Arms and the Man Study Guide

Arms and the Man by George Bernard Shaw

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Introduction

Shaw was already a celebrity arts critic and socialist lecturer when he wrote *Arms and the Man* in 1894. One of Shaw's earliest attempts at writing for the theatre, it was also his first commercial success as a playwright. Although it played for only one season at an avant-garde theatre, thanks to the financial backing of a friend, it was later produced in America in 1895. Accustomed to the melodramas of the age, however, even sophisticated audiences often did not discern the serious purpose of Shaw's play. Thus, Shaw considered it a failure.

True success did not come until 1898, when *Arms and the Man* was published as one of the "pleasant" plays in Shaw's collection called *Plays: Pleasant and Unpleasant*, and it subsequently gained popularity as a written work. Included in this collection of plays are lengthy explanatory prefaces, which note significant issues in the plays and which have been invaluable to critics. In place of brief stage directions, Shaw's plays also included lengthy instructions and descriptions. Another unique aspect of *Arms and the Man* was its use of a woman as the central character.

Set during the four-month-long Serbo-Bulgarian War that occurred between November 1885 and March 1886, this play is a satire on the foolishness of glorifying something so terrible as war, as well as a satire on the foolishness of basing your affections on idealistic notions of love. These themes brought reality and a timeless lesson to the comic stage. Consequently, once Shaw's genius was recognized, *Arms and the Man* became one of Shaw's most popular plays and has remained a classic ever since.

Author Biography

Considered one of the greatest English-speaking dramatists, George Bernard Shaw was born July 26, 1856, in Dublin, Ireland, and had a long and productive life. He was the only son and youngest of three children born to George Carr and Lucinda Elizabeth Gurly Shaw, who were Irish Protestant gentry. Shaw's education involved tutoring from an uncle and at a series of schools, but he quit school at fifteen to work in an estate agent's office for five years. In 1876, he went to London to join his sister and his mother, who had left Shaw's alcoholic father to pursue careers in music.

Shaw was supported by his mother and sister as he wrote five unsuccessful novels. In 1888, he became the music critic for a newspaper, and then in 1895, he took a position as the drama critic at the *Saturday Review*, a position he held for three years. A devotee of Henrik Ibsen, he wrote *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* (1890) and modeled his own works after the individualism and the moral and social issues that he saw in Ibsen's drama. Through his own plays, Shaw is credited with creating the "drama of ideas." Among his best-known plays are *Arms and the Man* (1894), *Saint Joan* (1923), *Man and Superman* (1905), *Major Barbara* (1905), *Candida* (1897), and *Pygmalion* (first English production in 1914; it was produced in German translation in 1913). *Pygmalion* was made into a movie, for which Shaw won an Academy Award for best screenplay in 1938. The play was later made into a musical, *My Fair Lady* (1964), with book and score by Alan Jay Lerner and music by Frederick Lowe; the musical version retained the plot, characters, and many of the lines from the original play.

In 1898, Shaw married Charlotte Francis Payne-Townshend, an Irish heiress. Their marriage lasted until her death in 1943. A vegetarian, teetotaler, and fervent socialist, Shaw championed the causes of women and the poor. He was an active member in the Fabian Society, which proposed gradual, nonrevolutionary socialist reforms in the structure of society and the economy. In 1895, with Sidney and Beatrice Webb, he helped establish the London School of Economics.

Shaw wrote numerous pamphlets and kept busy as a lecturer on issues in politics, economics, and sociology. He was also a prolific letter writer. Greatly criticized for his opposition to World War I, Shaw was eventually forgiven by the public as his predictions about the conflict came true and people started to understand the true nature of war. In 1925, he won the Nobel Prize for Literature. He died November 2, 1950, at his home in Hertfordshire, England. He left his fortune to the movement for rational spelling, the British Library, and the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art.

Plot Summary

Act 1

It is November 1885, during the Serbo-Bulgarian War. Raina Petkoff, a young Bulgarian woman, is in her bedchamber when her mother, Catherine, enters and announces there has been a battle close by and that Raina's fiancé, Major Sergius Saranoff, was the hero of a cavalry charge. The women rejoice that Sergius has proven to be as heroic as they expected, but they soon turn to securing the house because of fighting in the streets. Nonetheless, a Serbian officer gains entry through Raina's shutters. Raina decides to hide him and she denies having seen anyone when she is questioned by a Russian officer who is hunting for a man seen climbing the water pipe to Raina's balcony. Raina covers well, and the Russian leaves without noticing the pistol on Raina's bed.

When Raina hands the gun to the Serbian after the Russian leaves, the Serbian admits that the gun is not loaded because he carries chocolates in his cartridge belt instead of ammunition. He explains that he is a Swiss mercenary fighting for the Serbs because it is his profession to be a soldier and the Serbian war was close by. He adds that old, experienced soldiers carry food while only the young soldiers carry weapons. Shocked by this attitude, Raina criticizes him for being a poor soldier. He counters by describing what makes a real fool, not knowing that his version of the day's cavalry charge makes fun of her betrothed. She is incensed but agrees to let him stay once he impresses upon her the danger of going back out into the street. She tries to impress him with her family's wealth and position, saying that they have the nobility to give refuge to an enemy. He pledges her safety and advises her to tell her mother about his presence, to keep matters proper. While she is gone, he falls into a deep sleep on her bed and he cannot be roused by a shocked Catherine. Raina takes pity on him and asks that they let him sleep.

Act 2

On March 6, 1886, Raina's father, Major Paul Petkoff, comes home and announces the end of the war. Catherine is upset that the Serbians have agreed to a peace treaty, believing that her side should have a glorious victory. Major Saranoff arrives just after Petkoff makes comments indicating that Saranoff is not a talented military leader. Catherine praises Saranoff, but he announces that he is resigning from the army. Raina joins the conversation just before the discussion turns to a Swiss officer who bested the men in a horse trade and who had been, according to a friend's story, rescued by two Bulgarian ladies after a battle. Catherine and Raina pretend to be shocked by such unpatriotic behavior.

Catherine and Major Petkoff leave the two young people to have some time to alone. Raina and Sergius exchange all the silly platitudes expected of lovers about how much

they missed each other and how they worship each other. However, while Raina is away to get her hat for a walk, Sergius flirts with the maid, Louka, whom he has apparently chased in the past. Louka protests his behavior and reveals that there is someone for whom Raina has real feelings, not the fake ones she puts on for Sergius. Sergius becomes angry and insults Louka, although he is confused about his own feelings.

Sergius goes to help Petkoff with some final military business. In his absence, Catherine tells Raina that Petkoff has asked for the coat they gave the enemy soldier when he left. Just then, the Swiss officer, Captain Bluntschli, arrives to return the coat. The women try but fail to hurry him away before Petkoff and Sergius see him. Bluntschli offers to help them with the logistics of their troop movements, and Petkoff invites him to stay, much to the discomfort of the ladies.

Act 3

Bluntschli is busy drawing up orders, and Saranoff signs them as everyone else is lounging in the library. Petkoff complains that he would be more comfortable in his old coat, but he cannot find it. Now that Bluntschli has returned it, Catherine insists that the coat is in the blue closet, where she placed it since the last time her husband looked. When the servant finds the coat in the appropriate closet, Petkoff dismisses the incident as a foible of old age.

When Saranoff and Petkoff go out to deliver orders to the couriers, Raina has a chance to talk with Bluntschli alone, and she lets him know that his story about his evening in her room made it through camp rumors all the way to her father and her fiancé. After bantering about honor and lies, Raina reveals that she had slipped her portrait and a note into her father's old coat when she gave it to Bluntschli. Unfortunately, Bluntschli never discovered it, and they realize that it could still be in the pocket. A messenger arrives with telegrams that tell Bluntschli that his father has died and that he must attend to the family business.

Louka and the manservant, Nicola, have an exchange about Louka's ambitions and about the role of servants. Nicola realizes that it might be more to his advantage to let Louka marry Saranoff and to then become their servant. Later, Saranoff and Louka argue about whether Saranoff is afraid to express his love for Louka, and she reveals that Raina has fallen for Bluntschli. Saranoff challenges Bluntschli to a duel, but when Raina charges that she saw Saranoff with Louka, he backs off. Raina then stirs Saranoff's emotions by telling him that Louka is engaged to Nicola.

Petkoff enters, complaining that his coat had to be repaired. When Raina helps Petkoff put on the coat, she pulls the incriminating photo from the pocket and tosses it to Bluntschli, not knowing that her father has already seen the photo. When Petkoff does not find the photo in his pocket, the questioning begins about the photo's inscription to a "Chocolate Cream Soldier," and an avalanche of truthful revelations from all parties begins. Nicola wisely denies being engaged to Louka so she can marry Saranoff. As

Catherine protests the dishonor to Raina, Louka injects that Raina would not have married Saranoff anyway because of Bluntschli. The Swiss captain is hesitant to declare himself in love until he learns that Raina is twenty-three years old, and is not the teenager he thought she was. Confident then that she is old enough to know her feelings, Bluntschli asks for Raina's hand in marriage. Again, Catherine protests because she thinks Bluntschli cannot provide for her daughter appropriately, so he tells them of his great wealth. Raina puts up a token protest about being sold to the highest bidder, but Bluntschli reminds her that she fell in love with him before she knew he had any rank or money. She capitulates, and the play ends with everyone happy.

Characters

Captain Bluntschli

Bluntschli is a realist who believes in adapting to a situation in order to survive. A professional soldier, he knows that he is only a tool and he has no illusions about war and the practical actions one must take to win battles and stay alive. His most famous feature is that he keeps chocolates in his cartridge belt rather than bullets. His common sense appeals to Sergius, who is in awe of Bluntschli's ability to figure out troop movements. This influence helps Sergius make the decision to be honest about Louka and to change his life.

When Bluntschli takes refuge in Raina's bedroom, he starts a chain of events that changes his life and the lives of all those associated with the Petkoff family. Despite his pragmatism, Bluntschli has a romantic side, illustrated by such actions as: he ran off to be a soldier rather than go into his father's business; he climbs a balcony to escape rather than drop into a cellar; and he himself returns the borrowed coat rather than shipping it, because he wants to see Raina. He has always known that total pragmatism can be as unrealistic as overblown idealism and he has tried to maintain a balance. However, over the course of the play, this balance flip-flops as he changes from a soldier who looks askance at love, to a man who is leaving the army to get married and to take care of his father's business. Thus, the man who changed Raina's and Sergius's lives has also had his own life transformed.

Louka

An ambitious and sometimes spiteful maid who is desperate to rise above her station, Louka is attracted to Major Sergius Saranoff, and he to her. However, Sergius is engaged to Raina, and he is gentry while Louka is just a servant. Louka shames Sergius about the hypocrisy of his behavior. She tries to break up his relationship with Raina when Captain Bluntschli returns, knowing that Bluntschli is the enemy soldier who hid in Raina's bedroom. Louka is herself supposedly engaged to another servant, Nicola, who advises her to accept her place in life, but she rejects his downcast philosophy and eventually wins her man and a new life.

Nicola

A wily servant, Nicola covers for Raina and Catherine's intrigues. He believes that class division is an indisputable system, and he advises Louka to accept her place. He found Louka, taught her how to be a proper servant, and plans to marry her, but he comes to see how Louka's marriage to Sergius would create an advantage for both Louka and for himself. Thus, he changes his story about his engagement to Louka, and he promotes Louka's ambitions. Ultimately, Nicola wants to run his own business, so he will do

whatever it takes to stay in favor with potential patrons, while taking advantage of opportunities to earn extra capital for special services.

Catherine Petkoff

Raina's mother and the wife of Major Paul Petkoff, Catherine is a nouveau-riche social climber. Crudely ignorant and snooty, Catherine is Shaw's voice for the stereotypical expectations of romanticized love and war. Catherine is disappointed when the war ends in a peace treaty, because she wanted a glorious victory over a soundly defeated enemy. Although she allows Bluntschli to hide in her home and she helps to keep him secret, she thinks Sergius Saranoff is the ideal handsome hero her daughter must marry for an appropriate match. She declares Bluntschli unsuitable until she finds out how rich he is, and then she quickly changes her mind.

Major Paul Petkoff

Raina's father and Catherine's husband, Major Petkoff is an amiable, unpolished buffoon who craves rank and has somehow stumbled into wealth. His rank was given to him for being the richest Bulgarian, but he has no military skills. His purpose in the play is almost that of a prop. It is his old coat that is lent to Bluntschli and which then gives Bluntschli the excuse to come back to see Raina. It is Petkoff who discovers the incriminating photo in his coat pocket that leads to the revelation of the truth and to the resolution of the story.

Raina Petkoff

The central character in the play, Raina learns to discard her foolish ideals about love in exchange for real love. Raina is central because Catherine and Paul Petkoff are her parents, Sergius is her fiancé, Louka and Nicola are her family's servants, and Bluntschli is her dream soldier. The play starts in her bedroom, where we learn what a dreamy romantic she is about love and war, before the enemy soldier comes through her window and begins to shatter her fairy-tale illusions with his realism.

Shaw was known for creating lively, willful, and articulate female characters. He also often included a youthful character in his plays, one who could express a childish approach to life. Raina fits both these descriptions. She is unworldly and sometimes acts like a spoiled child to get her way. Catherine points out that Raina always times her entrances to get the most attention. Nonetheless, Raina is intelligent. She probably wouldn't have fallen for Bluntschli if she had not been open to his arguments and if she were not smart enough to see the differences in qualities between Bluntschli and Saranoff. She is also honest enough with herself to realize that she is not truly in love with Saranoff, but was just playing a role to meet social expectations. Raina has enough bravery and compassion to aid an enemy soldier in need, and she is courageous and adventurous enough to take a risk with Bluntschli and to start a new life.

Major Sergius Saranoff

Major Saranoff is Raina's fiancé, and he is a shining example of Raina and her mother's romanticized image of a hero. He is almost quixotic in his attempt to live up to this image, especially in battle, for it is hopeless to try to embody a myth. Thus, Shaw uses this character to show that these romanticized ideals were probably nonsense all along. Sergius is often referred to as the Byronic hero or as the Hamlet of this play because he has an underlying despair about life. He clings to his idealized image of himself because he is afraid to find out who he really is. He knows that he is a different person with Raina than he is with Louka, and Louka has pointed out his hypocritical behaviors to him. Sergius realizes that there must be more to himself than the idealized soldier the young ladies worship, but of the other selves that he has observed in himself he says: "One of them is a hero, another a buffoon, another a humbug, another perhaps a bit of a blackguard." He is disconcerted by the feeling that "everything I think is mocked by everything I do." In losing Raina and declaring his love for Louka, Sergius is freed to be himself and to discover his own values.

Themes

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.

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.

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 wiliest, character in the play.

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."

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.

Style

Ruritanian Romance

Although already established as a model for romances prior to the publication of Anthony Hope's popular 1894 novel *The Prisoner of Zenda*, Ruritanian romance takes its name from the imaginary country of Ruritania found in Hope's book. This type of story generally includes intrigue, adventure, sword fights, and star-crossed lovers, ingredients that are all found in *Arms and the Man*. However, Shaw ultimately attacks this genre by exaggerating the absurdities of the plot and by transforming the typically cookie-cutter characters into people facing reality. He thus inverts the conventions of melodrama and inserts critical commentary into the cleverly funny lines of his play. There is the threat of a sword fight that never comes to fruition, since Bluntschli is too sensible to accept Saranoff's challenge□which illustrates Shaw's belief that dueling is stupid. Romance also plays a big role in *Arms and the Man*, but, again, Shaw turns the tables by having the heroine and her fiancé abandon their idealized relationship, which would have been prized in a Ruritanian romance, for a more realistic and truer love.

Comedy

One standard trait of comedic plays□often used by Shakespeare and also used by Shaw in *Arms and the Man*□is the use of an ending in which all the confusions of the play are resolved, and every romantic figure winds up with his or her ideal partner. The gimmicks in *Arms and the Man* of the lost coat and the incriminating inscription on the hidden photograph are also ploys that are typical of comedy. The gimmicks serve as catalysts to spark the humorous confusion, and work as objects around which the plot turns. In Shaw's hands, however, comedy is serious business disguised by farce. Always an innovator, Shaw introduced moral instruction into comedic plays, rather than taking the conventional route of writing essays or lectures to communicate his views.

Redefining Romance and Heroism

Shaw does not simply dismiss Raina's idealism in favor of Bluntschli's pragmatism. He replaces her shallow ideals with more worthy ones. By the end of the play, Raina understands that a man like Bluntschli is more of a real hero than Sergius. The audience also discovers that Bluntschli's practical nature is not without romance because he has come back to see Raina rather than sending the coat back by courier. In fact, he admits to Sergius that he "climbed the balcony of this house when a man of sense would have dived into the nearest cellar." Together, Raina, Bluntschli, and Sergius attain a new realism that sees love and heroism as they really should be, according to Shaw. Thus Shaw does not reject romance and heroism, but rather brings his characters to an understanding of a higher definition of these values. That is, the

course of the play has worked to maneuver the characters and the audience into a new position and thus redefine romance and heroism according to the light of realism.

Historical Context

Victorian Rule

Queen Victoria, the longest-reigning monarch in British history, was born in 1819 and ruled from 1837 to 1901. She was married in 1840 to her cousin, Prince Albert, and it was he who insisted on the straitlaced behavior and strict decorum that have become known as Victorian values. They had nine children, whose marriages and prodigy entangled most of the thrones of Europe, including grandchildren Emperor William II of Germany and Empress Alexandra, wife of Nicholas II of Russia. Prince Albert died in 1861 and Victoria largely withdrew from public life, thus damaging her popularity and the political clout she had previously wielded.

When Benjamin Disraeli became prime minister in 1874, he flattered Victoria into resuming some involvement in public affairs, and she regained admiration as well as the title of Empress of India. Disraeli worked for social reform while promoting the growth of the British Empire. In contrast to Disraeli, Victoria greatly disliked William E. Gladstone, who served as prime minister four times between 1868 and 1894. Considered a great statesman, Gladstone championed tax reforms, an end to colonial expansion, and Irish home rule.

Relative prosperity existed in the late 1800s in England, although there were some years of high unemployment. Agricultural production was at its height. The Crimean War (1854—1856) had been a disaster for England, but otherwise the empire spread prosperously around the globe to include Canada, Australia, India, and large sections of Africa, as well as various Asian and West Indies islands and ports. It is estimated that at one point, one-fourth of the world's population lived under British rule. Consequently, British influence was dominant around the world in this time period and this legacy has had lasting effects into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Victorian Society

During the second half of the nineteenth century, the family was considered to be the focal point of society. The term "Victorian" is now associated with an inflexible set of manners and prudishness. In truth, the morality of the times was based on a heroic idealism and an honorable work ethic. Character and duty were the watchwords of the times. Class divisions continued, but individual advancement within a class was encouraged. As in many societies, there was a Victorian underworld in which prostitution thrived. It was this conflicting social situation in such morally high-minded times that led Shaw to write his play *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, a comedy about a prim young lady's discovery that her mother is the owner of a series of brothels. This play was refused a license by the ministry until 1905 because of its unseemly subject.

Victorian Literature

Victorian literature throughout the nineteenth century was noted for its humor. Charles Dickens, William Thackeray, and Lewis Carroll were among the many British writers who were successful with comic fiction. Early Victorian theatre was characterized by artificial plots, shallow romantic characters, and melodrama, and played to largely uneducated audiences. By midcentury, Dion Boucicault and Tom Taylor had gained popularity with their comedic plays, in which it was fashionable to play upon the titillation of stories about "fallen" women. Besides farces, many plays of the time were intrigues with complicated and ludicrous plots.

Realistic drama got a start in the 1860s work of T. W. Robertson, but it was not until the 1890s that the most prominent dramatists, Sir A. W. Pinero and H. A. Jones, tried to follow suit. However, neither Pinero nor Jones was able to fully break away from the usual fare expected by theatergoers. Nonetheless, the influence of Henrik Ibsen caused Pinero to join in the movement to write serious "problem" plays, such as his *Second Mrs. Tanqueray* (1893). Ibsen, an enormously influential Norwegian critic and playwright, attacked social norms and hypocrisies. His plays focus on real human concerns and portray characters of depth who are trying to make sense of their lives. Ibsen believed that drama can honestly and meaningfully deal with social problems. In 1891, J. T. Grein organized the Independent Theatre to present plays by Ibsen; it was this theatre that staged Shaw's first plays, which were heavily influenced by Ibsen. In 1895, Oscar Wilde brought further innovation to comedy with one of the greatest English plays, *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

Critical Overview

Although Shaw's drama was not generally appreciated or understood in his early years as a playwright, he was eventually recognized for his genius and is now considered one of the most important British playwrights of modern times, second only to Shakespeare in the history of British theater. This change of opinion developed over time as a result of changes in social attitudes and a general maturing of the theater. Once Shaw's first collection of plays appeared in print, people had the time while reading to unearth the riches of his works. The influence of Ibsen on drama changed the usual fare fed to theatergoers, educating them about the role of drama in telling stories that could instruct and could portray real people and their emotions. These changes made audiences more receptive to the innovations and themes that Shaw conveyed in his plays.

In the 1890s, however, while critics found Shaw's dialogue amusing, they found his work difficult to classify. Early critics misinterpreted his characters, finding them inhuman, and concluded that Shaw had a heartless approach to life. Shaw's attack on the phony idealism associated with war caused him to be accused of trying to destroy the concept of heroism. When Shaw included in *Arms and the Man* a soldier who carried chocolates rather than bullets, along with descriptions of a bungled cavalry charge and a grisly death, critics accused Shaw of looking only at the baser side of life.

Shaw has had a myriad of books and articles written about him. The following is a brief review of what some of the most eminent critics have said about Shaw's work as a whole, and about *Arms and the Man* in particular. These reviews are a reflection of the general opinion expressed by those who have studied his works.

One of Shaw's biographers was the famous British novelist, essayist, and religious writer, Gilbert K. Chesterton. Although Chesterton disagreed with Shaw on most social policies, he understood Shaw's dramatic method. Chesterton writes that Shaw "resolved to build a play not on pathos, but on bathos," the reverse of common practice at the time. In other words, Shaw did not follow the melodramatic convention of appealing to pity or sympathy; instead, he exaggerated the pathos and made abrupt changes from a lofty to an ordinary style. Chesterton adds that in *Arms and the Man*, "there was a savage sincerity," a "strong satire in the idea."

The world-renowned Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges□commenting on the commonplace criticism of Shaw's early plays, which said that Shaw was attempting to destroy the heroic concept□responds that such criticism "did not understand that the heroic was completely independent from the romantic and was embodied in Captain Bluntschli of *Arms and the Man*, not in Sergius Saranoff." Borges adds that the body of "Shaw's work . . . leaves an aftertaste of liberation."

German playwright and critic Bertolt Brecht notes of Shaw: "Probably all of his characters, in all of their traits, are the result of Shaw's delight in upsetting our habitual prejudices." Certainly this practice is evidenced in the class prejudices depicted by the Petkoffs against their servants and against their enemies in *Arms and the Man*. Shaw

was known to take some radical positions in his lifetime, but he never resorted to any sort of terrorism other than satire. According to Brecht, "[Shaw's] terror is an unusual one, and he employs an unusual weapon□that of humor."

Shaw considered *Arms and the Man* to be a failure when it was first staged, because so few people realized his true message or intent. Within ten years, however, lack of understanding was seldom a problem among his readers and audiences who had grown to understand Shaw and his dramatic realism. Critic Arthur Bingham Walkley, a contemporary of Shaw's, is quoted by Barbara M. Fisher in *George Bernard Shaw* as writing: "In the form of a droll, fantastic farce, [*Arms and the Man*] presents us with a criticism of conduct, a theory of life." H. W. Nevinson, writing in 1929 for the *New Leader*, sums up Shaw's drama by noting that Shaw's "plays have laid bare the falsities and hypocrisies and boastful pretensions of our . . . time. I can think of no modern prophet who has swept away so much accepted rubbish and cleared the air of so much cant."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

Kerschen is a school district administrator and freelance writer. In this essay, Kerschen examines the elements of the play that convey Shaw's socialist feelings about class structures and stereotypes.

Although the dominant themes of *Arms and the Man* are the foolishness of romanticized love and of glorified war, there is another theme concerning social classes. Shaw was one of the key figures in the establishment of the Fabian Society, a middle-class socialist group that believed reform should come through the gradual education of the people and through changes in intellectual and political life, not through revolution. One of the reforms sought by the Fabian Society was the establishment of equality, legally and socially, for all people. Therefore, in *Arms and the Man*, as with the stereotypes that Shaw targets concerning heroes and the conventions of romance, he also takes aim at the stereotypes and false tenets of class.

Shaw greatly admired the Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen. According to the *Norton Anthology of British Literature*, Shaw preferred Ibsen's plays that "attacked middle-class conventionality and hypocrisy rather than those which probed more subtly and poetically into deeper aspects of experience." Indeed, it is this conventionality and hypocrisy that Shaw targets in *Arms and the Man*. For one thing, Shaw makes fun of the high-class pretensions of the Petkoff family. In the stage directions to Act 1, Shaw describes Raina's bedroom as "half rich Bulgarian and half cheap Viennese." He describes Catherine as "a very 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."

When Raina informs Bluntschli that he is in the house of Petkoff, "the richest and best known [family] in our country," she expects him to be impressed. She brags that her father holds the highest command of any Bulgarian in the Russian army, but it is only the rank of major, which does not say much for the Bulgarians. Raina also brags that hers is the only private house in Bulgaria that has two rows of windows and a flight of stairs to go up and down by. When Bluntschli feigns being impressed, she adds that they have the only library in Bulgaria. She condescendingly tells Bluntschli that he has shown great ignorance, but the audience recognizes that Raina is the one who is pathetically ignorant. She advises Bluntschli that she tells him all these things so that he will know he is not in the house of ignorant country folk. As proof, she declares that she goes to the opera in Bucharest every year and has spent a month in Vienna. Bluntschli says, "I saw at once that you knew the world" when what he is seeing is that she is very unworldly. Bertolt Brecht, in his 1959 article "Ovation for Show" in *Modern Drama,* wrote that Shaw insisted "on the prerogative of every man to act decently, logically, and with a sense of humor" and that a person was obligated to behave this way "even in the face of opposition." Apparently, Shaw gave this attribute to Bluntschli.

Shaw further shows the vulgarity of the Petkoffs when Raina explains that "Bulgarians of really good standing□people in OUR position□wash their hands nearly every day."

Raina thinks that simply washing hands is a sign of a gentleman, not knowing that her primitive lifestyle sets her standards low. In Act 2, Major Petkoff blames his wife's chronic sore throat on washing her neck every day. His lecture on the foolishness of frequent bathing is a further sign from Shaw that we are dealing with people who have only recently barely risen above the great unwashed masses. Throwing in the comments about washing being the fault of the English whose climate makes them so dirty is a playful barb at Shaw's own audience.

The repeated reference to their library once again shows that the Petkoffs think that all they need to be gentry is to have a room called the library. Putting a bell in it just heightens the ludicrousness of their pretensions. When Petkoff asks why they cannot just shout for their servants, Catherine replies that she has learned that civilized people never shout for their servants. He counters that he has learned that civilized people do not hang their laundry out to dry where other people can see it. Catherine finds that concept absurd and declares that really refined people do not notice such things, as if she knew. Obviously, neither of them have any idea what refinement is, especially if they have only recently begun learning proper habits.

In his essay "Ovation for Show," Brecht wrote that "Probably all of [Shaw's] characters, in all their traits, are the result of Shaw's delight in upsetting our habitual prejudices." For example, Saranoff assumes that Bluntschli is bourgeois because Bluntschli's father is a hotel and livery keeper. He has jumped to the wrong conclusion because Bluntschli is too humble to brag about his father's holdings. Louka challenges Saranoff's prejudices when she says, "It is so hard to know what a gentleman considers right" after Saranoff jumps back and forth between familiarity with her and putting a barrier between them because he is supposedly a gentleman and she only a maid. In one minute, Louka is worth chasing; in another, she is "an abominable little clod of common clay, with the soul of a servant." But Louka retorts that it does not matter what she is because she has now found out that he is made of the same clay. Shaw is, of course, making the point that virtue and baseness are not the properties of any one class but that we are all human.

Louka is resentful of a society that tries to restrict her to a certain "place." The audience can tell that Louka is better suited to being a mistress than a maid. Nicola tries to convince her that a rigid structure of classes is part of the natural order of things, and that people are more content when they accept their place and stop torturing themselves with useless aspirations. Louka replies disdainfully that Nicola has "the soul of a servant." He may have capitulated to social restrictions, but she will not. In *The Quintessence of Ibsenism*, Shaw argued that women should not fall for society's dictum that they be self-sacrificing, but should instead take care of themselves first so that they could then be in a position to help others. Louka is an example of a woman following this advice.

In Act 3, the audience is finally shown the famous "library" and learn that, in truth, it contains only a few books. Once again, Shaw is making fun of the Petkoffs' attempt at upward mobility. In a conversation between Sergius and Louka, Louka asks if poor men are any less brave than rich men. He replies, "Not a bit." However, he qualifies his

answer by adding that they are just as brave in battle, but cower before officers. Shaw's voice is heard as Sergius concludes: "Oh, give me the man who will defy to the death any power on earth or in heaven that sets itself up against his own will and conscience: he alone is the brave man." Louka challenges his definition of true courage. She says that servants do not have the liberty to express their own wills, to show bravery. If she were an empress, though, she would show courage by marrying the man she loved, even if he were far below her in station. She accuses Sergius of not having that kind of courage, and he claims that he does but he loves Raina. Of course, Louka is setting him up to be without excuses for marrying her once he learns that Raina loves Bluntschi, and Shaw has successfully set forth a debate about class and courage for his audience to ponder.

Class distinctions become all muddled at the end of the play, and barriers are broken, as Shaw hoped they would be in real life. Nicola becomes a servant to a servant, or is it a compatriot, when he declares that Louka has "a soul above her station; and I have been no more than her confidential servant." Then Sergius becomes engaged to Louka, so the class barrier between them comes down. In a further blow for equality, Louka addresses Raina by her first name. Raina and her mother are indignant at the liberty a mere servant has taken, but Louka says, "I have a right to call her Raina: she calls me Louka." It seemed logical to Shaw, and he hoped his audience would see the sense of this peer treatment. The final jab at snobbery is taken when Catherine objects to Raina marrying Bluntschli until she finds out that he is rich. Then he becomes instantly acceptable. The hypocrisy of basing marriage on money instead of love could not have been lost on the audience.

Arthur St. John Adcock, a British poet, novelist, and journalist, understood why Shaw took his moral and socialist preaching to theatre audiences rather than to a lecture podium: "it would bear the more fruit because it fell upon their minds like a pleasant and enlivening dew and not like a destroying thunderstorm." He added: "I doubt whether any man has attacked more social evils and respectable shibboleths, or had a profounder, more far-reaching influence on his own time." Ultimately, Shaw was an optimist. He could present social reform in a comedy because he found humor in the human situation. He knew it was better to laugh than cry, and he truly believed that good sense and justice would prevail. He would not have bothered to present his ideas if he did not think that people were capable of reasoning their value. For that faith in their innate goodness and intelligence, Shaw's audiences have rewarded him with a lasting reputation as one of the greatest playwrights of all time.

Source: Lois Kerschen, Critical Essay on *Arms and the Man*, in *Drama for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

Adaptations

A film version of *Arms and the Man*, adapted by Shaw and produced by John Maxwell, was created for British International Pictures in 1932.

Topics for Further Study

Shaw greatly admired the artist and socialist William Morris. Write a brief biography that identifies Morris and his legacy.

The title of *Arms and the Man* comes from the opening line of Virgil's epic poem "The Aeneid." Write a summary of this poem and contrast its message to that of Shaw's play.

Shaw identified himself as a socialist and he helped to organize the Fabian Society. What is the Fabian Society, what were its goals, and what were some of the works that Shaw wrote while a Fabian?

Arms and the Man was set during a war in the Balkans between the Bulgarians and the Serbians. The Serbians were recently again involved in a war that resulted in international intervention. Trace and report on the history of the various Balkan conflicts from the late 1800s to the present day, including the Serbian involvement in the start of World War I.

Shaw is credited with initiating the "theater of ideas." What does this term mean? How were Shaw's plays different from most theater during the Victorian era and what was Shaw's impact on the theater world?

Compare and Contrast

1890s: After centuries of rule by the Ottoman Turks, in 1878, northern Bulgaria becomes autonomous, and a united Bulgaria gains its independence in 1908.

Today: A German ally in both world wars, Bulgaria falls to Soviet domination during World War II and remains under its control until 1990. Upon signing of the European Constitution in 2004, Bulgaria is de facto considered a full-fledged member of the European Union. Bulgaria also joins NATO in 2004.

1890s: After becoming an autonomous principality in 1829, Serbia is recognized in 1878 as an independent country. In 1882, the ruling prince, Milan Obrenovi, is proclaimed king. Obrenovi establishes a liberal constitution, but his son Alexander, who rules from 1889 to 1903, rejects it, evoking hostility in Serbia until he is assassinated in 1903.

Today: From 1992 to 2002, Serbia and Montenegro are joined as the country of Yugoslavia. After 2002, the two states are in a loose federation, and a referendum in each republic concerning full independence is to be held in 2006.

1890s: *Arms and the Man* is in limited production and is not appreciated until its publication several years later.

Today: *Arms and the Man* is produced around the world and is one of Shaw's most popular plays.

What Do I Read Next?

Shaw wrote *The Intelligent Woman's Guide to Socialism and Capitalism* (1927) as a political primer for women, who had just gained suffrage in Britain. Available in a 1984 reprint edition from Transaction Publishers, this book strongly advocates socialism as the best economic solution.

Shaw's *Complete Plays with Prefaces* (1962), published by Dodd Mead, is a collection of all of Shaw's dramatic works, including the famous prefaces that are so valuable to the study of Shaw and his messages.

Shaw wrote *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* (1890) as a tribute to the great Norwegian playwright and critic Henrik Ibsen, whose philosophy about the power of literature to instruct inspired Shaw's career. This book was reprinted in 1994 by Dover Publications.

Henrik Ibsen greatly influenced Shaw and other dramatists of his age. A collection of Ibsen's plays can be found in *Henrik Ibsen: The Complete Major Prose Plays* (1988), published by Plume Books.

Oscar Wilde is another of Britain's greatest playwrights. Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*, first produced in 1895, is arguably his best work and perhaps the most famous comedy of manners in theater history. Numerous editions are available, including a Dover Edition from 1990.

Further Study

Booth, Michael Richard, and Joel H. Kaplan, *The Edwardian Theatre: Essays on Performance and the Stage*, Cambridge University Press, 1996.

An overview of the Edwardian entertainment industry, this book is a collection of essays that cover cultural studies and the inner workings of the theatre in this age.

Davis, Tracy C., *George Bernard Shaw and the Socialist Theatre*, Praeger, 1994.

This book traces the theatrical and political influences on Shaw and discusses his economic practices and theories as they relate to his work in the theatre.

Henderson, Archibald, *George Bernard Shaw: Man of the Century*, Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1956.

Henderson was Shaw's official biographer and knew the playwright for 47 years. This book, edited by Shaw himself, is a comprehensive examination of Shaw's life and work, including his correspondence.

Innes, Christopher, *The Cambridge Companion to George Bernard Shaw*, Cambridge University Press, 1998.

This popular and comprehensive guide to all things Shaw includes essays by leading scholars on a wide variety of topics.

Jackson, Russell, *Victorian Theatre: The Theatre in Its Time*, New Amsterdam Books, 1990.

A sourcebook about the Victorian stage containing articles, letters of actors and managers, memoirs, contracts, and more, this book provides a detailed look at the world of Victorian theatre.

Jenkins, Anthony, *The Making of Victorian Drama*, Cambridge University Press, 1991.

Jenkins examines seven playwrights, including Shaw, who contributed to the theatre of ideas and who helped to gain respectability for the theatre. Jenkins also looks at the social and political context in which these playwrights worked.

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