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Arms and the Man

by

George Bernard Shaw

First performed - 1894

First published - 1898



MonkeyNotes Study Guide by TheBestNotes Staff

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KEY LITERARY ELEMENTS

SETTING

Prince Alexander I, the Regent of Bulgaria, led the Bulgarian army against the Serbs who had declared war in November 1885. The Bulgarian army was helped by the Russians whereas the Serbs were led by Austrians. The Swiss supplied a large number of mercenaries and Captain Bluntschli is one such soldier fighting on the Serbian side. Such mercenaries had no feelings. At a crucial point Russia called back her officers and Bulgaria was left to fend for herself. In spite of such mishaps the Bulgarians were victorious in.....

LIST OF CHARACTERS

Raina Petkoff - Raina, the heroine of the play, is the only child of Major Petkoff and Catherine Petkoff. She is a "romantic" and had romantic notions of love and war.

Catherine Petkoff - Catherine Petkoff, Raina's mother, is a middle-aged affected woman, who wishes to pass off as a Viennese lady. She is "imperiously energetic" and good-looking.

Louka - Louka, a servant girl in the Petkoff household, is proud and looks down on servility. She is ambitious and wishes to rise in life. Nicola wishes to marry her but she has other plans.

Major Petkoff - Major Petkoff has acquired his position in the army more because of his wealth than his ability. In military strategy he takes help from Bluntschli but believes that he himself has made all the plans. He is, however a good father and husband.

Sergius - Sergius is handsome, as a romantic hero ought to be, has a good position in.....

Additional characters are identified in the complete study guide.

CONFLICT

The conflict in "Arms and the Man" is between opposing beliefs and ideas.

Protagonist - Raina is the protagonist. She has romantic notions about war and love.

Antagonist - In a way, Bluntschli could be considered the antagonist since he presents a realistic picture of war. Louka is the other antagonist who makes Raina and Sergius.....

Climax - Bluntschli's arrival with the coat is the climax. At that point the

Outcome - The outcome is a happy one. Raina marries Bluntschli and Louka secures Sergius. Overall, the.....

THEMES

The play has two major themes : war and marriage. Romantic illusion about war lead to disasters, in the same way romantic notions of love and marriage lead to unhappy marriages.

A minor theme is the relationship between the upper and lower classes as represented by.....

MOOD

Pleasant. The play was published together with the others in "Plays Pleasant".

SHORT PLOT SUMMARY (Synopsis)

In a war between Bulgaria and Serbia, the Serbian soldiers are fleeing. A Serbian soldier surprises Raina, the heroine, by entering her bedroom for shelter. The Serbian officer is a Swiss mercenary soldier fighting on the Serbian side, his name is Captain Bluntschli. Raina Petkoff had been dreaming of her fiancé Sergius; about how valiantly he had led the Bulgarians to victory. Bluntschli is a soldier who prefers a supply of chocolates to

bullets when he goes to the front. He gives an account to Raina about the Bulgarian victory, which according to him, was a fluke as someone had forgotten to supply the Serbian army with ammunition. Her romantic notion about soldiers receives a shock when he tells her he is afraid and unwilling to die. However, when the pursuers enter the house, she hides Bluntschli successfully. Only Louka, the maidservant notices the pistol and knows that the fugitive is hiding in the room.

Four months later, after the war is over, Major Petkoff and Sergius get a warm welcome from Mrs. Petkoff and Raina. The two men talk about a young Swiss officer who had impressed them with.....

BACKGROUND INFORMATION - BIOGRAPHY

George Bernard Shaw was born in Dublin on July 26, 1856. He was the youngest of three children, his older siblings were girls. His parents were George Carr Shaw and Lucinda Elizabeth Shaw. His father came from a good family but was the youngest son of his parents, and therefore, inherited nothing except aristocratic habits. He was a drunkard and was unable to support his family adequately. His mother was a talented singer. Her music teacher was George J.V. Lee.

With a mother, too aloof, and a drunkard father, the children grew up in a lax atmosphere. They were left to themselves without any guidance and without any demand for obedience. The parents did not earn much reverence from Bernard. From his father he inherited a sense of humor and from his mother, imagination. After being tutored at home by a governess and then an uncle, Bernard Shaw went to the Dublin Wesleyan connexional school. In 1869 he was transferred to the Central Model Boys' school in Dublin. The last two years of his school life were spent at the Dublin English Scientific and Commercial Day School, which he left in 1871. Academically, he was a failure and later described the learning process as "a ceremony of disillusion". However, he gained something -- he became a voracious reader.

Before he had finished school, his mother, unable to cope with her husband, moved with her family to Lee's house in 1868. During the next four years, Shaw was surrounded by musical people, rehearsals and performances, which gave him a good background and sharpened his musical sensibility.

Later on his father became a teetotaler, yet the family broke up. Mrs. Shaw, with her.....

Preface to "Plays Pleasant"

Shaw first wrote a full-length preface when he wrote "Man and Superman". When "Arms and the Man" was first published, it did not have a preface. Later it was published in "Plays Pleasant" along with "Candida," "You Never Can Tell" and "The Man of Destiny". Shaw's prefaces are not necessarily related to the plays. The preface to the "Plays Pleasant" deals with 'New Drama' and 'New Theater'. The reason why he wrote plays was to prove that a real movement did exist. There were people like J.T. Grein who were trying to produce plays for the "Independent Theater" which were different from the well-made plays that the people were used to. Shaw completed "Arms and the Man" to be produced at the "Independent Theater". The purpose was to follow the example of Pre-Raphaelites who were trying to capture real life as the artists of

SCENE SUMMARIES WITH NOTES / ANALYSIS

ACT 1

Summary

The setting is a lady's bedchamber in a small town in Bulgaria. It is Raina's room and as the curtain rises we see her on the balcony admiring the beauty of the snow-clad peaks on a starlit night in November. The decor is "half rich Bulgarian, half cheap Viennese". All the ornamental fabrics in the room are oriental and gorgeous and in contrast the western wallpaper is shabby. On the chest of drawers are nick knacks including a box of chocolate cream and a miniature easel with a large photograph of a handsome officer. While Raina is admiring the beautiful landscape, her mother brings her the exciting news that Sergius, her lover, has led the Bulgarian army to a glorious victory. Sergius is now "The hero of the howl!" according to the news sent by Major Petkoff.

Catherine, Raina's mother, enthusiastically tells her "He defied our Russian commanders -- acted without orders -- led a charge on his own responsibility -- headed it himself -- was the first man to sweep through their guns." Raina feels gratified that her ideas about Sergius' heroism and patriotism have come true. She had wondered what kind of figure he would cut beside the Russian officers. Catherine asks Louka to shut all the windows. Serbs were being chased through the pass and they may run through the town and there may be shooting. Raina asks her to keep the shutters of the balcony open and promises to bolt them as soon as she heard any commotion. Louka reports that one of the bolts has gone.

Catherine and Louka leave. Raina admires her lover's portrait and goes to bed with a novel. She hears gunshots, rushes to blow out the candles on the chest of drawers as well as on the dressing table and goes back to bed. There is firing close by. The shutter opens and a figure enters bolting the shutter behind him. She can hear him panting. Raina asks "Who's there ? Who is that ?" A voice cautions her to be silent or else his revolver may go off. At his command she lights a candle. She sees a man of 35 "in deplorable plight, bespattered with mud and blood and snow" He appears to be a Serbian officer. He warns her that if the officers followed him to the room he would be killed and he does not intend to be killed. He tells her that in her present state of undress it would be inappropriate if the soldiers came in. She reaches for her cloak but he grabs it before she can. The possession of her cloak can safeguard him better than his revolver so he flings it on the ottoman.

They hear shooting followed by voices insisting on entering the house to look for a fugitive. Louka knocks on Raina's door. The fugitive quickly flings her cloak to her, relieved she hides him behind the curtains and opens the door. Catherine has also come in to check if Raina is safe. She has found a Russian officer who will check Raina's room. The officer comes in and after being assured that no fugitive is hiding there, he apologizes and leaves. Raina advises Louka not to leave her mother. Louka has seen the revolver on the ottoman and her glances tell Raina that she knows her secret.

As soon as Catherine and Louka are gone. The man steps out from his hiding place as Raina slams the door. He thanks her for saving him. She presumes he is one of those Austrians who were helping the Serbs to destroy the liberty of the Bulgarians. He confesses that he is a Swiss mercenary and begs her not to hate him. He asks her to allow him to spend some more time in her bedroom as he is still not out of danger. She requests him to sit. As she sits on the ottoman she jumps up with a shriek that startles him. Seeing his reaction she scornfully hands him the revolver so that he may protect himself and he tells her the revolver was useless as it had no cartridges. Raina tells him to load it and he tells her that instead of cartridges, he carried chocolates. She is outraged and offers him some chocolate cream. He eats ravenously and as his good humor returns he thanks her and tells her only young soldiers carry ammunition whereas the old soldiers carried food. He is tired and sleepy. She is sympathetic. She mentions that Bulgarian soldiers were not like him. He explains how the Bulgarians had won victory due to sheer ignorance. He describes the leader of the cavalry charge sarcastically, not knowing that he was Raina's lover. He tells her that the man was "A regular handsome fellow, with flashing eyes and lovely moustache shouting his war-cry and charging like Don Quixote at the windmills." Raina shows him the portrait of Sergius, he recognizes the "Don Quixote" and chokes with suppressed laughter. Raina snatches the picture and deliberately kisses it. She is offended and asks him to go back the way he came. He could climb up the pipe when he was being charged by the enemy but going down was impossible. Raina is, once again, moved to pity. He is exhausted and extremely sleepy, yet agrees to go down. Just at that moment they hear firing and Raina seizes him and pulls him in. She asks him not to sleep while she goes out to tell her mother about him. She assures him that he could trust their hospitality. He tries hard to stand up and keep awake but stumbles on the bed and falls asleep.

Catherine and Raina enter and are surprised not to find him near the ottoman. They think he has escaped. Catherine is even more shocked to discover him fast asleep in Raina's bed. She tries to rouse him but Raina requests her to allow him to sleep.

Notes

For the reader (as well as for the performers) Shaw gives elaborate stage directions, they include not only a detailed description of the decor of the stage, the exact property needed but also the character analysis. In this Act, every detail of the bedroom is given so that we are at once to see the lack of taste the woman displays in the choice of furnishings and artifacts she has in the room.

As the play opens we learn about Raina's romantic nature. We learn she is rich as she is covered by "a mantle of furs, worth on a moderate estimate, about three times the furniture of her room." In a single sentence Shaw tells us that "Catherine Petkoff, a woman over forty, imperiously energetic, with magnificent black hair and eyes, who might be a very splendid specimen of the wife of a mountain farmer, but is determined to be a Viennese lady, and to that end wears a fashionable tea gown on all occasions".

The play begins with excitement. Bulgaria has won a victory over the Serbs under the leadership of Sergius, Raina's lover. Raina expresses all the emotions appropriate for a romantic girl. She wonders if she is worthy of Sergius, she is happy that all she had imagined about Sergius has come true and she also feels remorse that there were moments of doubt about the heroism of her lover. The fact that she doubted the heroism of Sergius is in her favor as it shows that she has a practical side to her nature.

Right away there is a lot of activity after the announcement of the victory. There are gunshots and reports of Serbians retreating through the town with Russian troops following to capture them. On stage there is activity, as Catherine and Louka, the maidservant, enter Raina's room to shut all the doors and windows to safeguard Raina. In a sweeping statement Shaw tells us about Louka's appearance as well as her nature. She is a pretty proud insolent Bulgarian girl who lacks servility. Notice the skillful management of plot : Louka tells Raina that the bolt of the shutter in the balcony is missing thus preparing us for the plausibility of the fugitive's entrance from the balcony. Raina is elated since her lover has proved to be all that heroism means. When Catherine wishes her goodnight she says, "Wish me joy. This is the happiest night of my life - if only there are no fugitives." Ironically, it proves to be the happiest night of her life because there is a fugitive. The reader or the audience is now in suspense as they hear gunshots and Raina darkens the room. We know the balcony shutter is not bolted.

The fugitive comes in through the balcony. When Raina spots him, he threatens to kill her if she makes a noise. Its only later we learn that his revolver is not loaded. In Act One we don't meet Sergius but through the stage directions and comments of the characters we have an accurate picture of a brave and handsome soldier. Bluntschli is a contrast to him. When we first see him he is in a "deplorable plight, bespattered with mud and blood and snow." His tunic is torn. Instead of being courageous, he is afraid to die. One by one he shatters the illusions that Raina (and the audience) have about war. When the officer comes to search the house Bluntschli grabs her cloak so that her modesty will act as a protection for Bluntschli. When the officer really comes to her room, Bluntschli quickly gives her the cloak proving that he is kind and considerate. Raina hides him and assures the officer that there is no fugitive in her room. She too reveals the kindness in her nature. When Catherine, Louka and the officers leave the room, Bluntschli and Raina resume their conversation. Now she learns that the revolver is unloaded that he prefers to carry chocolates instead of cartridges. Raina is "outraged at her more cherished ideals of manhood". She thinks only schoolboys carry chocolates. What Shaw is telling us is that food is as important for the soldier as ammunition. Scornfully Raina offers him the box of chocolate creams.

Bluntschli accepts the chocolate creams with gratitude and finishes them with relish. Satiated, he thanks her profusely and then explains that the older soldiers carry food and the younger ones carry ammunition. Raina is contemptuous and claims to be more brave although a woman. Bluntschli explains the realities of war; he tells her that a man is bound to be a nervous wreck if he has been under fire for three whole days. Raina retorts that Bulgarian soldiers don't buckle under such stress. Bluntschli disagrees and gives her his views on the Bulgarian

victory at Slivnitsa. He tells her that the Bulgarian cavalry won out of sheer ignorance. In his opinion they were unprofessional. It was stupid to make a cavalry charge against a battery of machine guns. Raina is eager to hear more of it and Bluntschli gives her a detailed account without realizing that the leader of the cavalry charge, the object of his ridicule, was Raina's lover. Sergius horse had charged ahead and could not be controlled. Raina thinks Sergius must have charged ahead of the others because he was the bravest of them all. Bluntschli tells her only the young soldiers charge wildly without realizing they can be shot easily whereas the older soldiers go in groups realizing the futility of fighting. Raina insists that the leader was certainly not a coward and she is eager to get a more detailed description of his action. She is breathless with anticipation. Bluntschli describes him vividly. " He did it like an operatic tenor. A regular handsome fellow, with flashing eyes and lovely moustache, shouting his war-cry and charging like Don Quixote at the windmills. We did laugh ." Bluntschli's comments show that he is a man of some sophistication to be able to compare Sergius to an operatic tenor as well as Don Quixote. It is also noteworthy that while he describes the foolishness of the Bulgarian soldiers, he is realistic about his own side. It's the height of irresponsibility that the Serbians did not have proper ammunition to retaliate. The Bulgarians have won a victory out of sheer luck or else their strategy was suicidal. In his opinion Sergius ought to be court marshaled for being so unprofessional. It is important to notice that Bluntschli feels embarrassed when he recognizes Sergius in the photograph and learns that he is Raina's lover.

He is apologetic. He does care for her feelings. He has succeeded in deflating Raina's exaggerated picture of Sergin's heroism.

Raina is offended and asks him how she should treat her enemy, after all, Bluntschli was at her mercy. Bluntschli flatters her by saying "to my last hour I shall remember those three chocolate creams." She is still faithful to Sergius and will not tolerate a man who laughed at her hero. The prospect of going down the pipeline scares him but he has to accept the inevitable. Besides, he is now so sleepy that he is unable to think of capture or death clearly. As he attempts to go there are gunshots, Raina drags him in.

What follows is interesting. Raina wishes to impress him and tells him that if he had knocked at their door for shelter, they, who believe in hospitality, would have sheltered him. She tries to show off her sophistication and assure him that their sense of hospitality was as strong as that of the nobleman in the opera "Ernani". In that story the hero fleeing from his enemy takes refuge in the castle of a Castilian noble who belongs to the enemy camp. The nobleman protects him as his great and refuses to give him up. Bluntschli mixes up Ernani with Faust since he is overcome with sleep. Once again displaying some familiarity with the opera. Bluntschli also talks about his father's hospitality; after all, he is a hotel owner. Raina even brags about the staircase and the library in their house. She asks him to wait till she calls her mother. When the mother enters with Raina, he is fast asleep. Raina's comment "Don't mamma, the poor darling is worn out. Let him sleep," shocks Major Petkoff.

There are general contrasts in this act. Raina's dreamy romantic nature is a contrast to her mother's energetic manner. Bluntschli's shabby state is marked by a contrast to the smart appearance of Sergius in the photograph. Notice also the reaction of Bluntschli when he sees the photograph. Raina showed him the photograph expecting some admiration but in contrast, Bluntschli laughs at the photograph.

There is dramatic irony in this Act and a contamination of it in Act two and three as well. When Bluntschli describes the cavalry charge he compares Sergius to Don Quixote not knowing that he is Raina's lover. The audience knows it.....

OVERALL ANALYSES

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

The characters in " Arms and the Man" are clearly defined. Dialogue is more important than action, so, our judgment of characters depends on their speech. Unlike other playwrights Shaw gives elaborate stage directions

which guide the judgment of the reader. The stage directions do not pertain only to movement or decor on stage but also a detailed description of the costume, appearance and nature of characters. The spectator, of course, depends on the dialogue and the interpretation of the actors.

Raina Petkoff - Raina Petkoff is the only child of Major Petkoff and Catherine. She is a beautiful girl who gives Bluntschli the impression she is seventeen although she is twenty three years old. In the first Act she is shown admiring the beautiful snowcapped Balkan mountain on a moonlit night. The view is romantic in keeping with her romantic disposition. Her romantic notions are nurtured by the romantic poetry of.....

Sergius Saranoff - Much before we see Sergius Saranoff, he is introduced to us by Catherine who praises him and Bluntschli who laughs at him. We learn he is handsome from Bluntschli who has seen him at the battlefield and then through the description of his photograph. He is a handsome fellow with flashing eyes and a lovely moustache but he is like Don Quixote charging against the windmills.

Physically, he is exactly like a romantic hero ought to be. He has other assets which add to it. He is rich, has a good position in the Bulgarian army and like the hero of chivalric romance loves his horses. His statements about the war are ironic. When he returns from the war and Catherine receives.....

Bluntschli - Bluntschli is perhaps the most lovable character in the play. When we first see him he is a fugitive - tired hungry and sleepy. He is a bundle of nerves. As a young boy he ran away from home because he wanted to become a soldier. He joined the Serbian army which was at war and needed soldiers.

When the play opens the war is over and the Serbs are being chased by the Bulgarians and firing can be heard in the streets. Bluntschli enters Raina's bedroom from the balcony in order to escape death. In the.....

Major Petkoff - Major Petkoff is a rich family man who has gained his status in the army because of his wealth and not because of his military expertise. He is not ambitious and is satisfied with the position he enjoys in his town. Like Sergius, he is inefficient. So when Bluntschli comes along he happily hands over the responsibility of planning the mobilization of the army. After Bluntschli has finished writing the orders.....

Catherine Petkoff - Catherine Petkoff is a woman over forty. She is imperious and energetic. She has "magnificent black hair and eyes, who might be a very splendid specimen of the wife of a mountain farmer, but is determined to be a Viennese lady(who) wears a fashionable tea gown on all occasions." She is seen excited over the Bulgarian victory and especially in the triumph of Sergius. She scolds

Nicola - Nicola is a faithful old servant of the household. He does not talk much to the Petkoffs. He believes he must please his superiors and that the poor can only come up in life with the patronage of the rich. He is ambitious. He plans to open a shop in future after he marries Louka and looks forward to their custom. When Louka decides to marry Sergius he does not mind provided they promise to patronize.....

Louka - Louka is the spirited maid servant in the Petkoff household. She hates Nicola's servility. She is intelligent and ambitious. The moment Sergius begins to flirt with her she makes up her mind to trap him. Her method is to rouse his jealousy by telling him Raina will never marry him. She does not

PLOT STRUCTURE ANALYSIS

Shaw said "I avoid plots like the plague My procedure is to imagine characters and let them rip.....". He was against the popular well-made play in which the plot was the most important thing. In such plays character played no important part. Actions were not an outcome of character. He admired the plays of Ibsen. Allardyce Nicoll points out that Ibsen's association began with the production of a large number of well-made plays. As a result his plays were also well made and he used many devices from that genre. The difference was that Ibsen took issues which no other playwright had done before him. Shaw also took very bold themes and built his plays around them. Themes like Slum landlords, prostitution, Christian socialism and so on and in the

beginning, critics did not appreciate them. In "Arms and the Man" he deals with romantic notions of love and war and he exposes them. He had a great sense of humor and so while he entertained his.....

CONTRASTS

The major contrasts in the play are between Sergius and Bluntschli and between Raina and Louka. The appearance of Sergius is that of a typical romantic hero : he is handsome and very well-groomed whereas Bluntschli, when he first appears, is Shabby and nothing much to look at. Sergius is first seen in the photograph with proper clothes where as Bluntschli's clothes are stained with mud and blood.....

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. In what way is "Arms and the Man" an anti-romantic comedy?
2. Show how Shaw's stage directions help with the production of the play as well as with assessment of character.
3. Compare and contrast the characters of Bluntschli and Sergius.

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