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1. The comic feature of *Arms and the Man* / Wit and humour in *Arms and the Man* /significance of sub-title

The first introduction to Shaw's work shows that its essence is comedy. This element of comedy always makes us smile, and often makes us laugh out loud. If we study the Shavian comedy, we shall see that Shaw employs many different ways of inducing amusement, but that he prefers the method which is regarded as the loftiest – that is to say, the comedy of ideas.

The comedy of incident in Shaw's plays takes various forms. To make us laugh he has recourse to an inversion of roles. Thus, we laugh when Philip and Dolly, in *You Never Can Tell*, give moral lectures to their mother; when the accused, Richard Dudgeon, gives a lesson to his judge, Major Swindon, in *The Devil's Disciple*; when Juggins, the valet, teaches good manners to his masters (*Fanny's First Play*); when Charteris of *The Philanderer* is hunted by Julia, or Tanner, in *Man and Superman*, by Ann. But in addition to these methods, we find a comedy which is the outcome of events and actions.

In *Arms and the Man* Shaw has repeatedly employed the humour to make us laugh. In the very opening Bluntschli threatens Raina in such a manner that it is less threatening and more hilarious. His toying with the pistol or carrying chocolate instead of bullet confirms the Shavian humour. But the reader is also aware of the undertone of this humour. Bluntschli's grim humour that all soldiers are afraid to die shatters the romantic notion of soldiering. We find also in Shaw's work the humour that comes from the repetition of words. We have this in the scene in which Bluntschli is alone, at the end of the first act when in half consciousness he repeats "sleep" and "danger", again shattering the idea that soldiers are superhuman beings.

Shaw's drama is comic in respect of its incident, its characters, and its diction; but the Shavian comedy is above all a comedy of ideas. Since in *Arms and the Man* Shaw attacks the false glory of war and the hollow romance of marriage. The characters are equally set to reveal the idea. Thus, Bluntschli's humour largely shatters the romantic notion of war and love. Sergius's foolish romanticism stands as a contrast to reality. Raina embodies the romance of ideal higher love while Louka represents

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practical mind. When Bluntschli compares Sergius's charge with "Don Quixote" or "operatic tenor" and "drum major" we are amused but at the same time we feel the underlying life force. The chocolate similarly stands for food.

Another Shavian comedy is the satire of false ideas of society. He makes us laugh by showing us that society is not based upon reason or logic. Thus, Sergius flirts with Louka but prepares marriage with Raina. Shaw here presents Louka as a remarkable wit who is perhaps the only character to win her destiny through wit. Her conversation with Sergius exposes the false romances. She diminishes Sergius to a state of schoolboy. He ultimately accepts her as his wife. Shaw adds humour in the manner of this acceptance.

In Bernard Shaw's work we find but little that is comic in the way of character. His men are types of a class, a profession, or a sect, and not individual characters. He makes some of them almost burlesque by isolating in them the most conspicuous characteristic of their class or of their profession. Sergius represents the Byronic class. Both Petkoff and Catherine superbly reveal the snobbery of their class and the scenes are sources of fun. As they pride in their library or electric bell, we realize that some people really show vanity out of trivial possession. At the end of the play their obsession for a good "historical" family, "comfortable establishment" for Raina only shows that they take marriage only as a social bond, ignoring its emotional and intellectual needs.

Thus, Shavian comedy in every sense is an experience of humour. Shaw himself calls this play "An anti-romantic comedy in three acts". He himself implies the idea of laughter and ridicule through humour. The comic spirit in *Arms and the Man* is largely based on the light humour and satire but the use of humour is only the way to fulfil the idea of the play.



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2. Write a note on the character of Nicola in *Arms and the Man*.

Nicola is undoubtedly the most unconventional servant in the world of English theatre. No other servant in stage showed so much humility, obedience and patience to his master as this simple man does. Unlike Brainworm in Jonson's *Every Man in His Humour* or Mosca in *Volpone*, Nicola is an uninteresting unromantic fool whose submission is cold and almost bestial. He maintains a dog-like devotion to all, tolerates the insults which are unjust, and at the moment of supreme heroism leaves his intended wife to the hand of a gallant. His only probable virtue is perhaps his quality not to flatter the masters for tip. He is in fact not a hypocrite in this sense.

Nicola's first appearance occurs in Act II of the play. He is a middle-aged man with a perfect temperament of a servant. Shaw comments of him that Nicola is an "accurate calculator who has no illusion". He is the betrothed lover of Louka as Sergius is for Raina. But Louka's apparent beauty and arrogance are a contrast to his plain and simple servant-look. When he begins to speak, his words are full of morality and principles on slavery. "Be warned in time, Louka; mend your manners". He goes on moralizing on the duty of a servant to his master--- make the mistress feel that ----- she can depend on you to hold your tongue and serve the family faithfully". He is wholly unromantic about the master class: "You don't know the power such high people have ----- when we try to rise out of our poverty against them".

Nicola is a complete departure from the traditional servants of English stage. He is not Adam in Shakespeare's *As you Like It*, who even in old age embraces his master's misfortune. He delights in his job, obeys his superiors silently. But he is not devoid of sentiments and dream. His life is not meant for sacrifice for other. His ambition in life is to open a shop in Sofia. All the insults and injuries are meaningful at the end because of this freedom. His meagre savings include other dreams too. He will have a good home, a good wife and there he will be the master. The day, he thinks will come when he will be the master.

Though in the play Nicola has very little role to play as a lover of Louka, the relation is full of incidents and actions. His subdued love can be felt in his repeated address to Louka to "mend" her manners. During his heavy drudgery, he always tries



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to find a time to be alone with her. He offers her money to purchase good behaviour from her as "a human being". He confesses: "I get tired of being a servant occasionally". Yet when he notices Sergius's interest for her (Louka) he instantly becomes practical to calculate over the possibilities of future. He knows it very well that between his love for Louka and his dream for freedom, Sergius is the reality that he cannot ignore. Hence, in a supreme moment of sacrifice, Nicola withdraws his hand from his engagement. He gives a logic that is convincing: "She has a soul above her station and I have been no more than her confidential servant". He has already a plan for future, as when he opens a shop, he can expect her "customs and recommendation should she marry into the nobility". Bluntschli's comment is the highest tribute to his character "Nicola's the ablest man I've met in Bulgaria. I'll make him manager of a hotel if he can speak French and German".

Shaw's view is quite clear in this character of Nicola. He is against any bloody and romantic revolution against the master class who are strong enough to resist any such power. Nicola represents that cool and obedient class who possess no threat to the ruling class. His role may raise many disturbing questions in 21st century as being a convenient tool of the capitalism. His ambition remains unfulfilled in the play and his social elevation still remains a question. But he steals our sympathy as a man who cherishes no illusion, has a low but clear intelligence and a soul that is actually above his station.

**** This material is only to serve students' need. This material has been developed by taking information from various sources.**