



## **Anti-romance in *Arms and the Man***

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### **Abstract**

This study examines and interprets *Arms and the Man* through the lens of anti-romanticism and literary realism, focusing on how Shaw dismantles the idealized views of love and war. In contrast to the Victorian Age's romanticization of these themes, Shaw defies traditional romantic ideals by revealing the truths they obscure. Through characters like Sergius, who embodies conventional heroism, Shaw portrays society's superficial valorization of war, where soldiers receive the status of noble heroes. Sergius's grandiose actions embody society's naïve view of war as an honorable, almost theatrical pursuit. However, Shaw introduces Bluntschli, a Swiss mercenary whose realistic views expose the disillusionment underlying such heroism. Bluntschli, who prioritizes survival over glory, carries chocolates instead of ammunition, embodying a soldier's natural inclination to preserve life rather than sacrifice it for abstract ideals. Similarly, Shaw critiques romanticized love through the relationship between Raina and Sergius. Initially, Sergius's heroic ideal captivates Raina, but her encounters with Bluntschli awaken her to a pragmatic view of love. Disillusioned by Sergius's bravado, she ultimately gravitates toward Bluntschli, symbolizing her rejection of romantic ideals. By elevating Bluntschli, the play's anti-hero, Shaw redefines the qualities worth admiring in individuals, shifting focus from empty heroism to grounded realism. This study employs a qualitative approach to reveal Shaw's complex portrayal of human relationships, challenging audiences to reconsider the alluring but deceptive nature of romantic ideals.

**Keywords:** *Anti-romance, illusions of heroism, pragmatism vs. idealism, realism in love and war, romantic disillusionment, societal ideals, war and heroism*

### **Introduction**

This paper examines and postulates George Bernard Shaw's *Arms and the Man* (*AM*) that challenges the hollow romantic notions of love and war. Through its characters and plot, Shaw introduces the futility of war and humorously addresses the hypocrisies of human nature. Known for his critique of romanticized ideals, Shaw's opposition to these notions begins in *AM*. Shaw introduces the play's purpose by asserting, "the play has two themes: one is war, the other is marriage. These themes are interwoven, for Shaw believed that while war is evil and stupid, and marriage desirable and good, both had become wrapped in romantic illusions, which led to disastrous wars and also to unhappy marriages" (85). Thus,

Shaw portrays the play as anti-romantic and didactic, discouraging naïve engagement in love or war by exposing the unrealistic expectations attached to these ideals. As Shaw himself claims, “I do not accept the conventional ideals; to them I oppose in the play the practical life and morals of the efficient, realist man, unaffectedly ready to face what risks must be faced, considerate but not chivalrous, patient and practical” (qtd. in Laurence 427). Shaw’s *AM* thus challenges romanticized life, presenting it as picturesque and heroic but ultimately misleading.

Shaw’s inspiration for such anti-romantic themes largely stems from Henrik Ibsen, the Norwegian dramatist who pioneers modern realistic drama. Ibsen’s works, including *A Doll’s House* and *Ghosts*, heighten awareness of social issues and reshapes audience expectations. As Daiches asserts, “Shaw’s study of Ibsen presented the Norwegian dramatist as the exponent of reforming naturalism with the emphasis on the prose social plays” (1104). While Ibsen focuses on characters and their actions, Shaw prioritizes ideas, creating plays that explore natural morality rather than romantic ideals. His works often contain extensive prefaces, detailed stage directions, and character speeches that advance his social critique. These early didactic plays such as *Mrs. Warren’s Profession*, *The Devil’s Disciple*, and *Captain Brassbound’s Conversion*, address pressing social issues of Shaw’s time, including, in *AM*, the illusions surrounding war.

Shaw borrows the title *AM* from Virgil’s epic *The Aeneid*, which begins with, “Of arms and the man I sing, who forced by fate, / And haughty Juno’s unrelenting hate” (1). While Virgil glorifies war and heroism, Shaw subverts this by satirizing the romanticized view of heroism in war. Through Sergius, a figure portrays as heroic but later reveals as foolish in *AM*, Shaw mocks not only on war but also on the glamorization of valor and courage. Nayar observes, “Arms and the Man focused on war as a theme” (368), noting Shaw’s critique of romantic illusions about war, which he replaces with a more realistic and often unflattering portrayal of soldiers. By showing soldier Bluntschli’s pragmatic approach in the play, including his decision to carry chocolates instead of ammunition, Shaw de-romanticizes the idea of the noble soldier, stripping it of its idealized sheen.

*AM* opens on a scene that blends heroism with satire, as Raina learns of Sergius’s cavalry charge in the Serbo-Bulgarian war. Initially awes by Sergius’s supposed heroics, Raina’s views begin to shift as the play exposes the hollowness of such romantic ideals. *AM* ultimately reveals that Sergius, the so-called hero of Slivnitza, deserves not praise but criticism for his actions. Shaw’s play is an “anti-romantic comedy”—a work that overturns the familiar tropes of heroism, sacrifice, and romantic love. By presenting love and relationships as idealized and often transactional, *AM* critique the unrealistic portrayals of both romantic and martial heroism. Shaw frames the play as both a comedy and a critique, satirizing romantic illusions about love and war rather than glorifying them.

Shaw’s *AM* faces criticism for its anti-romantic ideals. Smith asserts, “Shaw’s *Arms and the Man* serves as a prime example of anti-romance in drama, challenging romanticized notions of war and love through satire and wit” (45). This perspective highlights Shaw’s satirical approach, which mocks the conventional glorification of war and romantic relationships by exposing their unrealistic foundations. Brown adduces, “the play strategically undermines romantic conventions to convey a more nuanced and critical perspective on societal expectations” (12). Through humor and irony, Shaw encourages audiences to question traditional views on heroism and love, especially within the Victorian context. *AM* does more than simply entertain—it dismantles the ideals of love and war, offering a practical and grounded vision of relationships and heroism rather than one rooted in fantasy.

## Statement of the Problem

In *AM*, the primary characters embody romantic ideals akin to those found in the works of Byron and Pushkin, highlighting notions of heroism, love, and honour. However, Shaw, influenced by Henrik Ibsen's commitment to realism, presents a contrasting perspective by weaving anti-romantic elements throughout the play. This study examines Shaw's portrayal of these anti-romantic elements as a critique of the Victorian Age's dominant romantic ideals, which often glamorize war and romanticize love without regard for the harsher realities of human nature and society. By analyzing Shaw's divergence from these ideals, the study aims to explore how *AM* reflects Shaw's broader vision of realism as a means of challenging and deconstructing romanticized heroism and relationships.

## Research Questions

This study centers on the following research questions:

- (a) How does Shaw use anti-romantic elements to challenge traditional ideals of romance and heroism in *AM*?
- (b) In what ways does Shaw incorporate aspects of literary realism to frame *AM* as an anti-romantic comedy?

## Objectives

This research attempts to draw the following objectives:

- (a) To explore anti-romantic elements to challenge traditional ideals of romance and heroism in *AM*.
- (b) To analyze Shaw's aspects of literary realism to frame *AM* as an anti-romantic comedy.

## Methodology

This study employs a qualitative approach to research to examine the elements of anti-romance in *AM*. It employs literary realism as a genre to define anti-romance of the Victorian Age. This genre avoids speculative fiction, supernatural elements, and artistic conventions. It portrays objective reality, and depicts banal activities and experiences. This research considers *AM* as a primary source of the study. The book-reviews, commentaries, academic journals, literary criticisms, online resources, etc. constitute its secondary sources of the study. It employs thematic analysis to analyze the sources of the research. It uses a systematic approach to coding and categorizing the sources to ensure the rigour of the analysis. It compares the findings from the analysis of primary and secondary sources, to enhance the reliability of the study.

## Limitations of the Study

This research primarily focuses on the text of *AM*, limiting its scope to an analysis of anti-romantic themes within this single play. As such, the findings and interpretations may not be directly applicable to Shaw's broader body of work, where themes, characterizations, and styles may diverge significantly. The study's analytical framework does not extend to Shaw's other plays or his general philosophies on romance, realism, or social criticism.

Furthermore, while the research briefly references the Victorian Age to highlight the romantic ideals challenged in *AM*, it explores its historical context superficially. The study does not provide an in-depth examination of the Victorian cultural backdrop, nor does it analyze how specific societal expectations or literary norms of that era might have influenced Shaw's anti-romantic approach.

Additionally, this research does not address how *AM*'s anti-romantic themes resonate with modern audiences or intersect with contemporary discussions of romance, gender, and social norms. By focusing solely on the textual analysis, the study does not consider Shaw's reception in the modern era or the play's potential relevance to today's societal debates.

Finally, this research acknowledges the interpretations of anti-romance vary widely among scholars, and the conclusions presented here reflect only one perspective within a broader academic conversation. Therefore, this study's findings should be viewed as an interpretive, rather than definitive, analysis of anti-romantic elements within *AM*. The following discussions likely to meet the objectives of this research paper.

### **Raina Petkoff and Sergius Saranoff: Their Romantic Notions**

The play begins with Raina Petkoff, a young Bulgarian woman, standing on her balcony to enjoy the night and gazing upon the snowy Balkans. Here, the theme of romance quickly emerges, as the notions of heroism and honor tie to war captivates Raina. When her mother, Catherine, brings news of the recent Serbo-Bulgarian conflict, Raina learns that her fiancé, Sergius Saranoff leads a successful cavalry charge. This victory reinforces her image of Sergius as the epitome of heroism. Shaw explores her view by likening Sergius to "a knight in a tournament with his lady looking down at him!" (34). For Raina, Sergius embodies her "hero" and "king" (Shaw 34), while he, in turn, idealizes her as his "queen" and speaks of their relationship as a "higher love" (Shaw 34). Together, they inhabit a shared fantasy, shaped by ideals and fueled by romantic influences from literature, including Byron's *Childe Harold* and the poetry of Ruskin. As their dialogue unfolds, Shaw's choice of language and metaphors further emphasizes their mutual adoration. For instance, Sergius exclaims, "Let me be the worshipper, dear. You little know how unworthy even the best man is of a girl's pure passion!" (34). This metaphor of worship reveals Sergius's inflated view of their bond, suggesting that he perceives love as a near-spiritual pursuit. Raina reciprocates, pledging her unwavering trust: "I trust you. I love you. You will never disappoint me, Sergius" (Shaw 34). Yet, amidst their lofty declarations, they reveal a shared disconnection from reality—both characters build their relationship on romanticized ideals rather than grounded experiences.

Shaw employs the idealized romance between Sergius and Raina to critique the exaggerated societal perceptions of heroism, which often glamorizes bravery and nobility while overlooking practical realities. Through references to the Byronic hero—a figure marked by arrogance, sophistication, and a tendency toward self-destruction—Shaw invites the audience to question the authenticity of such romantic ideals. As the play progresses, the researcher witness Raina's gradual awakening to this disconnect, particularly when she meets Bluntschli. His entrance serves as a pivotal moment in Raina's journey. Unlike Sergius, his pragmatic and straightforward view of war challenges Raina's beliefs. His practical outlook stands in direct contrast to the ideals that Raina holds, highlighting the divide between romance and realism. Through her interactions with Bluntschli, Raina confronts the limitations of her fantasy, setting the stage for her transformation as she grapples with the more realistic approach that he embodies.

### **Intrusion of Reality: Disillusionment**

The romantic illusions between Raina and Bluntschli quickly shatter upon their first encounter with reality. Raina declares to Sergius, “Our romance is shattered. Life’s a farce” (Shaw 65). Realism intrudes in the form of Captain Bluntschli, a pragmatic Swiss mercenary fighting in the Serbian army, who climbs into Raina’s bedroom seeking shelter from Bulgarian soldiers. Bluntschli, a figure of anti-romantic ideals, carries no illusions about war; he brings the “naked truth” before Raina, dispelling her idealized views of heroism. Holding her at gunpoint, he bluntly asserts, “If I’m caught I shall be killed” (Shaw 9), showing that he prioritizes survival, not glory. When Raina attempts to uphold her romanticized view by stating, “Some soldiers, I know, are afraid to death” (Shaw 9), he replies, “all of them, dear lady, all of them, believe me. It is our duty to live as long as we can” (Shaw 9). This sentiment, groundbreaking at the time, prefigures the modern disillusionment with war and introduces a tone of anti-romantic revelation that continues throughout the play.

Bluntschli further reveals his motivations as a soldier, making it clear to Raina that he participates in war as a professional, not as a patriotic. “I’m a professional soldier: I fight when I have to, and am very glad to get out of it when I haven’t to” (Shaw 65). His practicality becomes even more apparent as he confides in Raina, “What use are cartridges in battle? I always carry chocolate instead” (Shaw 13). Bluntschli’s priorities of survival and sustenance over arms dismantle Raina’s romanticized ideas of war, illustrating the stark reality of a soldier’s need to prioritize survival over heroism. He even remarks disparagingly on the intelligence of most soldiers, saying, “nine soldiers out of ten are born fools” (Shaw 11), indirectly hinting that even her military hero Sergius falls into this category. Through this candid, pragmatic lens, Raina’s romantic ideals of war begin to unravel.

Bluntschli also critiques Sergius’s notion of heroism, ridiculing Sergius’s military blunders mask as bravery. Sergius prides himself on leading a dramatic cavalry charge, unaware of the fact that his success in it becomes possible due to a logistical error on the enemy’s part, as they have been supplied with incorrect ammunition. Bluntschli’s commentary exposes the folly rather than the heroism in Sergius’s actions, which Purdom aptly describes as “unconsciously but devastatingly” (159) dismantling Raina’s cherished ideals. This encounter eventually leads Sergius himself to a bitter disillusionment, as he realizes soldiering as merely a trade like any other. He ultimately defines war as “the coward’s art of attacking mercilessly when you are strong and keeping out of harm’s way when you are weak... Get your enemy at a disadvantage and never on any account fight him on equal terms” (Shaw 47). Disenchanted, Sergius resigns from his military post, telling Catherine that he has “no ambition to shine as a tradesman” (Shaw 48). Disillusioned with the nature of military service, Sergius resigns, explaining to Catherine that he has no desire to pursue soldiering as merely a transactional occupation.

In the end, both Raina and Sergius, once enthralled by romantic ideals, reject their initial plans to marry each other. Instead, they align with more realistic partners—Sergius with Louka, the practical and perceptive servant, and Raina with Bluntschli, the consummate realist. Through these unions, Shaw critiques the allure of romantic ideals, presenting instead a pragmatic, realistic view of relationships and human motives.

## The Exposure of the Heroic

Shaw's *AM* centers on exposing the superficiality of conventional heroism, challenging traditional ideals of bravery and honor. Through characters and events, Shaw satirizes the romanticized notions of heroism and war that were widely accepted in society at the time. For instance, Bluntschli, the play's unconventional hero, embodies pragmatism and realism rather than traditional valor. He prioritizes practicality and survival over ideals like honor or glory. Rather than attempting a dramatic escape, Bluntschli seeks refuge in Raina's bedroom, which starkly contrasts with the romantic expectations of a soldier's bravery. Raina's label for him as a "chocolate cream soldier" (Shaw 44) itself satirizes society's unrealistic expectations of heroism, underscoring Shaw's critique of these shallow ideals.

In addition to exposing the romantic heroism, Shaw's play explores the idealized notions of love, as in the disillusionment of Raina and Sergius. Sergius struggles to reconcile his romanticized love with the reality of his relationship with Raina. It leads him to flirt with Louka as a means of finding the genuine connection he craves. For him, Louka's love feels more authentic. Similarly, Raina turns to Bluntschli, draws to him not because of his profession as a soldier but because of his honesty and practicality. Unlike Sergius, who remains tangled in illusions, Bluntschli faces reality head-on. By interacting with him, Raina begins to see through the romanticized aura surrounding Sergius, ultimately recognizing the flaws in her idealized views on heroism and love.

## Shaw's Anti-romantic Intentions: Distortion of Reality

*AM* presents the truths of life—specifically about love and war—not merely through a realistic lens, but with a distinctly anti-romantic perspective. Rather than adhering to simple realism, Shaw heightens reality to reveal its underlying contradictions, pushing the boundaries of credibility to challenge conventional ideals. His anti-romantic stance goes beyond straightforward representation; in some moments, it verges on the unbelievable. For instance, while a soldier in famine might logically seek food, Bluntschli's craving for chocolates seems an unexpected twist, introducing a sense of absurdity that undercuts the traditional expectations of heroism.

Furthermore, Shaw employs Raina's character to illustrate the shift from fantasy to reality. Her encounters with Bluntschli prompt a re-evaluation of her values, challenging her to confront the real over the romanticized. Through Raina, Shaw navigates the tension between idealized visions of love and war and the harsher truths of life. Her developing attachment to Bluntschli disrupts societal norms, questioning both heroism and the authenticity of romantic ideals. The play, as a result, encourages a more practical and honest view of both love and war, replacing the fantasies of heroism with grounded perspectives.

Additionally, Shaw makes a study of romantic conventions in relationships. He finds how love often follows certain patterns, while reality does not need any ideality. While characters like Sergius and Raina might naturally end up together in a romantic tale, Shaw subverts this by hinting at Sergius's attraction to Louka, suggesting that real-life relationships don't always align with romantic ideals. Similarly, Shaw exaggerates to humorous effect when he portrays a soldier failing to notice a visible pistol, only to have Louka, a maid without military training, spot it immediately. These intentional

exaggerations further show anti-romantic intentions, compelling the audience to re-evaluate conventional ideals and embrace a more pragmatic view of heroism, love, and war.

### **The Note of Romance**

Shaw portrays Raina and Sergius as embodying heightened romantic ideals, which the play both exaggerates and scrutinizes. It opens in an atmosphere reminiscent of romantic melodrama, filled with thrilling sensations, gunfire, and the classic trope of fugitives and pursuers. Raina, in particular, romanticizes war and heroism, seeing Sergius as her “ideal hero” (Shaw 29) following his cavalry charge in the Serbo-Bulgarian war. She worships him as a noble war figure. However, her perception shifts dramatically after an encounter with Bluntschli in her bedroom, as he reveals to her the unglamorous realities of war, challenging her previously cherished ideals.

Sergius, on the other hand, clings to chivalric notions of bravery and honor, seeking to embody the traditional image of a heroic soldier. He performs extravagant acts, such as leading a cavalry charge with a saber, as proof of his valour. His romantic notions also extend to his relationship with Raina, where he expects an idealized love. Yet, these expectations frequently clash with the complexities of real human connections. Shaw employs irony and satire in Sergius’s character, using his exaggerated actions to explore society’s unrealistic expectations of military heroes. Despite Sergius’s valour, his character often serves as a humorous commentary on the artificiality of romanticized heroism. Through Sergius, Shaw underscores the impracticality of adhering rigidly to chivalric ideals in the face of modern realities.

Both Raina’s and Sergius’s ideals come under Shaw’s satirical lens, exposing a contrast between romantic illusions and worldly realities. This contrast serves as a critique of the authenticity of the heroic and romantic narratives that influence human behavior. Shaw uses their characters to question conventional views of love and heroism popular in his society, exploring the tension between idealism and the more pragmatic aspects of war and relationships. Interestingly, Shaw includes a “note of romance” in Bluntschli as well, despite his otherwise realistic disposition. Bluntschli, unlike Raina and Sergius, recognizes his own faults in a candid, self-aware manner. He asserts:

I, a commonplace Swiss soldier who hardly knows what a decent life is after fifteen years of barracks and battles: a vagabond, a man who has spoiled all his chances in life through an incurably romantic disposition, a man—I ran away from home twice when I was a boy. I went into the army instead of into my father’s business. I climbed the balcony of this house when a man of sense would have dived into the nearest cellar. I came sneaking back here to have another look at the young lady when any other man of my age would have sent the coat back. (Shaw 73)

Here, Bluntschli’s admission of his “incurably romantic disposition” reveals his own susceptibility to idealism, yet he approaches it with a practical humor absent in Raina and Sergius. Raina’s reaction to Bluntschli’s self-awareness is also telling; she playfully refers to him as a “romantic idiot” and remarks, “Next time, I hope you will know the difference between a schoolgirl of seventeen and a woman of twenty-three” (Shaw 74). Bluntschli’s wry acceptance of his own romantic inclinations offers a foil to Raina’s earlier idealism, as he initially mistakes her for a naïve schoolgirl when, in fact, she is

a mature young woman of twenty-three. Through these contrasts, Shaw highlights the irony and complexity of romantic ideals and their intersection with real life.

### **Shaw's Satires on Romantic Ideals of Life**

*AM* demonstrates traditional notions of heroism and love, using satire to question romantic ideals and conventions. First, Shaw addresses the concept of “higher love” between Raina and Sergius, exposing its superficiality. Though outwardly engaged, Sergius betrays this ideal by secretly courting Louka. In his attempts to woo her, he praises her as “witty as well as pretty” (Shaw 36) and ultimately follows her suggestions to meet in a secluded place “where we can’t be seen” (Shaw 36), moving with her into the stable yard gateway. Through this behavior, Shaw highlights Sergius’s divergence from romantic ideals, as he pursues an affair with Louka while supposedly committed to Raina. This hidden romance does not escape Raina’s notice; she later confronts Sergius, saying, “you were with her this morning all that time” (Shaw 65). Thus, Shaw presents Sergius as estranged from the ideals of faithful, lofty love.

Similarly, Shaw portrays Raina as distancing herself from Sergius in favour of Bluntschli, whom she finds more aligned with her evolving perspective on love and war. When Raina realizes the stark realities of war through her interactions with Bluntschli, her affections subtly shift. Louka even hints at this shift to Sergius, commenting, “gentlefolk are all alike: you making love to me behind Miss Raina’s back; and she doing the same behind yours” (Shaw 36). With this statement, Louka suggests that romantic deceptions are common among the upper class, positioning them as betrayers of love. She then warns Sergius, “Miss Raina will marry him, whether he likes it or not” (Shaw 37), hinting at Raina’s intentions to pursue a relationship with Bluntschli. This remark reflects both Louka’s desire to critique romantic notions and her own aspirations to elevate her social standing by aligning with Sergius.

The resulting tensions lead Sergius to question his own beliefs, as he exclaims to Raina, “Oh, what sort of god is this I have been worshipping!” (Shaw 65). Through these exchanges, Shaw exposes “higher love” as an illusion, tarnished by betrayal and self-interest. This romantic ideal, once perceived as noble, is ultimately reduced to a world of artifice and self-serving desires. Raina’s eventual choice to marry Bluntschli reflects her embrace of his realistic approach to life, rejecting the illusions that initially defined her relationship with Sergius. In this way, Shaw contrasts romantic ideals with practicality, revealing the fragility of conventional notions of love when confronted with reality.

### **Conclusion**

In *AM*, the researcher identifies and examines the anti-romantic elements through Shaw’s realist lens on love and war. By dismantling traditional romantic ideals, Shaw exposes the truths hidden behind the facades of romance and respectability. Instead of glorifying war, he unearths its horrors and the folly of romanticized notions of heroism. Love, as Shaw presents it, is neither an idealized fantasy nor a transcendent ideal but rather a grounded, complex reality. Marital union, as he suggests, requires no embellishment. Additionally, Shaw exposes the supposed glory of war and soldiers’ heroism, portraying these concepts as illusions that lead only to destruction and suffering. Sergius, initially celebrated as a hero, ultimately emerges as a foolish and easily manipulated figure, while the play elevates humaneness above militaristic valour. Further emphasizing the instinct of self-preservation, Shaw explores soldiers’



concerns lie less in achieving glory than in ensuring survival. Through Bluntschli, who opts to carry chocolates over cartridges, Shaw illustrates man's vulnerability and the natural prioritization of life over heroics. This study underscores how Shaw's realism redefines heroism, proposing a perspective that values human resilience over empty valour. Finally, this examination opens avenues for further research in other literary contexts where similar discussions on realism and anti-romanticism engage audiences and challenge conventional views.

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