

An Appreciation of George Bernard Shaw's *Arms and the Man* as a literary work paying attention to the thematic interests and the techniques of the play

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This article is an appreciation of George Bernard Shaw's *Arms and the Man* as a literary work with the thematic interests and the techniques of the play. There is a lack of such a work to be seen and this will fill the necessity of a criticism on 'Arms and the Man'.

1. Plot

The play has a straight forward and simple plot that starts from the beginning and moves swiftly to the end. It has no flashback or subplots. The plot is simply divided into three acts. The events of the play span about five months; it begins in November 1885 and ends in March 1886. Shaw uses dates and known towns and countries to establish the historical mode of the play.

As we know, the structuring of events in sequence is a plot. The play begins with Raina's reveries, of how Sergius, led a victorious cavalry charge against the enemy. Meanwhile, the Serbian forces who were defeated are on the run chased by the Bulgarians. One of the fugitives, Captain Bluntschli, runs into Raina's bedroom and she

protects him when the search party came in. Bluntschli prefers chocolate to bullets when he is at the war front. He tells Raina that Sergius and his cavalry charge succeeded because someone forgot to supply ammunition to the Serbs at the appropriate time. The captain's life is saved as he leaves in disguise, wearing Major Petkoff's coat. (This revelation was made towards the end of the play, when Bluntschli returns the coat to Raina and her mother).

The war ends, Raina's father, Major Petkoff, returns home with Sergius, the hero, to recount the story of a certain Swiss officer who impeded them at the exchange of prisoners. This officer, according to them, escaped death by chance as a certain girl and her mother protected him. Meanwhile, contrary to expectations, Sergius is attracted to Raina's maid, Louka. Unexpectedly, Captain Bluntschli arrives to return the coat which Raina and her mother lent him. He is the Swiss Officer talked about, so the men give him a rousing welcome while the women pretend that they do not know him.

However, he is persuaded to stay for lunch. After the lunch, he helps Serguis and Petkoff in their arrangement to demoblise the military formation with ease. Raina who, right from the first day she met Bluntschli, had romantic ideas about him to the extent of sending her a picture and calls him her chocolate cream soldiers, develops stronger feelings towards him. However, she still feels obliged to go on with Sergius. On the other hand, Louka who has fallen in love with Serguis, informs him that Raina is in love with Bluntschli. Sergius accuses Raina of making love to Bluntschli while Raina accuses him of doing same to

Louka. The crisis is resolved as Bluntschli proposes to marry Raina. Her parents are happy. Sergius accepts to marry Louka.

2. Themes of the Play

2.1. The Futility of War

The play is a satire on war. It is a deflation of military glory and a brazen onslaught on falsehood, and pretence. It is an exposition of all military spurious claims of bravery and heroism. In short, Shaw is saying in the play that warfare is criminal and bad and should not be seen as a mark of progress, achievement or of national greatness. This explains why a soldier who should be trigger - happy, is content with and settles for his chocolate in a serious life-and-death situation which the war represents.

2.2. Love and Marriage

The second theme of the play is marriage. Shaw is of the view that marriage is a union between a man and a woman which should be built on concrete traits of their character and not on illusions and fantasies. He feels that marriage is good and should be encouraged. The primary decision of Raina to marry Sergius is based on the illusion that Sergius is a war hero whom she could be proud of anytime, and anywhere. Raina declares that her fiancé Sergius, is “just as splendid and noble as he looks, that the world is really a glorious world for women who can see its glory and men who can act its romance”. The same fantasy leads her to take Sergius’ portrait and address it while on her bed in the night and say, “my hero, my hero”. The same emotion

governs her parent’s choice of partner in marriage for her. This is simply because they discovered that Bluntschli inherited a lot of wealth from his late father.

2.3. Romanticism of War

In line after line, Shaw satirizes the romantic notions about war that glorify a grisly business. If not for the comic dialogue, the audience would more easily recognize that they are being presented with a soldier who has escaped from a horrific battle after three days of being under fire. He is exhausted, starving, and being pursued. Such is the experience of a real soldier. Late in the play, Shaw throws in a gruesome report on the death of the man who told Bluntschli’s secret about staying in Raina’s bedroom; there is nothing comic or heroic about being shot in the hip and then burned to death. When Raina expresses horror at such a death, Sergius adds, “And how ridiculous! Oh, war! War! The dream of patriots and heroes! A fraud, Bluntschli, a hollow sham.” This kind of description caused Shaw’s critics to accuse him of baseness, of trying to destroy the heroic concept. That a soldier would prefer food to cartridges in his belt was considered ludicrous by critics, but in the introduction to *Plays: Pleasant and Unpleasant*, Shaw was reported to have said that all he had to do was introduce any doubters to the first six real soldiers they came across, and his stage soldier would prove authentic.

It is also noteworthy that Catherine is dissatisfied with a peace treaty because, in her unrealistic vision of glorious war, there is supposed to be a crushing rout of the enemy followed by celebrations of a heroic victory. Shaw’s message here is that there can be peaceful alternatives to

perpetual fighting. He was dedicated throughout his life to curbing violence, especially that of wars, and *Arms and the Man* was one of the vehicles he used to plead his case.

2.4. Romanticism of Love

Shaw was a master flirt and he enjoyed the playful farce of romantic intrigues. But he recognized that playing a game differed from serious love, and he tried to convey as much in *Arms and the Man*, which is subtitled “An Anti-Romantic Comedy.” In the play, Raina and Sergius have paired themselves for all the wrong reasons: because their social status requires a mate from the same social level; and because Sergius plays the role of the type of hero that Raina has been taught to admire, and Raina plays the role that Sergius expects from a woman of her station. The problem is that neither is portraying his/her real self, so their love is based on outward appearances, not on the true person beneath the facade. They are both acting out a romance according to their idealized standards for courtship rather than according to their innermost feelings. Just as the cheerleader is expected to fall for the star quarterback, Raina has fallen for her brave army officer who looks handsome in his uniform. When Bluntschli and Louka force Raina and Sergius to examine their true feelings, Raina and Sergius discover that they have the courage and desire to follow their hearts instead of seeking to meet social expectations.

2.5. Class Discrimination

As a socialist, Shaw believed in the equality of all people and he abhorred discrimination based on gender or social

class. These beliefs are evident in the relationships portrayed in *Arms and the Man*. Shaw allows a maid to succeed in her ambitions to better herself by marrying Sergius, an officer and a gentleman. This match also means that Sergius has developed the courage to free himself from the expectations of his class and instead marry the woman he loves. The silliness of Catherine’s character is used to show the illogical nature of class snobbery, as she clearly makes divisions between her family and the servants, even though, or perhaps because, the Petkoffs themselves have only recently climbed the social ladder. The play also attacks divisions of rank, as Captain Bluntschli has leadership abilities that the superior-ranking officers, Majors Petkoff and Saranoff, do not have, illustrating the fact that ability has little to do with rank. Ability also has little to do with class, as exemplified by the character of Nicola, who is declared the ablest, and certainly the wildest, character in the play.

2.6. Idealism versus Realism

Arms and the Man illustrates the conflict between idealism and realism. The romantic ideal of war as a glorious opportunity for a man to display courage and honor is dispelled when Sergius admits that his heroic cavalry charge that won the battle was the wrong thing to do. His notable action does not get him his promotion and Sergius learns that “Soldiering, my dear madam, is the coward’s art of attacking mercilessly when you are strong, and keeping out of harm’s way when you are weak.”¹

Sergius and Raina must face the fact that their ideals about love are false. Fortunately, both of them are actually

released by this knowledge to pursue their true loves. But first, Sergius goes through a period of despair in which he questions whether life is futile if the ideals by which he has set his standards of conduct fail to hold up when exposed to reality. This question is an underlying current throughout the play. Shaw gives a happy resolution, but it is a serious question that most people must face in life.

Much is made of Bluntschli's realism—i.e., keeping chocolates instead of ammunition in his cartridge belt, showing contempt for sentimentality, and reacting in a practical manner to his father's death. However, Nicola is the consummate realist in the play. Nicola's message is: adapt, exploit, survive. Bluntschli proves to have a romantic side, after all, and thus is the most balanced character in the play in that he seems to know when to temper his romanticism with realism and when to stick to his ideals.

3. Setting

The play has both physical and historical settings. It is set in Bulgaria of 1885 when Prince Alexander I of Bulgaria revolted against the Serbs and refused to pay compensation. The Serbs declared war against them but were defeated in the Battle of Slivinitza. Austrian officers fought with the Serbs while Russian officers led the Bulgarian army. Swiss mercenaries (professional soldiers who are hired during wars) fought on both sides. Captain Bluntschli fought on the Serbian side but when he met Raina, he wished he "had joined the Bulgarian army instead of the other one". Captain Bluntschli exemplified the Swiss mercenaries in the play. All the actions of the play take place in Major

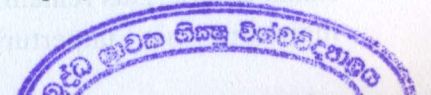
Petkoff's house - Raina's bedroom, their library and their garden.

4. Language

The language of the play is simple, straight forward and direct. It is devoid of flamboyant imagery and symbolism. The dialogue is true to life and appropriate. All these enhance an easy understanding of the play. However, Shaw made extensive use of humour and ironies in the play. In the play there is an extensive use of imagery. The imagery help to create a mental picture of all the wars fought and won (real war and romance) to the reader. The language is simple, this makes it easy for the reader to read and understand it.

5. Humour and Ridicule

The play presents an extravagant exhibition of humour. It is ridiculous that a soldier should prefer chocolates to his gun to the extent that he is nicknamed "chocolate cream soldier". See also, the way Captain Bluntschli attacks the chocolate box and licks his fingers. And that the Petkoffs should conclude among themselves that they are superior to their neighbors simply because of the mere possession of a library and an electric bell. The scene when the Captain returns and Raina and Catherine pretend not to know him and the eventual discovery of the truth are some of the scenes that provoke humour. The accepted views of heroism and nobility are also ridiculed in the play. Raina and Sergius are the main targets here.



6. Dramatic Irony

It is ironic that a soldier, Sergius, who has learnt the horrors of war and becomes so worn out that he declares that "soldiering...is the coward's art of attacking mercilessly when you are strong and keeping out of harm's way when you are weak,"² is treated and regarded as a hero by Raina. It is also an irony of situation that "Raina's chocolate cream soldier"³ whom she sheltered from the ravages and wreckage of war, eventually marries her, regardless of her avowed expectations to marry her fiancé, Sergius, and her day-dreams of striking a lasting companionship with her childhood hero.

7. Stage Direction

The playwright uses elaborate and detailed stage directions. These help to enhance the mental picture of the reader, as plays "are meant to be performed not read". Thus, those who are not opportuned to watch the real performance can watch it with their minds' eyes. These stage directions also help to give insights into the characters hence he describes Catherine Petkoff as "...imperiously energetic...a very splendid specimen of the wife of a mountain farmer, but determined to be a Viennese lady..."⁴

8. Characterization

Shaw presents well-developed characters who are consistent and properly motivated. Each character acts consistently from the beginning to the end; for instance, Raina and Sergius remain romantic throughout, Bluntschli maintains his unperturbed and unpretentious pose

throughout. Shaw also uses characters to foster his theme. For example, Louka maintains her derogatory attitude towards Raina and even the entire household. Her attitude questions the issue of social status in the society.

8.1. Raina Petkoff

Raina is a beautiful young lady. She is twenty three years old but behaves like a school girl of seventeen, perhaps because as an only child of her parents, they pampered and spoiled her. To her mother she is still a child and her father calls her 'little one'⁵. Her parents are rich, so she is accustomed to very comfortable establishments like going to Bucharest every year for the opera session and spending a whole month in Vienna. She is very romantic, and appreciates beauty as she is seen in the opening scene; intensely conscious of the romantic beauty of the night, she has heroic ideas about love and marriage. Though she does not really love Sergius, she wants to marry him because of his heroic qualities. However, the marriage does not work out and she agrees to marry her chocolate cream soldier, another hero. Raina is generous, hospitable, compassionate and impulsive. These aspects of her character come out clearly in her relationship with Bluntschli. It is on impulse that she decides to hide him from the Bulgarian soldiers; she takes pity on him and calls in her mother to help save his life. As Bluntschli notes later, she had accepted him a fugitive, a beggar and starving man, her hand to kiss, her bed to sleep on, her roof to shelter him⁶. Above all she offered him chocolate.

Despite the above sterling attributes, Raina tells lies and pretends a lot. Her pretentious character is made manifest especially in her relationship with Sergius. Both of them played roles expected of people who are in love while in the real sense, neither cared deeply for the other. Her pretence is found out by Bluntschli who is a practical man. Her mother also is aware of this aspect of her character for she once acclaimed "Oh Raina! Raina. Will anything ever make you straightforward"⁷. She, however, shows that she could be natural and sincere when she is in a congenial company. She told her mother the truth about how she felt about Sergius and declared that she did not "care whether he finds out her chocolate cream soldier or not"⁸

8.2. Catherine Petkoff

Catherine is Raina's mother and is very fond of her only child. She is well "over forty, imperiously energetic, with magnificent black eyes"⁹. She makes effort to live like a wealthy woman by "wearing fashionable tea gown on all occasions"¹⁰. She is determined to live like a modern aristocrat everyday despite the fact that it gives her sore throats. Her husband observes that she goes "... too far with these modern customs ... Carrying the things to a ridiculous extent"¹¹. She also likes showing off her modern acquisitions and social status as is clearly shown in her pride at owning a library and an electric bell. She is domineering and rules the Petkoff household. Her husband takes instruction from her even in official state matters. She is fully involved in the political affairs of the country and is respected and feared more than her husband. Her husband confirms this as he prepares to go and give orders on the

demobilization exercise when he said "...Catherine, you may as well come too. They'll be far more frightened of you than of me"¹². She is ostentatious and materialistic. She encourages her daughter to marry Sergius who she believes is a hero and also rich but changes her mind as soon as she realizes that Bluntschli is richer than Sergius.

8.3. Major Petkoff

Major Petkoff is an amiable easy-going man. Though he is a major he is not knowledgeable in military strategy and organization, so one can easily conclude that he does not merit his rank but earned it because of his social status in the town.

That he is not even interested in politics is evident from one of the important questions he asked his wife as soon as he came back from the war: "you haven't been campaigning". For him the best thing in the world is for them to sit down in their house "after a good lunch, with nothing to do but enjoy ourselves"¹³. He is complacent and is ruled by his wife. In fact, he is afraid of his wife and takes instruction from her most of the time. He is content to have others do his work for him. He loves his only daughter and pets her. He is gullible as he is deceived by his wife and daughter when Bluntschli arrives in the house. He is also materialistic and wanted his daughter to marry a rich man because according to him, she is "accustomed to very comfortable establishments"¹⁴

In conclusion, he is, as the playwright puts it, "a cheerful, excitable, insignificant, unpolished man of about 80, naturally unambitious"¹⁵. He is not interested in modern

way of life. His wife describes him as a “barbarian at heart”¹⁶, but he is not bothered, and prefers to shout to call his servant instead of using the electric bell.

8.4. Major Sergius Saranoff

Sergius is a tall handsome man. He is rich in their local estimation, as he owns twenty horses. He is Raina’s romantic hero. Like major Petkoff, he is not well versed in military strategy and organization. He allows Bluntschli to map out their disengagement strategies and proudly appends his signature. This is why he led a suicide squad in the name of a cavalry charge. He escaped with his life because the enemies had the wrong ammunition. He does not admit his error instead he is cynical about their Russian officers who he said have been promoted while he is “...still a simple major”¹⁷.

This shows that he is arrogant and selfish. He wants to be promoted to a higher rank despite the blunder he committed at the war front. He resigns because he was not promoted. He claims that he never apologises when he offends anyone. He does not consider anybody’s feelings as long as he gets what he wants. He is affectatious as seen in her relationship with Raina. He pretends to love her while in actual sense he does not, but flirts with her maid, Louka. He honors his words in the end by proposing to marry Louka. He is boastful, impulsive and proud. He challenges Bluntschli to a duel when he learnt that Raina had an affair with Sergius, according to him “I brook no rival”. However, he is a coward and the fight did not take place eventually.

8.5. Louka

Louka is a maid in the Petkoff’s household. She is not contented with being a maid and hopes to get out of that situation. She is ambitious and realizes this ambition of not remaining a maid for the rest of her life when she accepts the proposal to marry Sergius. Nicolas describes her as having “a soul above her station”¹⁸

She is proud, self-righteous and contemptuous of her employers. She feels that there is really nothing spectacular about nobility. Her contempt for them is as a result of the fact that she had seen or known some of their illicit affairs. She also feels that she could use what she knew about them to blackmail them into not harming her. Hear her “I know some family secrets they wouldn’t care to have told me as young as I am. Let them dare quarrel with me”¹⁹.

She is fearless, strong willed, impudent and vicious. She believes that the end justifies the means. She goes to any length to get what she wants even if it means to malign another person just like she did to Raina. She blackmailed Sergius into the marriage proposal he made to her. She is a gossip. It is true that Raina and Sergius do not really love each other, Louka’s gossip facilitated the break up and Sergius settled for her instead of Raina. When she was caught eavesdropping on Bluntschli, Sergius and Raina, she stood her ground and declared unabashedly, “my love was at stake. I am not ashamed”²⁰. She is very courageous and is the only person who deflates Sergius arrogance by forcing him to apologise to her publicly.

8.6. Nicola

Nicola is a good servant who is obedient and loyal. He is ambitious in his own way, he hopes to open shop at Sofia and would still need his employer's patronage. He therefore, does not want to lose that patronage by being disobedient. He is complacent and is contented to be used to avoid trouble in the household. For instance, he accepted spoiling the cake pudding in order to cover his mistress' secret. He is respectful, principled and faithful, he respects his superiors and does not interfere or intrude in their affairs or conversation like Louka does. Despite Louka's insults, he remains faithful to her and tries to educate her on the realities of life. He does not talk about the family secrets of the Petkoffs. He is more experienced than Louka and realizes that if he fell out with the Petkoffs, they could make life miserable for him in the end. This explains his words to Louka: "You don't know the power such high people have over you and me when we try to rise out of our poverty against them"²¹.

He has served the Petkoffs faithfully for ten years and is not prepared to jeopardize his benefits for any reason. He is a noble gentleman despite the fact that he is a servant. Bluntschli describes him as "the ablest man I've met in Bulgaria"²².

8.7. Bluntschli

Bluntschli is a Swiss mercenary who fought on the side of the Serbs during the Serbian- Bulgarian war. He abandoned a comfortable life in his father's business to become a mercenary. Though he claims that he carries

chocolates instead of ammunition, he is a fine and competent soldier to the core. He is very smart and practical. He makes the best use of every opportunity he gets; when he entered Raina's bedroom, he used her cloak to prevent her from opening the door to call for help. However, on a second thought he gave it up, and made her believe that he will not surrender easily to the Bulgarian soldiers as he will not to allow them burst into"... this pretty room of yours and slaughter me here like a pig, for I'll fight like a demon... are you prepared to receive that sort of company in your present undress"²³.

He is an intelligent soldier who knows all the tactics, strategies and organisation of the army, soldering and war. He informs Raina of the military blunder which Sergius committed and maintained that in an ideal situation "he (Sergius) ought to be court-martialled". He also realizes the futility of war. This explains why he fights it dispassionately. As a mercenary, he is not patriotic but is just concerned with his fees. No wonder, he carries chocolates instead of bullets. He is humble, modest and adjusts easily to any situation. Those attributes are obvious during his second visit to the Petkoffs. He sensed the ladies' confusion on seeing him and decides to play along with them.

However, at the moment of decision when the picture was found, the practical and natural aspect of him took over, He shows his military efficiency and organizational skills in the way he handles the demobilization exercise for Major Petkoff and Sergius. As a humble and modest man, he does

not brag about it, instead, he allows Sergius to append his signature and Petkoff to go and give the orders. So both of them take the glory for the work he actually did. He is not a man of many words but believes that action speaks more. When Sergius challenges him to a duel, he does not ask for the reason for the fight but simply assures him that there "...shall be no mistake about the cartridges this time"²⁴. Also, when he realizes that Raina was free to marry him, he proposes immediately. Finally, he is truthful and asks Raina to be truthful and natural with him. He is also a good businessman for he does not allow marriage plans to disrupt the business he had at hand.

9. CONCLUSION

Arms and the Man presents to us the pretensions and foibles of the upper and noble class. It also shows that nobility does not guarantee intelligence. Shaw highlights this by making Louka, the maid more intelligent than her master and mistress. She uplifts her life as she outwits and makes fun of them. It can be seen that in practical terms, how comedy is used to ridicule men in the society. It shows that while we laugh at the follies of characters like Catherine, Sergius and Raina, we try to realize and avoid such weaknesses in our lives.

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End Notes

- 1 Page 50, *Arms and the Man*.
- 2 Page 50, *Arms and the Man*.
- 3 Page 13, *Arms and the Man*.
- 4 Page 16, *Arms and the Man*.
- 5 Page 78, *Arms and the Man*.
- 6 Page 83, *Arms and the Man*.
- 7 Page 51, *Arms and the Man*.
- 8 Page 51, *Arms and the Man*.
- 9 Page 16, *Arms and the Man*.
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- 16 Page 39, *Arms and the Man*.

- 17 Page 41, *Arms and the Man*.
- 18 Page 80, *Arms and the Man*.
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- 21 Page 36, *Arms and the Man*.
- 22 Page 80, *Arms and the Man*.
- 23 Page 21, *Arms and the Man*.
- 24 Page 72, *Arms and the Man*.