

***Arms and the Man* as an Anti-Romantic Comedy and Education of Raina**

Introduction

With a fearless intellectual criticism, George Bernard Shaw (1856–1950), the most inventively unpredictable playwright in English tradition, appeared on the English stage towards the end of the 19th century. Shaw's comedies, better known as the “Shavian comedies”, are not romantic plays like Shakespeare's. These comedies are not about the flower of Arden, with romantic lovers, or about the fanciful dream of a mid-summer night. They are concerned with life and its problems. His plays are, as Nicoll calls them, “comedies of purpose”, and their ultimate objective is moral. In *Arms and the Man*, his purpose is to break the false notion of life and romantic conception of things.

Shaw's Anti-Romantic Conception through the Education of Raina

Raina, the romantic heroine of *Arms and the Man*, is found to change in the course of her acquaintance with Bluntschli. It is, however, through Raina's character and the change that gradually comes over her that Shaw reveals the absurdity that lies in the romantic conception of war and love. Shaw illustrates in her his main theme of the play—the conflict between Romance and Reality and the ultimate victory of Reality over Romance.

Raina's Romantic Conception of War

As the play opens, we are introduced to Raina, a beautiful young lady of romantic temperament. She is influenced by her reading of Byron and Pushkin. She is shown in a mood of rapture at the news of a war and the victory which has been won by her beloved man, Sergius. She feels an ecstatic delight and imagines the world really glorious for women who can see its romance. She is elated to find that Sergius is glorious and noble in her eyes. To her romantic imagination, the detail of his great cavalry charge is splendid and wonderful. After adoring Sergius's portrait, Raina goes to bed murmuring, “My hero! My hero!” This is a romantic girl's romantic view of life.

Raina's Romantic Notion of War Receives a Rude Shock

Raina's romantic notion of war receives a rude shock with the arrival of Captain Bluntschli. He tells the truth about Sergius' cavalry charge—it was something of foolhardiness and good luck. Sergius ought to be court-martialled. He and his regiment nearly committed suicide; only the enemy's pistol missed fire. Further, she is told that the horsemen did not really want to attack; they pulled hard at the horses, but the horses ran away with them. The conclusion is that “nine soldiers out of ten are born fools”. In this way, the idealistic notions of war held by Raina are punctured.

Raina's Acquaintance with the Realist Portrait of a Soldier

Again, Raina learns from the fugitive that it is the duty of a soldier to live as long as he can and that he must run away to save his life. Bluntschli himself runs away and enters Raina's bedroom to save his life. He even uses Raina's cloak as a shield to save himself and thus administers a rude shock to her. Bluntschli's words to Raina—“What use are cartridges in battle? I always carry chocolate instead...”—prove that a soldier is an ordinary creature of flesh and blood who suffers from hunger and fatigue. Raina learns, as Sergius himself puts it, 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”. This is how Raina's realization comes.

Raina's Romance of Love

Raina is also a dreamer of romantic love. To her, love is dream-like, and Sergius is her ideal hero, her “king” and her “god”. Her relation to Sergius is the one really beautiful and noble part of her life. She is the victim of higher love, feeding her imagination on Byron and Pushkin and abandoning herself to fiction. She adores and worships her hero and lover, Sergius. While Sergius is away in the battlefield, she adopts his portrait like a priestess. When they are together, they strike picturesque attitudes in the fashion of mediaeval ladies and knights. At the opening of the play, Raina stands at the balcony admiring the beauty of the night. She has a romantic glow over love.

Raina's Romantic Love – A Delusion

Raina's first encounter with Bluntschli, the anti-romantic and unconventional soldier, makes her dimly conscious that her romantic conception of love is perhaps a delusion. She feels an admiration for Bluntschli. She is desperately earnest to save his life, feeds him with chocolate cream, and presents him her photograph as a souvenir. Raina's growing weakness for Bluntschli makes her realize that higher love is a myth. Soon Raina comes to know the reality about her romantic love. She discovers that her hero, Sergius, is made of clay and can flirt with her maid Louka as soon as her back is turned.

Hollowness of Raina's Romantic Attitudes and Poses

Bluntschli shows Raina her real character beneath the romantic mask which she has been wearing since her childhood. He makes her realize that, firstly, she had substituted an imaginary ideal Sergius for the real one and, secondly, that she had built up an imaginary image of herself. Bluntschli ruthlessly exposes her “noble” attitude and her “higher love”. Thus reality dawns on her.

Raina: Now a Practical Girl

Raina learns; her character develops. She changes from a romantic girl into a practical, realistic lady. Her choice is no more conventional; her romantic, chivalrous hero of the gallant cavalry charge. She chooses the prosaic practical Swiss, Bluntschli, whose six hotels and commercial efficiency are certain to ensure her a better accommodation and happier adjustment to life.

Summing Up

In *Arms and the Man*, Shaw's objective is to dispel the illusion of life with which conventional world is concerned. Shaw calls “natural play” exhibits war against the “romantic morality”. Here Shaw's approach is anti-romantic and idealistic conception of life. Through the development of Raina's character from a

romantic, idealistic lady to a matter-of-fact, anti-romantic one, Arms and the Man can be described as the education of Raina.