

Realism in Arms and the Man: A Comparative Study – Realism and Idealism

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Abstract

This Research Paper aims to highlight the elements of realism in George Bernard Shaw's Arms and the Man (1894) which is an anti-romantic comedy. Through comedy, Shaw tries to present the real picture of his time and society. Shaw was an iconoclast who attacked the romantic notions of war and love. Toward the middle of the nineteenth century, there can be traced a significant development from romantic and historical themes to more realistic themes, and this movement toward realism received considerable impetus from the work of T.W. Robertson, (1829-71), who introduced in his plays the idea of a serious theme underlying the humor, characters and dialogue of a more natural kind. This play is a satire on the foolishness of glorifying war, as well as on basing affections on idealistic notions of love. These themes brought reality and a timeless lesson to the comic stage of the time. The present paper attempts to present the two contrasting ideas—realism and idealism, where the idea of the realist trumps over the idealist.

Keywords: realism, idealism, contrast, reality, human emotions, turns of events, satire.

Objectives: The objective of this Research Paper is to exhibit the idea of the realist trumping the idealist.

Scope: The paper will contribute extensively in understanding and spreading the philosophies of realism and idealism.

Methodology: Qualitative Method.

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 way of seeing, accepting and dealing with situations as they really are without being influenced by emotions or false hopes. It is a concept that believes in reflecting real life situations. Moreover, most often, 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. Besides, realism " is applied by literary critics in two diverse ways: (1) to identify a movement in the writing of novels during the nineteenth century that included Honore de Balzac in France, George Eliot in England, and William Dean Howells in America, and (2) to designate a recurrent mode, in various eras and literary forms, of representing human life and experience in literature."¹

Moreover, "realistic fiction is often opposed to romantic fiction. The romance is said to present life as we would have it to be--- more picturesque, fantastic, adventurous, or heroic than actuality; realism, on the other hand, is said to represent life as it really is."² Thus it is clear that the purpose of realistic fiction is to give the effect that it represents life and society that suits and evokes the common reader.

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

The title of the play *Arms and the Man* is taken from the opening line of the epic poem "*The Aeneid*" written in 19 BC by the Roman poet Virgil. In *The Aeneid*, "of arms and the man I sing", 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 drawn by Bluntschli, as well as the practical side of love and marriage as expressed by Louka.

Arms and the Man is one of the earliest plays by 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. For realities of love and marriage my views are corroborated with A.C. Ward's observation:

The realities of love and marriage became one of the most frequent themes in Shaw's plays throughout the remainder of 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. Though no one can predict with certainty the consequences of any marriage, Shaw never swerved from the conviction that marriage is a solemn contract, not a frivolous domestic excursion. In *Arms and the Man* and often elsewhere he laughed at this the humors Raina, Sergius and Bluntschli lay the memories of Shaw's own childhood in a home shadowed by the failure of his own parent's marriage. 3

The rest of the play is mostly light-hearted fun, though amid the fun there are several shrewd hints at two sorts of snobbery which also presents the real picture of society. The "snobbery of the man servant Nicola who regards his employees with cynical servility, despising them, yet humbling himself before them because "That's what they like; and that's how you will make most of them."4 Here Shaw hints at the materialistic mindset of the people which is irrefutable in the contemporary world. The snobbery of the Petkoffs who think themselves better than their neighbors because they have a library and an electrical bell. As "an upholder of social equality Shaw was opposed to any idea that servants are inferior class. He held that all necessary work, however menial, is valuable as a service to the community."5 He also believed that "it was mean and foolish to act as though the possession of wealth, or any other material advantage, is a sign of personal superiority"6 which is very clear through the portrayal of his characters. The Petkoffs claim to be the richest family in Bulgaria. They have not got positions in army because they have ability rather they are affluent. It is true sometimes that it is wealth and not the ability to rise in life as is the case with Major Petkoff. The comedy of the play depends on contrast of characters, unexpectedly turns of events, mistaken identities, surprising opinions, irony, wit and satire.

Notwithstanding, in the beginning of the play, we come to know the fact that Raina is betrothed to Major Sergius who is a dashing handsome romantic hero filled with bravado and idealistic morals, but at last she yields to the man she call her 'chocolate cream soldier'. She takes him as her husband. As such, Raina is very much impressed by the bona fides of Bluntschli. In a similar vein, Louka, a handsome, proud servant girl in the Petkoff household who looks down servility, ties her nuptial knot with Sergius. Nevertheless, while the runaway soldier, Bluntschli, enters Raina's chamber, she enquires, "Who's there? Who is that (Act I)? 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? Another moment of silence and darkness as she retreats to the chest of drawers. Then she lights a candle; and the mystery is at an end. He is a 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 my 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? This scene beautifully brings out the elements of realism in the play.

It is universally 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 makes it a point to prove 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.

Now let us talk about the setting of the play. Shaw has given a Bulgarian setting to *Arms and the Man*. This setting attracted the ordinary theatre goers who wanted to be entertained. Shaw wanted to entertain the people but with a serious message. *Arms and the Man* is set during the very brief 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 profited by, but 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 Slivnitsa on 19th November. The small town where the Petkoffs live was on the main road leading back to Serbia where the retreating army was fleeing.⁷

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, after over 500 years of ruling this southeastern quadrant of Europe, (as well as North Africa, Spain and much of the Middle East), the one powerful Ottoman (Turkish) Empire was weakening. The great powers of Europe—Russia, Germany, Austria—were more than willing to divide up any spoils that would result from a Turkish defeat. The question was, of course, which of these powers would reap the largest benefits. The Balkans has an exceedingly complex history, peopled by a wide variety of religious, ethnic, and linguistic groups scattered through this mountainous territory in a seemingly random manner. Dividing up the region into countries during the latter part of the nineteenth century therefore became contentious and has resulted in border disputes, civil wars and ethnic massacres even to this day."⁸ Shaw, one of the literary stalwarts, possessed a dominating personality which will be remembered even after his plays have been forgotten, and he will be always known as the most outstanding figure of his time. As pointed out by A.C. Ward, Shaw "has been for modern Britain what Socrates was for ancient Greece, "i.e., the Good Man of our time. In fact, Shaw has immortalized himself in his works.

From the dramatic point of view, the first half of the nineteenth century was almost completely barren. Towards the middle of century, there can be traced a significant development from romantic and historical themes, and this movement towards realism received considerable impetus from the work of T.W. Robertson (1829-1871) , a writer of comedies, who introduced in his plays the idea of serious theme underlying the humor, characters and dialogue of a more natural kind. He is inseparably connected with the modern revival of English drama.

In *Arms and the Man*, the treatment of real English life was under Ibsen's influence that serious drama from 1890 onward ceased to deal with themes remote in time or place. Ibsen had taught men that drama, if it was to live a true life of its own, must deal with human life emotions, with things near and dear to ordinary men and women. Hence melodramatic romanticism and treatment of remote historic themes alike disappeared in favor of a treatment of actual English life, first of aristocratic life, then of middle-class lives, and finally of laboring conditions. For its own stage types, Victorian audience understood well enough, or at least took for granted. Shaw's efforts, insofar as he ventured into criticism. His energies were concentrated on explaining and shielding his infusion of the real elements. Once he came into defense for the real elements in "*Arms and the Man*" in weekly pieces for "*The Saturday Review*". In an essay entitled "A Dramatic Realist to His Critics" explains how the infusion of reality affects dramatic characters:

It does not concern me that, according to certain ethical systems, all human beings fall into classes labelled liar, coward, and thief; and so on.....As a realist dramatistit is my business to get outside these systems. For instance, in the play of mine which is most in evidence in London just now, the heroine has been classified by critics as a minx, a liar, and a poseuse. I have nothing to do with that: the only moral question for me is, does she do good or harm? If you admit that she does good, that she generously saves another man's life and wisely extricates herself from a false position with another man, then you may classify her as you please----- brave, generous, and affectionate; or artful, dangerous, faithless---- it is all one to me; you can no more prejudice Me for or against her by such artificial categorizing than you could Have made Moliere dislikes Monsieur Jourdain by a lecture on the Vanity and pretentiousness of that admirably bourgeois gentil- homme.⁹

It is clear from the above mentioned lines that Shaw was challenging the basic conventions of character on the Victorian stage. In other respects Shavian drama is, in Shaw's own words, "utterly unlike Ibsen in its stage methods and its Socialist view of human misery."¹⁰ In fact, Shaw " wanted to bring in "reality", and reality for him was neither black, white, nor gray but all the colors of the rainbow."¹¹ In Shaw's works the psychology of the hero-and-villain are replaced with a tragic-comedy of the real elements. He does not adopt the method to ignore the traditions of heroes and villains but to indicate that it is itself real----as a superstition. As such, reality arises from the interaction of such superstition with natural fact. If the main distinction between Shaw's characters, true to his whole theory of drama, is that between the vital people and the mechanized people, "there are a couple of other antitheses which cut across the vital characters. These are the antithesis of male and female and the antithesis of the actual and the ideal."¹²

In September 1894, the reception of *Arms and the Man* was lukewarm. Its merit was not recognized by the majority of the people. In the last part of the same year it was given at the Deutsches Theater, Berlin, under the title *Helden*. In December 1894, the tide had turned for Bernard Shaw. Instantly he became popular and was recognized as great dramatist. *Arms and the Man* belongs to the group of "Pleasant Plays" which is a brilliant satirical comedy. It was "received by some critics as an attack upon the military ideal, and no doubt, that is involved."¹³ Sergius is satirized chiefly as a pseudo-idealist and that Raina, the woman of his choice, is obsessed with the same romantic ideas. Here, as always, Shaw is "aiming at the false social ideals which injure human life."¹⁴ Here Shaw seems to make fun of conventional picture of "hero". On the contrary, Bluntschli is the true soldier, though he appears as a muddy-booted mercenary, because he "strips war of its spacious decorative colors and shows it for the grim business it is. He works for wage, does his duty, and wears unbecoming clothes"¹⁵ which is based on reality. Shaw does not satirize romantic ideals bitterly rather genially. His intention is to bring a positive change in society.

Shaw discovered early the deceptions of society, and made them his special targets. Shaw sets himself against this social alignment. He embraces Ibsenism because he "sees in it the exposure of *ideals* to the cold light of the day. The idealist hides from fact because he hates himself; the realist sees in ideals "only something to blind us, something to numb us, something to murder self in us, something whereby, instead of resisting death, we can disarm it by committing suicide."¹⁶ For Shaw, blindness to reality is spiritual death. In a similar vein, "the theme of reality and corrupting ideals counts much in Shaw's play, too. One has only to think of *Candida*, *Bluntschli*, *Caesar*, *Undershaft*, and the like to realize that many Shavian heroes are realists warring genially against the idealists that surrounds them."¹⁷

The drama presents character in action. In other words, drama means 'action'. Most likely, Shaw has patterned *Arms and the Man* on Scribe's most successful play, *Bataille de Dames* but with a difference. In Shaw's best plays we notice that the principle of reversal pervades. Such a play is *Arms and the Man*. The " idea of taking two couples and causing them to exchange partners is hardly novel, and the little tale of the coat the portrait is Scribean in pattern."¹⁸ But Shaw can justifiably plead that this is no well-made play because the artifices of the plot are not what ultimately achieve the result. The following lines bring out beautifully one of the decisive turns in the action:

Raina. Captain Bluntschli!

Bluntschli. Yes?

Raina. Do you mean what you said just now? Do you know what you said just now?

Blunstchli. I do.

Raina. I! I!!!—How did you find me out?

With this last query, Raina passes from Sergius to Bluntschli forever. Here we witness the reversal of the principle. There is nothing like the Scribean arrangement of incidents. Here Shaw sticks to words, words, and only words which is a unique dramatic device. To Shaw, as pointed out by Eric Bentley, "his (Shaw's) plays were all words just as Raphael's paintings were all paint."¹⁹ Though Shaw was playing Scribe's game, he proceeded to break the rules. Frankly speaking, *In Arms and the Man*, Bluntschli conquers Raina's heart by words and not by actions. His words work forcefully in a particular situation in which the opposite was to be expected. They work more than a weapon. To look over *Arms and the Man* "with an eye to technique would be to conclude that what we have here is Scribe most subtly interwoven with Shaw. Yet this formulation is inadequate, for who did the interweaving? There was a Scribe in Shaw, and there was a counter Scribe in Shaw: what makes his works dramatic is the inter-action of the two."²⁰ The "passion and preoccupation of Scribe was the idea of climax whereas in Bernard Shaw there was almost as great a predilection for anti-climax. It is the Shavian "effect" par excellence; no other playwright has come near finding so many possibilities in it."²¹ The bit which has been quoted from Bluntschli and Raina is a suitable example.

The Arms and the Man does not round off the dual anti-climaxes. It is "not the disenchantment of Raina and Sergius but the discovery that Bluntschli, the realist, is actually an enchanted soul whom nothing will disenchant. He has destroyed their romanticism but he is "incurably romantic."²² This is another point that is made in "mere words"—"mere words stuck on at the end", if you wish and yet stuck on very well, for they are firmly attached to that little tale of the coat and the photograph which gives the work its continuity and shape:

Bluntschli. --- Yes: that's the coat I mean....Do you suppose I am the sort of fellow a young girl falls in love with? Why, look at our ages! I'm thirty four: I don't suppose the young lady is much over seventeen...All that adventure which was life or death to me was only a schoolgirl's game to her... Would a woman who took the affair seriously have sent me this and written on it: Raina, to her Chocolate Cream Soldier, a Souvenir?

Petkoff. That's what I was looking for. How the deuce did it get there?

Bluntschli. I have put everything right, I hope, gracious young lady.

Raina. I quite agree with your account of yourself. You are a romantic idiot. Next time I hope you will know the difference between a schoolgirl of seventeen and a woman of twenty three.

In the above scene, as pointed out by Eric Bentley, "plot and theme reach completion together, and the play of thesis and antithesis ends in synthesis."²³ Besides, the above lines clearly indicate the intentions of Shaw that, as a realist, he wanted to set things right.

Now let us talk about the form of the play. *In Arms and the Man* Shaw has used bathos and not pathos. Firstly the officer appears to be heroic and later on he is laughed at by everyone. While the curtain goes up, " a man remembering his youth, and he should only reveal himself as violent pork-butcher when someone interrupted him with an order for pork. This merely technical originality is indicated in the very title of the play. The name itself is meant to be bathos; arms---and the man."²⁴ In *Arms and the Man* "the bathos of form was strictly the incarnation of a strong satire in the idea."²⁵ The play opens with an atmosphere of military melodrama; the dashing officer of cavalry going off to death in an attitude, the lovely heroine left in tearful rapture; the brass band, the noise of guns and the red fire. Bluntschli, the Swiss professional soldier, makes his entry here. He is a man with trade though without country. He tells Raina, the army adoring heroine, frankly that she is a humbug; and she, in a moment, 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."²⁶ At length, Shaw, as a practitioner of realism, concludes *Arms and the Man* with realistic note.

Conclusion

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.

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