

Text analysis of "arms and the man" george bernard shaw essay sample



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This paper is a text analysis of George Bernard Shaw’s “ Arms and the Man.”

This play shall be examined on the following grounds: event, emotion, conflict, action, objective, need of the protagonist, relationships, circumstances, and environment, and character. To be able to accomplish such a huge task, this play shall be divided into two main parts: the first part shall concentrate on the themes that pervade the play; the second part shall be dedicated on the discussion of the conflict, climax, and the resolution of the play. In this way, this paper hopes to accomplish to give the reader the macro and micro picture of this play.

Three Themes

George Bernard Shaw’s “ Arms and the Man” is a satire-comedy play set in Bulgaria right after the Bulgarian army defeated Serbia in the very short Battle of Slivnitsa. It is set in the house of Major Paul Petkoff, a wealthy man whose position in the Bulgarian army is largely due to his social status. The main protagonist is Paul Petkoff’s daughter, Raina Petkoff.

George Bernard Shaw meant his plays to seriously comment on social realities while making the audience laugh. “ Arms and the Man” is no exception. This play, written in 1894, has at least three themes: the foolishness of romanticizing war; the idiocy of idealistic, chivalric love; and the ironic relations between the lower and upper classes.

The first theme, that of the foolishness of romanticizing war, could immediately be sensed in the title of the play. The title itself is satirical, adapted from the opening lines of Virgil's *Aeneid*, "Of arms and the man I sing." It should be recalled that *The Aeneid* is an epic that relates the story of Aeneas, a Trojan hero who founds Rome by going through fantastic events and winning a battle against Turnus. Needless to say, *The Aeneid* has a romanticized view of war and heroes. It presented war as the worthy means to found a great city, won by the mightiest hero who ought to be known, through all generations, as the founder of Rome. "Arms and the Man" says the opposite. In fact, the male protagonist, Captain Bluntschli, is presented in Act I as a soldier who would rather carry chocolates than loaded cartridges in his pockets. He is also presented as a fleeing soldier who jumped in the balcony of Raina to hide from the Bulgarians running after him. Simply put, Captain Bluntschli is a man who is far from the romanticized Aeneas.

Nevertheless, Captain Bluntschli is no coward. He is a professional soldier who does his best to survive and who is well equipped to do his tasks, if he is asked to do so. This could very well be seen when Major Petkoff solicited Bluntschli's help in order to plan the movements of the remaining regiments to Philoppopolis. He also proved himself to be very good at making soldier and horse exchanges, as witnessed by Major Petkoff and Sergius Saranoff. Bluntschli is the exact opposite of Saranoff, the war-hero whose status was gained accidentally and somewhat foolishly. He and his cavalry were proclaimed heroes only because they attacked the Serbians, beyond common sense and without a senior officer's command, when the Serbian's machine gun accidentally did not function due to the wrong cartridge. If not

for this "accident," Saranoff's cavalry would all have perished. Saranoff, the war-hero, is portrayed as an inept officer whose military position can largely be attributed to his family's social position, and whose war exploit is accidental.

Aside from the far-from-hero but realistic and human character of Bluntschli and the silliness of Saranoff's character, Shaw portrayed the foolishness of war through the words of the characters, most specially Saranoff. In Act III, Saranoff sheds the "heroic" pretences that he has struggled to put up with in the first two acts and says the following about the war: "And how ridiculous! Oh, war! War! The dream of patriots and heroes! A fraud, Bluntschli." The war hero is here caught saying that war is ridiculous and a fraud, something that the audience would not likely expect from someone who was glorified by his war-efforts. This was Saranoff's response to the narration of Bluntschli on how his friend was burnt alive by Saranoff's cavalry. Bluntschli narrated thus: "Shot in the hip in a wood-yard. Couldnt drag himself out. Your fellows' shells set the timber on fire and burnt him, with half a dozen other poor devils in the same predicament." This very short account of a "gory" event in the war should be enough to show how war is a waste, leading to the burning and death of seven individuals whose only "sin" is that they belong to the enemy's army. This and similar other events that happen in a war is what is ridiculous and a fraud.

That war is foolish is a message that Shaw has consistently fought for. It should be recalled that Shaw actively wrote against the First World War in a series of newspaper articles entitled, "Common Sense About the War"

(Mazer). For Shaw, "war represented the bankruptcy of the capitalist
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system, the last desperate gasps of the nineteenth-century empires, and a tragic waste of young lives, all under the guise of patriotism" (Mazer). This personal conviction is something he has warned the world about as early as 1894 in the play, " Arms and the Man."

As regards the second theme of the play, i. e., that romanticized love is a fraud, was portrayed through the characterization of the silliness of Raina and Saranoff's love affair, and the desirability of the love affair of Raina and Bluntschli and Louka and Saranoff. Raina and Saranoff's love affair could very well represent the romantic sort, the " higher love," as Raina and Saranoff called it. Act I is full of these representations. Raina praises Saranoff as her " soul's hero." She even treats his photograph as some sort of a sacred object: " *she does not kiss it or press it to her breast, or shew it any mark of bodily affection; but she takes it in her hands and elevates it, like a priestess.*" In Act II, Raina and Saranoff call each other " my queen" and " my king"; their actions are also as chivalric: " *Sergius leads Raina forward with splendid gallantry, as if she were a queen. When they arrive at the table, she turns to him with a bend of the head: he bows; and thus they separate, he coming to his place, and she going behind her father's chair.*" Nevertheless, in Act II, we also hear Raina talk to her mother about Sergius. She tells her how she is in fact not so into Sergius as she pretends to be. She also wishes to shock Sergius's senses, thinking that he is too ideal and chivalric. She expresses how she is not excited to get married to Sergius and somehow wishes that he finds the whole truth about the Chocolate Crème Soldier.

The fraudulent love affair between Sergius and Raina is in stark contrast to Raina and Bluntschli's love affair. From the very beginning, Bluntschli has already showed himself uncouth for Raina's sensibilities. In spite of this, Raina did something daring by leaving a photograph of her with a dedication, " Raina, to her Chocolate Crème Soldier, a souvenir" on the coat that she and her mother lent to Bluntschli. They consistently teased each other and eventually expressed their feelings to each other in the most unromantic way. In the end, Raina really loved Bluntschli and not Sergius. She prefers the uncouth chocolate crème soldier over the war-hero. We could also see how Louka and Sergius's love affair which is sensual and bold, totally inappropriate for their social standing, is more realistic and sincere, compared to the fraudulent " higher love" of Raina and Sergius.

The third theme, i. e., of the ironic characters of people from the upper and the lower class could well be characterized by the lack of sensibility and intelligence of Sergius and Major Petkoff contrasted with the intelligence and sensibility of Louka and Nikola. Major Petkoff's lack of planning skills is in direct contrast with Nikola saving for his future plan of putting up his own business. Sergius's guilt over his incapacity to be truly a gentleman and his lack of courage to fight for real love is also in direct contrast with Louka's straightforwardness and courage regarding love. With this said, let us now take a closer look at the play's conflict and the heroine's emotions.

Conflict, Climax, and Resolution

At the beginning of the play, Raina, the heroine, is seen basking in the comforts of her home and satisfied with the status of her family. This status

is something that both Raina and Catherine try hard to live up to. At the very beginning in Act I, Raina is described as wearing a coat thrice more expensive than the furniture in her room while Catherine is described to be a "splendid specimen of the wife of a mountain farmer, but is determined to be a Viennese lady, and to that end wears a fashionable tea gown on all occasions." Major Petkoff himself has to purposely speak about his library to the Russian officers just to prove his social worth. Hence, the initial situation of the Petkoffs is that of physically comfortable in their rich home at the same time perennially insecure about their social status, ceasing every moment to prove their social worth.

Along with this social insecurity comes the desire to live up to chivalric ideals. This is acutely present in Raina, as we have already described how she has idolized Sergius. Nevertheless, we have also seen how Raina gets tired of all these ideals, as she has intimated to Catherine. As mentioned, she wanted to shock Sergius's sensibilities. She also amiably accepted a Serbian soldier in her room and even gave him a photograph for souvenir. As such, it could safely be said that at the beginning, Raina has been coping with the "demand" to be a Victorian lady who takes pleasure in the higher things and idealizes love without necessarily associating it with bodily pleasures. This coping comes in conflict with her other "worldly" desires, the desire for the "wilder" things in life that a "true lady" should not think about. At the very beginning then, the insecurity of the situation is complemented by the internal conflict in Raina. Raina wants to feel the feelings of a true lady but in fact feels otherwise.

Unlike any other play, the conflict in "Arms and the Man" is established from the very beginning. In Act I, the insecurity of the Petkoffs has already been established in the same way that Raina's internal conflict has been made plain. It is in Act I when we see Raina both adoring Sergius's photo at the same time having to deal with an escaping Serbian soldier. Nevertheless, if we were to establish the event that made this conflict stark, it would definitely be the when Bruntschli jumped in Raina's room to take refuge. Right after Raina praised her war-hero, a dirty Serbian soldier challenges her lady-ideals. Bruntschli ate the chocolate crèmes in the most ungentlemanly manner. He does not care about courage and all the virtues of a gentleman and instead gives more importance to survival. Faced with such a character, Raina was obviously torn. She had to present herself as a lady and as a Petkoff. She had to be proud of her war-hero against the soldier who verbally made fun of Sergius but at the same time took liberty in hiding the Serbian soldier from those who were searching for him. As such, Raina is confronted with the conflict of ideals and reality. The audience is then presented with the question, "should ideals be prioritized over real feelings, thoughts, etcetera?"

Raina's internal conflict could have been put to rest if not for the accidental event of Petkoff and Sergius talking about it, without knowing that the two women involved in the hiding of the Serbian soldier were Raina and Catharine. This event, when Raina and Catharine had to be on their toes to hide their "misbehavior," would constitute the play's point of conflict. From here onwards, Catharine and Raina had to be at fits hiding the situation from Major Petkoff and Sergius. Raina would consistently be at odds between how

she wants to feel towards Sergius and how she truly feels about it. She would also be seen pretending to be unaffected and enjoying her own world when in fact she seizes every opportunity to speak with Bruntschli and enjoys the attention he provides her.

We could recall the event when Raina and Bluntschli were left in the library in Act III. Raina was "pleased" when Bluntschli admitted to being her "infatuated admirer." She also took comfort in the thought that Bluntschli is the first man to ever "take her seriously." The conflict continues until the point when the truth had to come out. The climax would then be when the secret of the Chocolate Crème Soldier cannot anymore be contained, i. e., when Major Petkoff found out about the photograph with dedication and demanded for an answer as to its intended recipient. Bluntschli admitted to being the true recipient of this photograph and the resolution of the other conflicts, including that of Louka and Sergius, slowly come to an end. Sergius finally was able to stand for his love for Louka and Bluntschli and Raina finally admitted their attraction towards each other.

In the play, we could see that along with the resolution comes the settling of Raina's internal conflict. As stated above, Raina was having troubles internally, between being a lady and her true desires. This internal conflict reached a point of conclusion when first, Raina had to face the fact that Sergius is not the gentleman he projects himself to be, and that Sergius is in love with Louka, and secondly, when Raina had to tell her father that "the lady" chose the Chocolate Crème Soldier. Thus, from the Raina who keeps things from the men and is internally torn between two desires, the audience is led to a Raina who was bold enough to finally face the reality regarding
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Sergius making love with Louka, that in fact, Sergius is no god that deserves no veneration. Finally, the audience is confronted with a Raina who has the guts to inform everyone of her real choice and of her real desires. As such, with the play's resolution comes the emotional resolution of the heroine.

"Arms and the Man" is a comedy satire meant to address very serious social problems. Nevertheless, it is also a play that looks closely into a human being's internal conflict created by the clashing of ideals and reality. As such, aside from making a commentary on social issues, the play also presents its own ethical answer to the question of the clashing of ideals and reality: in such instances, it would be best that ideals be tempered by reality. Or rather, romanticized ideals may be foolish things that keep a person from truly experiencing reality.

Works Cited

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