



Arms and the Man

George Bernard Shaw
(1894)

PLOT AND SETTING

The title comes from the English translation of the opening line of Virgil's *Aeneid*: 'Arms and the man I sing'. The first act opens with the description of the setting: **a small town near a mountain pass in the Balkans**. The Bulgarians have just won an important battle against the Serbs and their Austrian officers. **Raina Petkoff**, the daughter of a wealthy Bulgarian, is extremely happy and proud because her lover, **Sergius**, has led a cavalry charge with bravery. While she is rejoicing, a Swiss officer of the Serb army, **Bluntschli**, escapes by climbing into her bedroom; Raina agrees to hide him and helps him run away. The second act takes place six months later; Raina and Sergius talk about their love, but as soon as Raina leaves the stage, her lover flirts openly with Louka, the maid. Bluntschli arrives to give Raina back the coat she lent him to escape; in the end Raina marries him, while Sergius marries the maid. The play was also turned into a musical, *The Chocolate Soldier*.

CHARACTERS

Raina Petkoff is portrayed as a **typical Romantic heroine**. She is engaged to Sergius Saranoff, a young nobleman in the Serbo-Bulgarian cavalry. She loves adventure and romance and is surprised to find herself attracted to the enemy, the professional soldier, Captain Bluntschli, whom she saves from her own people. She falls in love with him because he is able to see through to her soul and is not intimidated by her belonging to a well-off family.

Captain Bluntschli is a **professional Swiss soldier** whose father is a rich hotel owner. He is called '**chocolate-cream**

soldier' by Raina because he asks her for some chocolates when he is a hungry refugee. **He does not act like a hero** and admits to carrying chocolates instead of ammunition on the battlefield. He is humble and, though attracted to Raina, does not pursue her. She has to pursue him. In the end, he admits he is a romantic, because he left his hometown to join the army and see the world.

Sergius is Raina's handsome fiancé. He is romantic in a different way, trying to act the part of a knight in modern warfare. He makes a fool of himself at the Battle of Slivnitza by leading a cavalry charge into a line of cannons, but fortunately they did not have the right ammunition and he won the battle. He gets tired of playing the ideal lover with Raina, and begins **flirting with Louka, to whom he is attracted**. Once he asks Louka to be his, he cannot change his mind.

Louka is rebellious, proud and insolent to Raina. She is Raina's rival for Sergius. She is witty and intelligent, and the **main voice for the equality of the classes in the play**, claiming that she has a right to marry whoever she loves.

THEMES

The main themes of the play are **the survival of militarism**, which from time to time casts a doubt on the reality of our civilisation, and **the opposition of reality to romance**.

STYLE

Shaw employs the techniques of suspense, surprise, reversal, and above all, the clever complication of events followed by the clear unravelling and resolution of the various actions.

COMPETENCE: READING AND UNDERSTANDING INFORMATION

1 READ the text and answer the following questions about *Arms and the Man*.

- 1 Where does the play take place?
- 2 Who are the main characters?
- 3 What is Raina like? Who does she fall in love with?
- 4 Why is Captain Bluntschli called 'chocolate-cream soldier'?
- 5 What is the role played by Sergius at the beginning of the play?
- 6 What kind of woman is Louka? What does she represent?
- 7 What are the main themes of the play?
- 8 What are the techniques employed by Shaw in this play?



Reality versus romance

The passage that follows describes the setting of the play and introduces the main characters, Bluntschli, a Swiss officer who fights for money rather than ideals, and Raina, a young girl with a romantic conception of war.

George Bernard Shaw
Arms and the Man
(1894)

Act I

- [Night. A lady's bedchamber in Bulgaria, in a small town near the Dragoman Pass, late in November in the year 1885. Through an open window with a little balcony a peak of the Balkans, wonderfully white and beautiful in the **starlit** snow, seems quite close at hand, though it is really miles away. The interior of the room is not like anything to be seen in the west of Europe. It is half rich Bulgarian, half cheap Viennese. Above the head of the bed, which stands against a little wall cutting off the left hand corner of the room, is a painted wooden shrine¹, blue and gold, with an ivory image of Christ, and a light hanging before it in a pierced² metal ball suspended by three chains. The principal seat, placed towards the other side of the room and opposite the window, is a Turkish **ottoman**. [...]
- 5 The washstand³, against the wall on the side nearest the ottoman and window, consists of an enamelled iron basin⁴ with a pail⁵ beneath it in a painted metal frame, and a single towel on the rail at the side. The dressing table, between the bed and the window, is a common pine table, covered with a cloth of many colors, with an expensive toilet mirror on it. The door is on the side nearest the bed; and there is a chest of drawers between.
- 15 This chest of drawers is also covered by a variegated native⁶ cloth; and on it there is a pile of **paper backed** novels, a box of chocolate creams, and a miniature easel⁷ with a large photograph of an extremely handsome officer, whose lofty bearing⁸ and magnetic glance can be felt even from the portrait. The room is lighted by a candle on the chest of drawers, and another on the dressing table, with a box of matches beside it.
- 20 The window is hinged doorwise⁹ and stands wide open. Outside a pair of wooden shutters, opening outwards¹⁰, also stand open. On the balcony, a young lady, intensely conscious of the romantic beauty of the night, and of the fact that her own youth and beauty is a part of it, is gazing at the snowy Balkans. She is in her nightgown, well covered by a long mantle of furs, worth, on a moderate estimate, about¹¹ three times the furniture of her room.
- 25 Her reverie¹² is interrupted by her mother, Catherine Petkoff, a woman over forty, imperiously energetic, with magnificent black hair and eyes, who might be a very splendid specimen¹³ 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.]

CATHERINE [entering **hastily**, full of good news] Raina! [She pronounces it Rah-eena, with the stress on the ee.] Raina! [She goes to the bed, expecting to find Raina there.] Why, where –? [RAINA looks into the room.] Heavens! Child! are you out in the night air instead of in your bed? You'll catch your death. Louka told me you were asleep.

30 RAINA [dreamily] I sent her away. I wanted to be alone. The stars are so beautiful! What is the matter?

CATHERINE Such news. There has been a battle! [...]

40 RAINA [looking up at the picture] Oh, I shall never be **unworthy** of you any more, my soul's hero – never, never, never. [She replaces it reverently. Then she selects a novel from the little pile of books. She turns over the leaves dreamily; finds her page; turns the book inside out at it; and, with a happy sigh, gets into bed and prepares to read herself to sleep. But before abandoning herself to fiction, she raises her eyes once more, thinking of the blessed reality, and murmurs] My hero! my hero! [A distant shot breaks the quiet of the night. She starts, listening; and two more shots, much nearer, follow, startling her¹⁴ so that she **scrambles** out of bed, and hastily blows out the candle on the chest of drawers. Then, putting her fingers in her ears, she runs to the dressing table, blows out¹⁵ the light there, and hurries back to bed in the dark,

- 1 painted wooden shrine. Teca di legno dipinta
- 2 pierced. Forata.
- 3 washstand. Lavabo.
- 4 enamelled iron basin. Bacinella di ferro smaltata.
- 5 pail. Secchio.
- 6 native. Del posto.
- 7 easel. Cavalletto.
- 8 lofty bearing. Portamento altero.
- 9 hinged doorwise. Provvista di cardini come una porta.
- 10 outwards. Verso l'esterno.
- 11 worth ... about. Che vale circa, secondo una modesta stima.
- 12 reverie. Sogno ad occhi aperti.
- 13 specimen. Esemplare.
- 14 startling her. Che la allarmano.
- 15 blows out. Spegne.



nothing being visible but the glimmer of the light in the pierced ball before the image, and the starlight seen through the slits¹⁶ at the top of the shutters. The firing breaks out again: there is a startling fusillade quite close at hand. Whilst it is still echoing, the shutters disappear, pulled open from without; and for an instant the rectangle of snowy starlight flashes out with the figure of a man silhouetted in black upon it. The shutters close immediately; and the room is dark again. But the silence is now broken by the sound of panting. Then there is a scratch¹⁷; and the flame of a match is seen in the middle of the room.]

RAINA [crouching¹⁸ on the bed] Who's there? [The match is out instantly.] Who's there? Who is that?

A MAN'S VOICE [in the darkness, subdued¹⁹, but threateningly] Sh – sh! Dont¹⁹ call out; or youll²⁰ 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.

RAINA But who –

THE VOICE [warning] Remember: if you raise your voice my revolver 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 man of about 35, in a deplorable plight²¹, bespattered²² with mud and blood and snow, his belt and the strap of his revolver-case keeping together the torn ruins of the blue tunic of a Serbian artillery officer. All that the candlelight and his unwashed unkempt²³ condition make it possible to discern is that he is of middling stature and undistinguished appearance, with strong neck and shoulders, roundish obstinate looking head covered with short crisp bronze curls, clear quick eyes and good brows and mouth, hopelessly prosaic nose like that of a strong minded baby, trim soldierlike carriage²⁴ and energetic manner, and with all his wits²⁵ about him in spite of his desperate predicament²⁶: even with a sense of the humor of it, without, however, the least intention of trifling with²⁷ it or throwing away a chance. Reckoning up²⁸ what he can guess about Raina: her age, her social position, her character, and the extent to which she is frightened, he continues, more politely but still most determinedly.] Excuse my disturbing you; but you recognize my uniform? Serb! If I'm caught I shall be killed. [Menacingly] Do you understand that?

RAINA Yes.

[...]

LOUKA [outside, knocking at the bedroom door] My lady! my lady! get up quick and open the door. If you dont they will break it down.

[The fugitive throws up his head with the gesture of a man who sees that it is all over with him, and drops the manner he has been assuming to intimidate Raina.]

THE MAN [sincerely and kindly] No use, dear: I'm done for. [Flinging the cloak²⁹ to her] Quick! wrap yourself up: they're coming³⁰.

RAINA Oh, thank you. [She wraps herself up with intense relief³¹.]

THE MAN [between his teeth] Dont mention it.

RAINA [anxiously] What will you do?

THE MAN [grimly³²] The first man in will find out. Keep out of the way; and dont look. It wont³³ last long; but it will not be nice. [He draws his sabre³⁴ and faces the door, waiting.]

RAINA [impulsively] I'll help you. I'll save you.

THE MAN You cant.

RAINA I can. I'll hide you. [She drags³⁵ him towards the window.] Here! behind the curtains.

THE MAN [yielding to³⁶ her] Theres³⁷ just half a chance, if you keep your head.

RAINA [drawing the curtain before him] S-sh! [She makes for³⁸ the ottoman.]

THE MAN [putting out his head] Remember –

RAINA [running back to him] Yes?

THE MAN – nine soldiers out of ten are born fools.

16 slits. Fessure.

17 scratch. Suono stridulo, scricchiolio.

18 crouching. Rannicchiandosi.

19 Dont. Don't.

20 youll. You'll.

21 deplorable plight. Condizioni deprecabili.

22 bespattered. Macchiato.

23 unkempt. Scarmigliata, disordinata.

24 trim soldierlike carriage. Il portamento impeccabile di un soldato.

25 with all his wits. Con tutta la sua prontezza di spirito.

26 predicament. Situazione difficile.

27 trifling with. Scherzare, non prendere sul serio.

28 Reckoning up. Calcolando, considerando.

29 Flinging the cloak. Buttando il mantello.

30 wrap ... coming. Avvolgiti: stanno arrivando.

31 relief. Solievo.

32 grimly. Spietatamente.

33 wont. Won't.

34 sabre. Sciabola.

35 drags. Trascina.

36 yielding to. Arrendendosi.

37 Theres. There is.

38 makes for. Si dirige verso.

**READING COMPETENCE****1 READ** the text and match the highlighted words with their Italian translation.

- | | |
|--------------------------|---------------------------------|
| 1 in brossura | 6 in maniera controllata |
| 2 indegna | 7 stupidi |
| 3 minacciosamente | 8 illuminata dalle stelle |
| 4 scende in fretta | 9 frettolosamente |
| 5 divano | |

> COMPETENCE: READING AND UNDERSTANDING A TEXT**2 READ** the text again and find out

- the setting in time and place;
- the contrast in the furnishings of the room;
- what Raina is looking at;
- who interrupts her reverie;
- what kind of book she is going to read;
- who the man climbing into her room is;
- how the girl reacts to the presence of the soldier in her bedroom;
- why she decides to help him;
- how she helps the soldier.

> COMPETENCE: ANALYSING AND INTERPRETING A TEXT**3 STATE** the functions of stage directions in this passage. Is it possible to state that they place the Petkoffs socially and culturally?**4 FOCUS** on Raina and the Swiss soldier.

- 1 Complete the table with any useful information about them.

	Raina	The soldier
Physical appearance		
Social position		
Personality		

- 2 Raina's attitude to the soldier undergoes a change. Complete the scheme below about the girl's behaviour during the scene.

Romantic outlook towards her lover, Sergius → →
 → common sense = help given to the Swiss officer

5 STATE what particular ideas Raina, the Swiss soldier and Sergius embody.**6 UNDERLINE** words and phrases belonging to the two most important semantic areas of the text: romantic fancy and reality.**7 IDENTIFY** the theme of the passage.**8 DISCUSS** in pairs the possible meaning of the play's subtitle: *An Anti-Romantic Comedy in Three Acts*.



➤ COMPETENCE: PRODUCING A WRITTEN TEXT ON A GIVEN SUBJECT

- 9 **WRITE** a 10/12-line paragraph imagining how would it be to act out this extract from *Arms and the Man* with the characters in contemporary clothes. Add a detailed description of the characters' costumes, the scenery, the lighting, sound effects and acting, specifying whether the dialogue would seem anachronistic or whether it would sound more comic.