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Anti-Romanticism and Realism in George Bernard Shaw's *Arms and the Man*

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Abstract

George Bernard Shaw's *Arms and the Man* (1894) stands as one of the most incisive dramatic critiques of Romanticism in English literature. Written at a time when Victorian sentimentality and idealized notions of love, heroism, and war dominated the cultural imagination, Shaw deploys sharp wit, irony, and intellectual rigour to expose the hollowness of Romantic illusions. This paper examines Shaw's systematic dismantling of Romantic conventions - particularly his satirical portrayal of the soldier-hero, idealized love, and the glorification of war - through the lens of realism. By placing the pragmatic Swiss soldier Bluntschli against the posturing Byronic hero Sergius, Shaw foregrounds the absurdity of Romantic idealism. The paper further explores how Raina's transformation from a Romantic dreamer to a woman of practical sensibility encapsulates Shaw's broader argument: that authentic human experience demands the honest confrontation of reality over the seductive comfort of illusion. Drawing on Shavian dramatic theory, the text of the play, and scholarly commentary, this paper argues that *Arms and the Man* is not merely a comedy but a sustained intellectual manifesto against the Romantic worldview, advocating instead for a clear-eyed, rational engagement with the human condition.

Keywords: Anti-Romanticism, Realism, Shaw, *Arms and the Man*, Bluntschli, Romanticism, Satire, Victorian Drama, Heroism, Shavian Comedy

Introduction

When George Bernard Shaw's *Arms and the Man* premiered at the Avenue Theatre, London, on 21 April 1894, it was met with a mixture of laughter, bewilderment, and outrage. The audience that had gathered expecting a patriotic celebration of military glory found instead a devastating comic exposé of Romantic self-deception. Shaw, never one to indulge sentimentality, deployed his characteristic wit and intellectual irreverence to challenge the foundational myths that Romanticism had woven into the fabric of Victorian consciousness - the myth of the heroic soldier, the myth of transcendent love, and the myth of war as a theatre of noble suffering and glory.

Arms and the Man belongs to Shaw's early cycle of 'Plays Pleasant,' works that, beneath their surface comedy, carry a serious moral and philosophical charge. Set against the backdrop of the 1885 Serbo-Bulgarian War, the play follows the encounter between Raina Petkoff, a young Bulgarian woman steeped in Romantic fantasies, and Captain Bluntschli, a Swiss mercenary soldier whose battle-

hardened pragmatism renders him the perfect foil to the Romantic heroism embodied - or rather, performed - by Raina's fiancé, Major Sergius Saranoff. Through the comic collision of these figures, Shaw constructs a sustained argument for realism as the only honest framework through which to understand war, love, and human character.

This paper investigates the mechanisms through which Shaw employs anti-Romanticism and realism in the play. It examines the characterization of Bluntschli as Shaw's ideal pragmatic man, the systematic deflation of Sergius as a Romantic fraud, Raina's journey from illusion to self-knowledge, and the play's treatment of war as a squalid, bureaucratic business rather than a field of honour. The paper also considers Shaw's dramatic technique - his use of irony, subverted theatrical conventions, and language - as tools in the service of his anti-Romantic polemic.

Shaw and the Victorian Romantic Tradition: A Necessary Confrontation

To appreciate the radical nature of Shaw's anti-

Romanticism, it is essential to understand the cultural milieu against which he was reacting. The Romantic movement, originating in the late eighteenth century with figures such as Wordsworth, Keats, Byron, and Shelley, had by the Victorian era permeated popular culture and social ideology. Romanticism celebrated the primacy of emotion over reason, idealized heroism and passionate love, and invested both war and nature with an almost mystical grandeur. The Byronic hero - brooding, passionate, morally complex, and physically magnificent - had become a cultural archetype.

Shaw, a committed rationalist and Fabian socialist, was philosophically opposed to every one of these propositions. He argued that Romantic idealism was not merely aesthetically sentimental but socially dangerous: it obscured the material realities of poverty, war, and class oppression behind a veil of beautiful lies. In his prefaces, correspondence, and critical writings, Shaw repeatedly identified the theatre as complicit in propagating these illusions. His mission, as he articulated it, was to drag the English stage out of its drawing-room sentimentality and into the harsh sunlight of social and moral reality.

Arms and the Man is one of the earliest and most successful executions of this mission. The play deliberately invokes the conventions of Romantic drama - the brave soldier, the beautiful lady, the moonlit balcony, the dramatic rescue - only to systematically subvert them. Shaw transforms the stage into a laboratory for testing Romantic assumptions against lived experience, and the results are uniformly devastating for Romanticism.

Bluntschli: The Realist Hero

Central to Shaw's anti-Romantic project is the figure of Captain Bluntschli, the Swiss mercenary who enters the play through Raina's window, fleeing the Bulgarian cavalry. Bluntschli is, in almost every respect, the antithesis of the Romantic soldier-hero. He is not driven by idealism, patriotism, or the love of glory; he fights because soldiering is his trade. He is not physically heroic in the conventional sense: he arrives hungry, exhausted, frightened, and carrying - famously - chocolate creams instead of ammunition.

Bluntschli's realism manifests most clearly in his attitude toward war. Where Romantic tradition imagines war as a theatre of heroism, sacrifice, and glory, Bluntschli describes it in terms of practicality, survival, and the mundane logistics of military campaigning. He informs Raina, without apology, that he is a professional soldier who has seen enough of war to be thoroughly disenchanted by it. He explains that experienced soldiers invariably carry food into battle rather than weapons, because ammunition can be scavenged from the dead, but hunger is a perpetual enemy that kills efficiency.

"I've no ammunition. What use are cartridges in battle? I always carry chocolate instead; and I finished the last cake of that hours ago." (Shaw, Act I)

This speech, one of the most celebrated in the play, is Shaw's most economical statement of his anti-Romantic thesis: the reality of war is not heroic. It is a matter of survival, calculation, and bodily need. The chocolate creams are not merely a comic prop; they are a philosophical

emblem - a symbol of the material, pragmatic, unglamorous reality that Romanticism's heroic narratives systematically suppress.

Bluntschli's emotional realism is equally pronounced in his approach to love. He does not idealize Raina; he reads her accurately from the beginning, recognizing her Romantic posturing for what it is. When he returns in Act III to claim her, he does so with characteristic directness and practicality, presenting his credentials not as a romantic lover but as a man of means and common sense. His love is real precisely because it is free of illusion.

Sergius Saranoff: The Romantic Illusion Exposed

If Bluntschli represents Shaw's realist ideal, Major Sergius Saranoff represents the Romantic ideal - and Shaw takes considerable care to expose it as a fraud. Sergius is introduced as a hero: his daring cavalry charge has won the battle and made him the talk of the Bulgarian army. Raina worships him as the embodiment of her Romantic fantasies, the living incarnation of the heroes she has read about in poetry and fiction.

Yet Shaw almost immediately begins the process of deflation. The cavalry charge, we learn, succeeded not because of Sergius's bravery or tactical genius, but because the Serbs happened to run out of the specific ammunition required to repel it - a piece of bureaucratic accident that Bluntschli matter-of-factly confirms. The heroic act at the centre of Sergius's reputation is, in other words, the product of chance rather than virtue.

More damaging still is Sergius's own private awareness of his fraudulence. He tells Louka, in a moment of revealing self-analysis, that he is engaged in a perpetual performance of the heroic role that the world expects of him, and that this performance exhausts and disgusts him. The Romantic hero, Shaw implies, is always to some degree a conscious imposture - a theatrical performance sustained at the cost of authentic selfhood.

"I never apologize! That is the rule that governs my character. That is the secret of success in a profession like mine - in the army." (Sergius, Act II)

Sergius's treatment of women further punctures the Romantic ideal. While paying courtly devotion to Raina, he simultaneously pursues Louka, the servant girl, with blunt sensual appetite. The contradiction between his Romantic performance with Raina and his carnal pursuit of Louka exposes the hypocrisy at the heart of Romantic idealism: it reserves its elevated sentiments for performance, while reality remains coarser and more selfish. By the end of the play, Sergius abandons even the pretence of Romantic heroism and accepts the plain truth of his character - a development that Shaw presents as, paradoxically, the most honest and therefore most admirable thing Sergius does.

Raina Petkoff: From Romantic Fantasy to Realistic Self-Knowledge

The character of Raina Petkoff undergoes the most significant transformation in the play and is, in many respects, its moral and psychological centre. At the outset, Raina is presented as the quintessential Romantic heroine: she lives in a world of operatic poses, literary fantasies, and

elevated sentiments. She gazes at the stars, contemplates heroism and sacrifice, and regards Sergius as the physical embodiment of her Romantic ideals. Her theatrical self-consciousness is evident from her very first entrance, in which Shaw's stage directions note that she strikes a consciously dramatic pose as she enters the room.

Raina's Romanticism is not merely aesthetic; it is epistemological. She literally cannot perceive reality except through the filter of Romantic narrative. When she hides Bluntschli, she casts the act in Romantic terms - she is a noblewoman protecting a fugitive, performing a brave and generous act. She is incapable, initially, of seeing Bluntschli simply as a hungry, frightened man in need of shelter.

Bluntschli's frank, unpretentious presence gradually erodes Raina's Romantic defences. He refuses to play the role of the grateful, awed soldier; he treats her with the same matter-of-fact practicality with which he approaches everything else. He sees through her poses - he calls her a 'young lady' and tells her directly that her idealized portrait of Sergius is precisely the kind of romantic self-deception he has learned to distrust in the field. Crucially, Bluntschli's honesty does not wound Raina; it liberates her.

By Act III, Raina has shed enough of her Romantic illusion to acknowledge, at least partially, her own theatricality and self-deception. Her final choice of Bluntschli over Sergius represents not merely a romantic preference but a philosophical conversion: she chooses the man who sees her clearly and honestly over the man who has been the mirror of her own illusions. This is Shaw's argument made incarnate: realism, for all its harsh clarity, is ultimately more life-affirming than Romanticism's beautiful lies.

War, Heroism, and Anti-Romantic Satire

Shaw's treatment of war in *Arms and the Man* is among the most pointed expressions of his anti-Romantic vision. The Romantic tradition had long invested warfare with epic grandeur — wars were the proving grounds of national character and individual heroism, the crucibles in which great men were forged. Victorian culture, in particular, had constructed a potent mythology of military honour, embodied in the penny-press accounts of colonial adventure and the sentimental poetry of sacrifice that saturated popular consciousness.

Shaw exposes this mythology with surgical precision. The Serbo-Bulgarian War of 1885, which serves as the play's backdrop, is not rendered as a theatre of glory but as a confused, contingent, bureaucratic muddle in which the decisive factor is not heroism but the accident of ammunition supply. Bluntschli's testimony strips war of its ceremonial dignity and reveals its material substrate: men are cold, hungry, and frightened; victory is a matter of logistics rather than valour; and the professional soldier's primary moral obligation is to survive.

Shaw's anti-war satire anticipates, by two decades, the disillusionment that the First World War would force upon an entire generation of European writers. Where Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon would later give that disillusionment tragic expression in the trenches of France, Shaw works in the mode of comedy - but the intellectual substance of his argument is no less radical. He insists that the Romantic glorification of war is not merely false but morally culpable: it sustains institutions and behaviours that

cause immense human suffering by clothing them in the language of nobility and honour.

The play's very title, taken from Virgil's *Aeneid* - 'Arma virumque cano' ('I sing of arms and the man') - is itself a sardonic gesture. Shaw invokes the classical epic tradition of martial celebration only to travesty it. His 'man' is not Aeneas but Bluntschli; his 'arms' are chocolate creams. The allusion serves to measure the distance between the heroic ideal and the comic reality Shaw places before his audience.

Shaw's Dramatic Technique: Irony, Language, and Subverted Conventions

Shaw's anti-Romanticism operates not only at the level of plot and characterization but through his mastery of dramatic language and theatrical convention. His most powerful tool is irony - a sustained, pervasive irony that exposes the gap between what characters claim to believe and what the audience knows to be true. Raina's elevated speeches about love and honour are consistently undercut by the audience's awareness of her fundamental theatricality; Sergius's heroic posturing is undercut by what we learn of the accidental nature of his triumph.

Shaw also exploits the subversion of theatrical convention for anti-Romantic effect. The play begins with what appears to be a standard Romantic scenario: a moonlit balcony, a beautiful young woman dreaming of her soldier-lover. The arrival of Bluntschli through the window is a classic theatrical device - the intruder in the boudoir - but Shaw transforms it from a scene of romantic danger into one of practical negotiation. Bluntschli's first concern is not the beautiful woman before him but the military threat behind him; Raina's response shifts, almost despite herself, from theatrical fright to practical management.

Shaw's dialogue throughout the play is dense with intellectual energy. Unlike the melodrama of his contemporaries, which relied on heightened emotional rhetoric, Shaw's characters debate, argue, and analyse. The comedic pleasure of the play derives not from physical farce but from the collision of competing worldviews - and in every such collision, the Romantic worldview is exposed as less coherent, less honest, and less adequate to experience than the realistic one. Shaw, in this sense, makes thinking itself the dramatic action.

Language as a Vehicle of Realism

The language Shaw assigns to Bluntschli is notable for its plainness, directness, and specificity. He speaks in the idiom of the craftsman: technical, practical, devoid of ornament. His descriptions of military life are detailed and unglamorous. This linguistic plainness is itself a form of realism - it insists that the world is best understood through precise, honest description rather than elevated rhetoric.

By contrast, the language Shaw gives to Raina and Sergius in their early scenes is deliberately overwrought - full of exclamation points, hyperbole, and operatic gesture. Shaw's stage directions frequently draw attention to the theatrical self-consciousness of their speech and movement, making explicit the gap between genuine feeling and performed sentiment. As the play progresses and the characters are forced into greater honesty, their language becomes simpler, more direct, closer to Bluntschli's register.

Love and Marriage: A Realistic Reconfiguration

Arms and the Man also offers a radical rethinking of romantic love and its social institution, marriage. The Romantic tradition idealized love as a consuming passion that transcended social circumstance and rational consideration. Shaw, characteristically, disagrees. The play's resolution pairs Raina with Bluntschli - not because their love is a great passion, but because they are genuinely compatible: they are alike in their fundamental honesty, their underlying practicality, and their capacity for self-knowledge.

This is a deliberately anti-Romantic conception of love. Shaw's ideal couple are not united by the irrational force of passion but by mutual recognition and respect - what one might call intellectual affinity. Bluntschli's declaration of love in Act III is arguably the least conventionally romantic love declaration in Victorian drama: he presents a list of his material qualifications rather than a protestation of undying passion. And yet Shaw clearly presents this as the more genuine, more durable, and more admirable form of love. Similarly, the play's secondary love plot - Sergius and Louka - is resolved not through Romantic passion but through the frank acknowledgement of social aspiration and physical attraction. Louka, the servant, is arguably the play's most consistently honest character: she sees Sergius for what he is and pursues her own interests without sentimentality. Her ultimate elevation through marriage to Sergius is, in Shaw's world, a triumph not of romance but of realism and personal honesty.

Shaw's Shavian Realism in Broader Context

It is important to situate Shaw's anti-Romanticism within the broader tradition of European literary realism that was transforming the arts in the late nineteenth century. Figures such as Henrik Ibsen in drama, Émile Zola in the novel, and later Bertolt Brecht in theatre were all engaged in the project of stripping away idealist illusion to reveal the social, economic, and psychological determinants of human behaviour. Shaw's debt to Ibsen is widely acknowledged: he championed Ibsen's work in *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* (1891), written just three years before *Arms and the Man*, and in that essay articulated many of the critical principles that *Arms and the Man* dramatizes.

However, Shaw's realism differs from that of Ibsen or Zola in its fundamentally comic register. Where Ibsen and Zola deploy the tragic and naturalistic modes to explore social reality, Shaw insists on comedy - not as a softening of his critique, but as its sharpest instrument. Comedy, for Shaw, was the form best suited to intellectual argument: it maintained the critical distance necessary for analysis, prevented the sentimental identification that tragedy encouraged, and - crucially - kept the audience laughing even as it dismantled their most cherished assumptions.

This use of comedy as a vehicle for serious intellectual critique is perhaps Shaw's most distinctive contribution to the realist tradition. *Arms and the Man* demonstrates that laughter and rigorous social criticism are not merely compatible but mutually reinforcing: we laugh at Sergius's posturing, and in laughing we accept Shaw's analysis of it; we smile at Raina's theatrical self-consciousness, and in smiling we recognize the self-deception that Romanticism enables. Shaw's comedy is, in the deepest sense, a form of

cognitive therapy - it cures us of Romantic illusion by making that illusion comic rather than noble.

Critical Perspectives

The critical literature on *Arms and the Man* has consistently recognized its anti-Romantic dimension, though scholars have differed in their assessments of its precise significance. Eric Bentley, one of the foremost Shaw scholars of the twentieth century, argued that the play's genius lies in its refusal of the easy consolations of both Romanticism and cynicism: Bluntschli is not a nihilist but a pragmatist, and Shaw's realism is not a counsel of despair but an affirmation of human intelligence.

Michael Holroyd, in his monumental biography of Shaw, emphasizes the personal dimensions of Shaw's anti-Romanticism, connecting it to his temperamental distrust of emotional excess and his intellectual formation in the rationalist tradition. Holroyd reads Bluntschli partly as a self-portrait - Shaw himself was, in many ways, the practical man of business who distrusted the luxury of sentiment. Feminist scholars such as J. Ellen Gainor have drawn attention to the play's treatment of female self-deception and awakening, reading Raina's transformation as a proto-feminist narrative in which a woman liberates herself from the Romantic scripts that her culture has imposed upon her. This reading enriches the play's anti-Romantic thesis by showing that Romanticism's illusions are not merely aesthetic but gendered - they constrain women's self-perception and limit their agency.

More recent critics have been attentive to the play's treatment of national identity and the Romantic mythology of the nation. The setting in Bulgaria - a country that, to Shaw's English audience, was at once exotic and slightly absurd - allows Shaw to distance his anti-Romantic critique from specifically English contexts while simultaneously implying that the Romantic illusions he targets are universal rather than local.

Conclusion

Arms and the Man is a work of remarkable intellectual ambition. In the space of three acts, Shaw dismantles the central pillars of the Romantic worldview - heroism, idealized love, and the glory of war - and replaces them with a vision of human experience grounded in honesty, self-knowledge, and practical intelligence. Through the contrasting figures of Bluntschli and Sergius, and through the educative transformation of Raina, Shaw dramatizes his conviction that authentic human flourishing requires the courage to see the world as it is rather than as we would wish it to be.

The play's anti-Romanticism is not a counsel of cynicism or despair. Shaw does not argue that idealism is wrong because the world is irredeemably squalid; he argues that idealism, by papering over reality with beautiful illusions, prevents the clear-sighted diagnosis and reform of the conditions that make human life genuinely difficult. Bluntschli's chocolate creams are not a symbol of defeat but of survival: the realist makes the best of what is, while the Romantic starves dreaming of what should be.

In its blend of sharp comedy, intellectual rigour, and moral seriousness, *Arms and the Man* establishes the template for Shavian drama at its most characteristic and most powerful.

It remains, more than a century after its first performance, a profoundly relevant work - a reminder that the capacity for honest self-examination is, as Shaw insisted, both the most difficult and the most necessary of human achievements. The play challenges every generation to examine its own Romantic myths and to choose, with Raina, the difficult freedom of reality over the seductive comfort of illusion.

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