

## Realism and Idealism in *Arms and the Man*

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### Abstract

*Arms and the Man* by G.B. Shaw is a humorous play. It shows the futility of war and deals with the hypocrisies of human nature. This Paper presents the elements of realism in George Bernard Shaw's *Arms and the Man*. It is an anti-romantic comedy. In this play Shaw tries to present the real picture of his time and society. Shaw attacks the romantic notions of war and love. It is a satire of glorifying war as well as idealistic notions of love. These themes point out reality and attempt to present the two contrasting ideas—realism and idealism, where the idea of the realist trumps over the idealist.

**Key Words:** realism, idealism, contrast, reality, human emotions, turns of events, satire

### Introduction:

This play takes place in 1885 during Serbo-Bulgarian War. Its heroine is Raina Petkoff. She is a young Bulgarian woman engaged to Sergius Saranoff, one of the heroes of that war whom she idolizes. One night a Swiss mercenary soldier in the Serbian army Captain Bluntschli, climbs in her bedroom and threatens to shoot Raina if she gives the alarm. When Bulgarian troops start to search the house for him, Raina hides him so that he won't be killed. He asks her to remember that "nine soldiers out of ten are born fools." Bluntschli's attitude towards war and soldiering is practical and opposed to Raina's idealistic views. It shocks her, especially after he admits that he uses his ammunition pouches to carry chocolates rather than cartridges for his pistol. When the search is over, Raina and her mother Catherine help Bluntschli to go out of the house, disguised in an old housecoat.

The purpose of this Paper is to present the idea of the realist trumping the idealist. The

paper will assist in understanding and spreading the philosophies of realism and idealism. Literary realism is a style in literature that presents things and people as they are in real life. It is opposed to romanticism or idealism. It is a concept that reflects real life situations. Generally literary realism refers to the trend, beginning with certain works of nineteenth-century French literature and extending to late nineteenth and early twentieth century authors in various countries, toward depictions of contemporary life and society—as they were. The realist writers presented the society as it was. They adopted realistic everyday activities which were common those days. The realistic fiction is often opposed to romantic fiction. The romance presents life more picturesque, fantastic, adventurous, or heroic than actuality. Realism presents life as it really is. It is clear that the purpose of realistic fiction is to give the effect that it represents life and society that suits the common reader.

G. B. Shaw (1856-1950) is a towering figure of his time. He depicted his society honestly for which he suffered criticism in early days. But later on he established his image as an anti-romantic in his society. Literature is mirror of society. Shaw reflects the same beautifully in his works. Shaw was very much impressed by Henrik Ibsen who pioneered modern realistic drama, meaning designed to increase awareness of some important social issues and sensitize the audience. He made it a forum for considering moral, political, social and economic issues of his days as his most important contribution to dramatic art.

The title of the play *Arms and the Man* has been taken from the opening line of the epic poem "The Aeneid" written in 19 BC by the Roman poet Virgil. Virgil glorifies war whereas Shaw employs irony in the title *Arms and the Man*. He (Shaw) attacks romantic notion of war. The conflict in *Arms and the Man* is between opposing beliefs and ideas. The romantic or idealistic notions of war and love which are held by Raina (the heroine) and the realistic picture of war held by Bluntschli as well as the practical side of love and marriage expressed by Louka. *Arms and the Man* is one of the earliest plays of Bernard Shaw. It appears to be amusing but has a serious message. It is amusing as well as thought-provoking. Here laughter and seriousness are juxtaposed. The reality of love and marriage became one of the most frequent themes in Shaw's plays throughout his long life. He thought of marriage not as a means of satisfying the personal desires of individual men and women, nor as a means of strengthening family ties, but as the

means of bringing to birth a new and better generation. Shaw never deviated from the conviction that marriage is a solemn contract not a frivolous domestic excursion.

This play depends on contrast of characters, mistaken identities, surprising opinions, irony, wit and satire. In the beginning Raina is betrothed to Major Sergius who is a dashing handsome romantic hero filled with bravado and idealistic morals. She yields to the man she call her 'chocolate cream soldier'. She takes him as her husband. Raina is very much impressed by Bluntschli. Louka, a handsome, proud servant girl in the Petkoff's household who looks down servility, ties her nuptial knot with Sergius. When Bluntschli, enters Raina's chamber, she enquires, —Who's there? Who is that? A man's voice (in the darkness, subduedly, but threateningly). Sh— sh! Don't call out; or you will be shot. Be good; and no harm will happen to you. (She is heard leaving her bed, and making for the door). Take care: it's no use trying to run away. Remember, if you raise your voice my pistol will go off. (Commandingly) Strike a light and let me see you. Do you hear? She lights a candle; and the mystery ends. He is in deplorable plight, bespattered with mud and blood and snow, his belt and strap of his revolver-case keeping together the torn ruins of the blue tunic of a Serbian artillery officer. Excuse me for disturbing you; but you recognize my uniform? Serb! If I'm caught I shall be killed. (Menacingly) Do you understand that? —I don't intend to get killed if I can help it. Do you understand that? (Act-1, PAGE 46, ARMS AND THE MAN)

This scene beautifully brings out the elements of realism in the play. It is true statement that no one wants to die. Raina thinks that only some soldiers are afraid of death. But the runaway soldier makes it clear that all of them are. Here Shaw proves realism that a dying soul can go to any extent in order to save life. Besides in real life, a pistol without bullet can work havoc. The pistol which is possessed by the Swiss soldier has no bullets but it creates havoc.

Arms and the Man is written during Serbo - Bulgarian war of November 1885. In a dispute between the two neighboring Balkan countries, each of whom felt the other had expansionist designs. Serbia was being backed by the Austro-Hungarian Empire and Bulgaria was being backed by the Russian Empire. Each of the larger powers was supporting the quarrelling countries with officers and supplies. The Swiss provided a large number of mercenaries, (such as Captain Bluntschli ) who cared nothing for the outcome of the war. Shortly after Serbia declared war in November 1885 and invaded, Russia called back her officers and Bulgaria was left to fend for herself. In spite of this setback, the Bulgarians were victorious in the battle of Slivnitza on 19th November. The small town where Petkoffs used to live was on the main road leading back to Serbia where the retreating army was fleeing. Historically, the Balkans is a name given to the region which includes modern – day Greece, Albania, Montenegro, Bosnia, Serbia, Bulgaria and Romania. During the 19th century the one powerful Ottoman (Turkish) Empire was weakening. The great powerful countries of Europe— Russia, Germany, Austria—were willing to

divide up any spoils that would result from a Turkish defeat. The question was which of these powers would reap the largest benefits. The Balkans has complex history, peopled by a wide variety of religious, ethnic, and linguistic groups scattered through this mountainous territory. Dividing up the region into countries during the latter part of the nineteenth century became contentious and has resulted in border disputes, civil wars and ethnic massacres even to this day.

Virtually Shaw has immortalized himself in his works. This play Arms and the Man belongs to the group of "Pleasant Plays" which is a brilliant satirical comedy. Sergius is satirized chiefly as a pseudo-idealist and Raina, the woman of his choice, is obsessed with the same romantic ideas. Here Shaw is aiming at the false social ideals which injure human life. Here Shaw makes fun of conventional picture of "hero". Shaw satirizes romantic ideals bitterly. His intention is to bring a positive change in society. He discovered early the deceptions of society, and made them his special targets. Shaw sets himself against this social alignment.

According to Shaw, blindness to reality is spiritual death. The " idea of taking two couples and causing them to exchange partners is hardly novel. In Arms and the Man, Bluntschli conquers Raina's heart by words and not by actions. It is not the disenchantment of Raina and Sergius but Bluntschli the realist is actually an enchanted soul whom nothing will disenchant. He has destroyed their romanticism.

The play opens with an atmosphere of military melodrama. Bluntschli the Swiss professional soldier makes his entry here. He tells Raina the army adoring heroine frankly that she is a humbug and she agrees with him. By the end of the play the young lady Raina —has lost all her military illusions and admires this mercenary soldier not because he faces guns but because he faces facts. Shaw as a practitioner of realism concludes *Arms and the Man* with realistic note.

**Conclusion:**

**References:**

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*Arms and the Man* is a wonderful play by Bernard Shaw that reflects wonderfully the elements of realism. In this play, Shaw attacks genially the romantic notions of war and love. He has adopted realistic approach in depicting every day activities which were common those days. Here Shaw attacks the social follies of society in order to bring a positive change for which he received criticism. Shaw rejects romanticism in order to embrace realism. Finally, he succeeds in his attempt to exhibit the idea of the realist trumping the idealist