

Tikrit University

College of Education for Humanities

English Department

Fourth Grade

Compiled by : Dr. Luhaib Hamid Khalaf



Theme Analysis

Romanticism / Idealism vs. Realism

One of the central criticisms of *Arms and the Man* is of the tendency of people to romanticize or idealize complex realities: in particular love and war. Literary romanticism began to decline right around the time Shaw was born, and the play in many ways illustrates how and why romanticism historically failed: it could not accurately describe fundamental human experiences.

Raina is the play's most obvious romantic. Her relationship with Sergius (whom the stage directions call a "Byronic hero" after the Romantic poet Lord Byron) embodies almost all of the romantic ideals: they are both beautiful, refined, and appear to be infatuated with each other. However this romantic, idealistic vision of love does not stand up when reality sets in. The "genteel" Sergius lusts animalistically—even, sometimes, violently—after the servant Louka and Raina is in love with the anti-romantic Bluntschli. Their ideal romantic love is all an act. In reality, love is much more multifaceted, and complicated, than Raina and Sergius make it seem.

Raina and Sergius's flawed romanticism also shows through in their conception of war. Raina waxes poetic about how Sergius is an ideal soldier: brave, virile, ruthless but fair. It turns out Sergius's cavalry

charge was ill-advised, and the charge only succeeded because the opposing side didn't have the correct ammunition. Sergius is not the perfect soldier—he is a farce. And the real soldier, Bluntschli, runs away from battle and carries sweets instead of a gun. He also speaks honestly about the brutality and violence of war—which involves more drunkenness and abuse than it does heroics and gallantry.

Shaw displays an interest in revealing human realities like love and war for what they really are: often ugly, contradictory, and thoroughly complex. He implicitly criticizes romantic art for avoiding these realities, and giving us a sugarcoated version of human life and human history. Conversely, his work puts forth the argument that art should be able to make sense of and account for human experiences.

Class Divisions

19th century Europe was a place where divisions between the classes were becoming sharper and more damaging all the time. Industrialization and a widening wage gap gave rise to a socialist movement determined to protect members of the working class from exploitation. Predictably, Shaw, a socialist and activist, seeks to undermine the significance of class divisions in his play. The book persistently points out that division between the classes is unethical and unjust. The play maintains that in fact there is no inherent difference between a member of the working class and a member of the aristocracy beyond the way they are treated by society.

Louka is the most adamant socialist voice in this play. She insists she does not have the “soul of a servant” and refuses to think of herself as subservient simply because she was born into the working class. She falls

in love with Sergius and calls Raina by her first name. In doing so she eschews convention and promotes her own equality.

Bluntschli persistently identifies himself as a poor soldier, and loves Raina because she was kind to him (and in fact fell in love with him) before she knew he owned a chain of hotels and therefore had a claim to a great fortune. Perhaps Raina's greatest virtue is her ability to see past class divisions. This is especially notable considering how wrapped up in the meaning of wealth and aristocracy the Petkoffs are. They speak down to the servants and seemingly cannot go five minutes without mentioning that they have a library (an indicator of unusual wealth.) Ultimately, the play depicts those obsessed with their wealth and class to be foolish and shallow, and further suggests that those locked into their class positions are stuck acting a role that keeps them from their true selves, from actual happiness.

Youth vs. Maturity

Shaw's play investigates the difference between young and old, inexperience and maturity. Bluntschli repeatedly distinguishes between the young soldiers and the old soldiers. The young ones are reckless, idealistic, and brave—they carry extra ammunition and run into action. The old soldiers carry food instead of ammo and often flee the battlefield. Raina is young—and she seems even younger than she is. Bluntschli does not take her seriously until he realizes she is 23 (and not 17, as he believed). Once he is aware that she is older, he is willing to take her opinions and beliefs more seriously, and agrees to court her. Raina's parents, meanwhile, and their servant Nicola are all “old” (or at least older than Raina, Louka, and Serge, who are all identified as “young”). However, unlike Bluntschli, they are not portrayed as particularly mature.

Rather, in their more advanced age, they have simply become entrenched in tradition and the status quo.

Shaw thus paints a complicated picture of age and maturity: youth can be vibrant and incite change, but it can also be silly and naïve. Age can mean realism and intelligence, but it can also mean a kind of disengagement and acceptance of even detrimental social norms. Shaw's heroes in this play are those who have the energy, vitality, and vigor of youth, but the sensibility, maturity, and insight that often comes with old age.

Heroism

Another of the central questions of *Arms and the Man* concerns the nature of heroism. What makes a hero? What does it mean to be a hero? What responsibilities does such a label convey? At first, Sergius is painted as a hero—he led a successful cavalry charge, displaying immense (in fact foolhardy) bravery. He is physically strong, courageous, and handsome. He thus embodies a very traditional kind of heroism. But it is made clear that Sergius's actions are considered by more seasoned soldiers to be farcical. Though Raina and her mother fawn over Sergius, in part because Raina is betrothed to him, others find him more of a clown than a hero.

Bluntschli is a kind of “anti-hero.” He is dubbed by Raina to be the “chocolate cream soldier”—a moniker that inspires images of weakness and sweetness—because he typically carries chocolates rather than extra ammo. He is older, more modest looking, and doesn't believe courage is a virtue. But by the end of the play he is revealed to be both a better soldier and a far more desirable husband than Sergius, and wins Raina's affections.

The question of heroism is a rich and diverse one. By wondering about what makes a hero, Shaw engages various lines of thinking. What do heroes mean to culture? Who ought to be a hero? And what of literary heroes?—Shaw was writing in a time of social and political upheaval. The clash between socialism and capitalism was growing more contentious, and the rise of new industrial technologies was exacerbating the already sharp class divisions and changing the cultural landscape. It was accordingly a time of artistic and literary upheaval as well: literary Romanticism no longer seemed fit to make sense of or address contemporary human problems. The Byronic, romantic hero had been forsaken—what would the new literary heroes look like? By engaging these questions about heroism Shaw is asking questions about the future of culture and art.

Symbol Analysis

The Library

The library in the Petkoff home is often held up as a symbol of their wealth, status, and accomplishment. Libraries are rare in Bulgarian homes, and therefore the library does indicate the family's wealth—but it also ironically symbolizes their lack of better learning, critical thinking, and cultural awareness. The library notably has very few books in it, and Major Petkoff, despite his pride in his library, isn't very well read. Though it indicates financial success it also indicates the emptiness and shallowness embodied by people like Major Petkoff.

Raina's Novels

Raina is often seen clutching a romantic novel—but, crucially, she is rarely reading it. She uses the books rather like props. They once again indicate shallowness and social performance. That Raina neglects to actually read these novels perhaps suggests the fall of romanticism itself: these books are not truly useful or interesting to her anymore, and she grows beyond them by the end of the play.