a new feller to be chasin’, a laugh an’ a joke with the girls. Till, one day, y’ own up to yourself an’ y’ say, is this it? Is this the absolute maximum I can expect from this livin’ lark? An’ that’s the big moment that one, that’s the point when y’ have to decide whether it’s gonna be another change of dress or a change in yourself.”⁴

This stream of consciousness strongly demonstrates Rita’s reasons for attending the course.

⁴ P. 32, Russell, *Educating Rita*, Pearson Education

Also the obstacles she faces during the course are important for the plot as they affect Rita's will to learn. The most important difficulty she has is her husband, Denny. He doesn't want Rita to improve herself because if she does, they will be so different that she may want a divorce from him. This is a risk to which Denny can't stay unresponsive, and so he decides to prevent Rita from going to the course. In order to do that he tries lots of things, even burning her books and essays; however she doesn't give up and continues the course and takes her exam. Moreover, it can be stated that this difficulty empowers her admiration towards literature and makes her even more ambitious. This situation can be seen easily in almost every dialogue between Frank and Rita that relates to Denny, including this one:

“Denny tried to stop me comin’ tonight. He tried to get me to go out to the pub with him an’ his mates. He hates me comin’ here. It’s like drug addicts, isn’t it? They hate it when one of them tries to break away. It makes me stronger comin’ here.”⁵

Denny's thoughts are accurate as we see from the things Rita says: that she takes the course to find herself, and during this she isn't much interested in anybody else. When she enters Frank's room she says:

“I’m busy enough findin’ meself, let alone findin’ someone else. I don’t want anyone else. I’ve begun to find me – an’ it’s great y’ know, it is Frank. It might sound selfish but all I want for the time bein’ is what I’m findin’ inside me.”⁶

⁵ P. 48, Russell, *Educating Rita*, Pearson Education

⁶ P. 51, Russell, *Educating Rita*, Pearson Education

This is one of the most obvious things that show Rita's aim. She just wants to explore the being inside of herself and in order to do that, she will give up anything: perhaps even her marriage.

She tries her best to gain maximum efficiency from the course with Frank by also attending other activities such as the theatre and dinners. Her eagerness to learn leads her to give all her energy and attention to this course. After she goes to the play "Macbeth", she is so excited that she leaves her customer with perm lotions in their hair to tell Frank that she had watched a "live" play. From that moment on, Rita's motivation is at its maximum level and nothing can stop her from achieving her goal. She becomes a completely different person in terms of her interests, expectations, and her ideas about life. Also, unlike Eliza, Rita has some broader insight into life and people. Eliza's vision is limited to Lisson Grove and although she attends her course, she never actively sought it. If Professor Higgins hadn't entered into such a bet, Eliza would still have been selling flowers in Tottenham Court. On the other hand, Rita isn't happy with the life she has and she knows things about other sections of society in terms of their lifestyles and living standards. She makes a decision about the kind of life she wants and chooses one that is more elite and she tries hard to have it.

An important similarity between these two characters is their final exams. On the surface, Rita's last evaluation in the course is the exam, and Eliza's is the Ambassador's Party. However when we take a deeper look at the plot, it is seen that the truth is different. Rita's final assessment is actually related to her husband Denny and her tutor Frank, and Eliza's will be between Professor Higgins and her. Both characters will need to prove their independence after having "re-made" themselves. This situation is completely related to their aims. Rita wants to be more cultured and educated than her husband, because from time to time she realizes that Denny's lifestyle is

completely different to what she seeks. As a result, when Denny gives her an ultimatum; she makes her choice and starts a new life.

On the other hand, Eliza wants to be a respected lady with the help of this course. However even Professor Higgins, as her teacher, doesn't treat her as a lady. Therefore, she needs to prove herself to her educator through declaring her independence. In the last scene of the play "Pygmalion", an argument takes place between Professor Higgins and Eliza. She says:

"Oh, when I think of myself crawling under your feet and being trampled on and called names, when all the time I had only to lift up my finger to be as good as you, I could just kick myself."⁷

Thus she makes sure that Higgins knows her thoughts. When Higgins tells her that he fulfilled his role in her education and created a woman of Eliza, she replies "Yes: you turn round and make up to me now that I'm not afraid of you, and can do without you."⁸ This answer is an indication of the success of Eliza's education. Her aim when accepting this course was to become a respected lady, and in that scene it is obvious that Higgins has started to show respect to Eliza.

Similarly to that, Rita has an argument with Denny related to the course which can be considered as one of Rita's ultimate challenges. With the process continuing, Denny becomes distant to Rita's life as they share different interests, and after a point he can no longer stand the situation. Rita is given an ultimatum and forced to make a decision about which way she will go. The

⁷ P. 104, Shaw, Pygmalion, Longman Literature, 2006.

⁸ P. 104, Shaw, Pygmalion, Longman Literature, 2006.

important aspect of this is that Rita is now able to shape her own future with her choices. As an answer to the warning, she leaves the house and takes a step into a new life. Furthermore, an argument between Frank and Rita is seen, which can be considered as the climactic point of the play. The argument arises when Rita asks Frank's opinion about her essay. Rita wants to hear Frank's review because she wonders whether it is a good one. However after hearing out the comment, Rita bursts out as she thinks Frank is too subjective about the essay. One of the main reasons for her attending the course is to become a person who is able to think critically and has unique ideas. Unfortunately, when she starts to act so, Frank becomes irritated as he doesn't want her to have an opinion differing from his. That fact can be deduced from his reaction when Rita expresses her opinion about Frank's poems. Though Rita reflects that she had admired his works, he refuses to believe her. The significant thing in that argument is that Rita uses the exact same words as Eliza: "I can do without you." This sentence is an obvious proof of Frank's success in making Susan "Rita" White an independent woman. Susan is a woman who is able to think critically, has her own ideas and is strong enough make decisions. This situation is entirely similar to that in "Pygmalion", as both Rita and Eliza are "re-made" and turned into individuals with these properties.

Being an individual can in this sense be considered as both having unique ideas about a situation and expressing those ideas. In the first act of the play "Pygmalion", Eliza sees herself as a pig and she lets Higgins humiliate her during the teaching process. However as the plot proceeds, she gains confidence in herself and begins to diminish that aspect of her relationship with Higgins – which is quite similar to one between a slave and his or her owner. In the last chapter, a new kind of relationship develops between Higgins and Eliza. As a result, Eliza becomes capable of making choices which clearly demonstrates the level of her confidence.

Similar to that, Rita also shows development in terms of her self confidence. When she first comes into Frank's room, she thinks her essays are completely without value and expresses as much. On the other hand, when she starts to constitute her own ideas, she realises that she is completely different from the girl she was. Therefore her confidence increases and this results in an argument with Frank. This shows she is able to make up her own ideas and make her own decisions, just as Eliza does.

Conclusion

By and large, with their common themes, the plays "Pygmalion" and "Educating Rita" are similar to each other. Characters share a variety of difficulties, even though the plays take place in different times. Both plays focus on the personal development of their main characters, which results in their starting of a new life. Although characters are being taught different disciplines, such as phonetics (Eliza) and literature (Rita), the results are similar somehow. Confidence, independence and respect are the trophies awarded for completing these two courses. Despite the differences in certain facts, such as setting and plot, these two plays leave the impression that they are so similar due to their characters' common points, such as their ambition, their effort, and the extent of their expectations.

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