ARMS AND THE MAN – SUMMARY, THEMES AND SYMBOLS

Plot Summary

ACT I

The play begins in Raina's bedroom. It is an odd mix of the expensively grand and tastelessly cheap. Raina stands out on her balcony enjoying the idea that she makes the lovely evening even more so. She wears a fur dressing gown worth three times the room's furniture. Catherine, her mother, enters and tells Raina that there has been a great battle. The war between Bulgaria and Serbia may have been decided by this great victory. Leading the daring charge was Raina's fiancée: Major Sergius Saranoff. The routed forces of the enemy are being hunted through the streets of the city.

Their maid servant, Louka, enters and informs the rejoicing mother and daughter of orders that the windows must be kept shuttered and barred, lest escaping soldiers or errant bullets get in. Raina's window does not bolt, but she closes the shutter and hides from the gunfire under her covers. It is then that a bedraggled-looking Servian officer climbs in her window.

Raina is not about to be intimidated and the two talk for quite a while. An officer of the Bulgarian army requests to search the room, as some people reported seeing a man climb in. Raina hides the Serbian officer and convinces the other soldiers that there is nobody there.

The soldier reveals that his gun has no cartridges and that, in fact, he generally carries chocolates where they should be. He is a professional soldier and knows that chocolates and food are more important in the long run than bullets. Raina contemptuously gives him the last of her chocolate crèmes and he gratefully eats them. Rather than allowing him to take the chance of capture and execution, Raina convinces the Officer (he isn't hard to convince) to rely upon her and her mother's good will. She leaves to enlist the help of her mother and when Raina and Catherine return to the room, the Officer has fallen asleep from stress and exhaustion. They wake him, dress him in an old coat of the Major's, and sneak him out safely.

ACT II

In the courtyard of the Petkoff house, Nicola is lecturing Louka about her insolence towards her employers. She scorns Nicola for his servility, but he knows the way things are and talks to her of practicalities and the real world. She will hear none of it.

Major Petkoff comes into the garden. He has just returned from the newly finished war. Treaties have been signed, and the two sides have begun diplomatic relations again. Petkoff is very glad to be home. Catherine runs out to greet him and they talk about the state of the two nations and of their own social status.

Sergius Saranoff arrives. Before he is brought around to the courtyard, Catherine presses Petkoff to arrange a promotion for their daughter's fiancée, but Petkoff assures her that it will not be very likely. Though his charge was brave, and worked, it was only through luck. It was actually a foolish move that only succeeded because of a technical problem in the enemy's machine guns. Nobody will give Saranoff a higher rank which would mean even more men to risk.

Saranoff realizes that his charge was "the cradle and the grave" of his military career and he announces his intention to retire. Raina arrives right on cue (Catherine remarks that her daughter waits for such moments).

Talking to Petkoff, Saranoff mentions an odd Swiss soldier they met during a prisoner exchange. He was an interesting fellow and definitely got the better of them in the trade. He told them a very interesting story about a spectacular escape from the Bulgarian forces. It involved crawling in the window of a young lady's bedroom and, with the assistance of the young lady and her mother, his escape in an old house-coat. This shocks Raina and Catherine, but both hide it well.

The major heads to the library to finish some plans for the military movements as they head back home. Saranoff and Raina are left alone. They trade romantic endearments and mutually worship each other's qualities. Raina convinces Saranoff to go for a walk with her and runs into the house to change dresses for the walk.

Saranoff takes the opportunity to drop his façade of courtly love and flirts with Louka. He is conflicted about the propriety of his own actions and varies between loving Louka and chastising himself, flirting and then apologizing. She is attracted to him, but also insulted by his actions. She hints that Raina isn't as innocent as Saranoff thinks, and he becomes angry, bruising her arms in his grip.

Raina enters to take Saranoff for a walk, but Catherine interrupts them, telling Saranoff that the Major needs his help with figuring out the troop movements. Saranoff promises to return in five minutes and runs into the Library. Raina admits to her mother that she isn't really as taken with Saranoff as she pretends to be.

Raina leaves as Louka re-enters to inform Catherine that a Serbian Officer named Bluntschli has come to visit. It quickly becomes clear that this is the "Chocolate Crème Soldier"- the man they helped to escape. He has come to return the old house coat. Catherine sees him secretly in the courtyard and asks him to leave as quickly as possible.

He says he understands and begins to leave as Major Petkoff and Saranoff enter. Recognizing the soldier, they greet him warmly and insist that he stay at the Petkoff home. He tries to back out, but they are insistent. Raina runs in and, recognizing Bluntschli, calls him her "Chocolate Crème Soldier" in shock. She and Catherine have to cover quickly for her slip. Finally, with Raina insisting that he stay as well, Bluntschli agrees to prolong his visit for a few days.

ACT III

The library, later that afternoon, is the place where the scene takes place. It really isn't much of a 'library' but the Petkoffs are enormously proud of it as a symbol of their wealth. Major Petkoff sits reading a paper. Bluntschli is studiously focused on writing the orders for troop movements that Petkoff and Saranoff couldn't figure out. He hands each completed order to Saranoff to sign. Saranoff is at once awed and jealous of Bluntschli's military knowledge. Catherine sits working on sewing, while Raina poses gazing out the window.

The major complains that he misses his old house-coat. He can't find it anywhere. Little does he know that his wife gave it to Bluntschli in his escape. Now returned, Catherine tells Petkoff to look in an upstairs closet, but the major insists that he's checked the closet a dozen times. He sends a servant to check once more, and Nicola enters with the house-coat. Amazed and a bit confused, the major happily dons his favorite garment.

Finishing the orders, Bluntschli sends the Major and Sergius out to dispatch them to the troops. Left alone, Raina teases Bluntschli about the coat and his escape. The conversation becomes serious as she blames Bluntschli for forcing her to tell the only two lies she has ever told- one to the officer searching her room in Act I, and the other to her father to cover for calling him her "chocolate crème soldier". Bluntschli laughs at the idea that she could be so innocent. Indeed, she is not. Once she is through raging at him, she admits that he's right. She is impressed- he is the only person to actually take her so seriously.

She asks him if he liked the portrait she sneaked into the pocket of the house-coat, but Bluntschli has never seen it. He did not go through the pockets of the coat when he escaped. Raina realizes that the portrait, which she inscribed "to my chocolate crème soldier", is likely still in the pocket of the coat.

Louka enters with mail for Bluntschli. He receives a telegram informing him of his father's death and his inheritance. He exits to pack, as he must be leaving very soon to take care of the arrangements. Louka compares him unfavorably to Saranoff and Raina leaves, offended.

Nicola again tries to curb Louka's ambition and insolence. They are engaged, and he would like her to be content with the life ahead of her. If she cannot be, she will quickly be discharged. She keeps getting more and more insolent with Raina. Louka, however, just despises Nicola's servility all the more.

Sergius enters and Nicola leaves to let them be alone. Sergius apologizes for hurting her, but says that he is "never sorry" for anything. Again, he varies between his desires and his ideals. Louka calls him a coward. She says that he refuses to marry her simply because of station, and that is cowardly. Were she Empress of Russia, she claims, she would marry whom she pleased and show her own bravery.

Getting carried away, Louka tells Saranoff that Raina is really in love with Bluntschli and that it was Raina who helped him escape. Saranoff at first refuses to believe it, and then rages. Louka continues to taunt him about his own infidelities. Incensed, Saranoff swears to Louka that if he ever holds her again, it will be as his fiancée.

Bluntschli enters and Sergius challenges him to a duel. He is shocked and hasn't any idea why, but if Sergius is determined, he will fight. Raina enters and Sergius makes his grievance clear. He accuses Raina of secretly trysting with Bluntschli. They both deny this and it is true, neither has done anything inappropriate. Bluntschli tries to help Sergius repair things with Raina, but it is too late. Saranoff's philandering with Louka comes out, and Louka is found eavesdropping on the conversation. Now both Louka and Raina proceed to berate Sergius who, while deserving, is totally incapable of defending himself.

Petkoff enters and everything comes out. The portrait addressed to "the chocolate crème soldier" is found, Sergius breaks off his engagement with Raina. Then, he takes Louka's hand and, once she reminds him of his oath, he swears to marry her. Nicola quietly gives up his claim on her. Bluntschli, recognizing Nicola's intelligence and dedication suggests that he has an excellent position running hotels for him.

Bluntschli intends to leave, but Saranoff deduces the Officer's real reason for his visit. He must be in love with Raina. Since he cannot deny this, Bluntschli then tells Petkoff that he intends to court Raina for his wife. Catherine objects to her daughter marrying a poor officer in the Swiss Army. Now Bluntschli admits to his inheritance and makes it clear that he is a very wealthy man. Raina initially objects, saying that it was the poor officer that she was interested in, but Bluntschli makes it clear that he is quite the same man, regardless of wealth. He is her "chocolate crème soldier."

Themes

Identity, Authenticity and Self Expression

Arms and the Man is very interested in identity—many of its characters (played by actors on the stage) are themselves acting out certain roles, and the play repeatedly questions what constitutes a person's "true identity." In addition, the play emphasizes the importance of remaining authentic to yourself: many characters in the play are liberated once they learn to stop posturing or performing for others and express themselves honestly.

Both Raina and Sergius act out different roles depending on who they are with. Sergius supposes that he is "six different men" all wrapped into one. Raina speaks with a certain kind of passion and drama deliberately, because she finds it has a desired effect on the listener. They both do a good deal of "acting." Shaw also implicitly asks what things (besides behavior) determine identity. Is it our profession? Is calling Bluntschli a "soldier" tantamount to summarizing his identity? The same question could be asked about Nicola being a "servant." Do our families or

our names define us? Raina often speaks of herself as though her status as a "Petkoff" is integral to who she is.

These characters triumph, and form happy relationships, once they cease performing for the benefit of their family, friends, etc. and allow themselves to act authentically. Raina is able to let go of her romantic youthful and aristocratic airs and be herself with Bluntschli—who can only admit his love for her after he lets go of his rugged cynicism and admits he has a romantic side. Louka and Sergius also end up together once Sergius admits he is not as sensitive and refined as he acts, and once Louka freely admits that, though she has been acting put off by Sergius, the affection is in fact mutual.

In the late 1800s, Shaw became an advocate for the rights of workers, women, and racial minorities. He observed that certain groups of people were subjugated because of certain aspects of their identities, and in many ways this play serves to deconstruct "identity" as many in the 1800s would have seen it: something grounded in manners, social and economic standing, ancestry, race and gender. He also sees these divisions as not only economically or socially damaging but also psychologically damaging. Shaw questions these divisions in the play just as he questioned them in his activism. The play reveals that if culture shapes our identity for us we fail to be happy. But if we can find a way to be authentic to ourselves, our lives become more honest and our relationships more fulfilling. In many ways this emphasis on the importance of self-expression could be a kind of implicit argument for the importance of the arts, which many perceived to be waning in importance in the increasingly industrialized and scientific world of the late 19th century.

Romanticism/ Idealism vs. Realism

One of the central criticisms of *Arms and the Man* is of the tendency of people to romanticize or idealize complex realities: in particular love and war. Literary romanticism began to decline right around the time Shaw was born, and the play in many ways illustrates how and why romanticism historically failed: it could not accurately describe fundamental human experiences.

Raina is the play's most obvious romantic. Her relationship with Sergius (whom the stage directions call a "Byronic hero" after the Romantic poet Lord Byron) embodies almost all of the romantic ideals: they are both beautiful, refined, and appear to be infatuated with each other. However this romantic, idealistic vision of love does not stand up when reality sets in. The "genteel" Sergius lusts animalistically—even, sometimes, violently—after the servant Louka and Raina is in love with the anti-romantic Bluntschli. Their ideal romantic love is all an act. In reality, love is much more multifaceted, and complicated, than Raina and Sergius make it seem.

Raina and Sergius's flawed romanticism also shows through in their conception of war. Raina waxes poetic about how Sergius is an ideal soldier: brave, virile, ruthless but fair. It turns out Sergius's cavalry charge was ill-advised, and the charge only succeeded because the opposing side didn't have the correct ammunition. Sergius is not the perfect soldier—he is a farce. And the *real* soldier, Bluntschli, runs away from battle and carries sweets instead of a gun. He also speaks honestly about the brutality and violence of war—which involves more drunkenness and abuse than it does heroics and gallantry.

Shaw displays an interest in revealing human realities like love and war for what they really are: often ugly, contradictory, and thoroughly complex. He implicitly criticizes romantic art for

avoiding these realities, and giving us a sugarcoated version of human life and human history. Conversely, his work puts forth the argument that art should be able to make sense of and account for human experiences.

Class Divisions

19th century Europe was a place where divisions between the classes were becoming sharper and more damaging all the time. Industrialization and a widening wage gap gave rise to a socialist movement determined to protect members of the working class from exploitation. Predictably, Shaw, a socialist and activist, seeks to undermine the significance of class divisions in his play. The book persistently points out that division between the classes is unethical and unjust. The play maintains that in fact there is no inherent difference between a member of the working class and a member of the aristocracy beyond the way they are treated by society.

Louka is the most adamant socialist voice in this play. She insists she does not have the "soul of a servant" and refuses to think of herself as subservient simply because she was born into the working class. She falls in love with Sergius and calls Raina by her first name. In doing so she eschews convention and promotes her own equality.

Bluntschli persistently identifies himself as a poor soldier, and loves Raina because she was kind to him (and in fact fell in love with him) *before* she knew he owned a chain of hotels and therefore had a claim to a great fortune. Perhaps Raina's greatest virtue is her ability to see past class divisions. This is especially notable considering how wrapped up in the meaning of wealth and aristocracy the Petkoffs are. They speak down to the servants and seemingly cannot go five minutes without mentioning that they have a library (an indicator of unusual wealth.) Ultimately, the play depicts those obsesses with their wealth and class to be foolish and shallow, and further suggests that those locked into their class positions are stuck acting a role that keeps them from their true selves, from actual happiness.

Youth vs. Maturity

Shaw's play investigates the difference between young and old, inexperience and maturity. Bluntschli repeatedly distinguishes between the young soldiers and the old soldiers. The young ones are reckless, idealistic, and brave—they carry extra ammunition and run into action. The old soldiers carry food instead of ammo and often flee the battlefield. Raina is young—and she seems even younger than she is. Bluntschli does not take her seriously until he realizes she is 23 (and not 17, as he believed). Once he is aware that she is older, he is willing to take her opinions and beliefs more seriously, and agrees to court her. Raina's parents, meanwhile, and their servant Nicola are all "old" (or at least older than Raina, Louka, and Serge, who are all identified as "young"). However, unlike Bluntschli, they are not portrayed as particularly mature. Rather, in their more advanced age, they have simply become entrenched in tradition and the status quo.

Shaw thus paints a complicated picture of age and maturity: youth can be vibrant and incite change, but it can also be silly and naïve. Age can mean realism and intelligence, but it can also mean a kind of disengagement and acceptance of even detrimental social norms. Shaw's heroes in this play are those who have the energy, vitality, and vigor of youth, but the sensibility, maturity, and insight that often come with old age.

Heroism

Another of the central questions of *Arms and the Man* concerns the nature of heroism. What makes a hero? What does it mean to be a hero? What responsibilities does such a label convey? At first, Sergius is painted as a hero—he led a successful cavalry charge, displaying immense (in fact foolhardy) bravery. He is physically strong, courageous, and handsome. He thus embodies a very traditional kind of heroism. But it is made clear that Sergius's actions are considered by more seasoned soldiers to be farcical. Though Raina and her mother fawn over Sergius, in part because Raina is betrothed to him, others find him more of a clown than a hero.

Bluntschli is a kind of "anti-hero." He is dubbed by Raina to be the "chocolate cream soldier"—a moniker that inspires images of weakness and sweetness—because he typically carries chocolates rather than extra ammo. He is older, more modest looking, and doesn't believe courage is a virtue. But by the end of the play he is revealed to be both a better soldier and a far more desirable husband than Sergius, and wins Raina's affections.

The question of heroism is a rich and diverse one. By wondering about what makes a hero, Shaw engages various lines of thinking. What do heroes mean to culture? Who ought to be a hero? And what of literary heroes?—Shaw was writing in a time of social and political upheaval. The clash between socialism and capitalism was growing more contentious, and the rise of new industrial technologies was exacerbating the already sharp class divisions and changing the cultural landscape. It was accordingly a time of artistic and literary upheaval as well: literary Romanticism no longer seemed fit to make sense of or address contemporary human problems. The Byronic, romantic hero had been forsaken—what would the new literary heroes look like? By engaging these questions about heroism Shaw is asking questions about the future of culture and art.

Symbols

The Library

The library in the Petkoff home is often held up as a symbol of their wealth, status, and accomplishment. Libraries are rare in Bulgarian homes, and therefore the library does indicate the family's wealth—but it also ironically symbolizes their lack of better learning, critical thinking, and cultural awareness. The library notably has very few books in it, and Major Petkoff, despite his pride in his library, isn't very well read. Though it indicates financial success it also indicates the emptiness and shallowness embodied by people like Major Petkoff.

Raina's Novels

Raina is often seen clutching a romantic novel—but, crucially, she is rarely reading it. She uses the books rather like props. They once again indicate shallowness and social performance. That Raina neglects to actually read these novels perhaps suggests the fall of romanticism itself: these books are not truly useful or interesting to her anymore, and she grows beyond them by the end of the play.