The comedy of ideas: George Bernard Shaw

The man and the playwright
George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950) was born in Dublin, the youngest son of a failed corn-merchant with a drinking problem. His early education was musical rather than literary. At the age of twenty he moved to London, where he became a critic of music and art and contributed to several periodicals.

Later he joined the Fabian Society, a middle-class socialist group whose members aimed at transforming Britain into a socialist state not through revolution, as Marx advised, but by systematic, progressive legislation, enhanced by persuasion and mass education. Shaw took an active part in this movement joining debating clubs, lecturing on social questions, and reading extensively. In 1892 he wrote his first play, Widower’s Houses, dealing with the problem of city slums. At first, Shaw's comedies were generally more successful outside England, and only gradually the Irish dramatist made an impression on London’s audiences and critics. In 1898 the collection Plays Pleasant and Unpleasant was published; these plays were ideological attacks on the evils of capitalism and explorations of moral and social problems. It included, among others, Arms and the Man (Text Bank 73-74), a parody of military heroism, Mrs Warren’s Profession (1894) (Text Bank 75), about the dishonesty of those who benefited from prostitution, and Pygmalion (1913).

In 1905 his play Man and Superman, echoing Nietzsche’s theory of Life Force, according to which woman is not an inferior being but the main instrument of procreation, established his reputation firmly. In 1925 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature and he died at the age of ninety-five in 1950.

A prophet of realism
Shaw described himself as a Puritan reformer who used drama to criticise Victorian institutions. He was not an enemy of scornful entertainment, but he believed he had a mission: the improvement of society, and therefore he was concerned about creating social awareness, through ethical themes and lucid characterisation. Two aspects of contemporary drama had disgusted Shaw: the former was a mental tendency he called ‘sentimentalism’ or ‘idealism’, which prevented man from facing unpleasant facts; the latter was the uncritical adulation of Shakespeare. He suggested replacing ‘idealism’ with ‘realism’ and Shakespeare with the Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906), who, according to Shaw, had presented real life on the stage and had introduced discussion into his plays.

The plays of ideas
Shaw invented ‘the drama of discussion or ideas’ where he combined contemporary moral problems with comic, ironic tones and paradoxes. His originality lies in infusing the discussion play with the spirit of the English comedy. His characters are identified with particular ideas and social institutions, they are brilliant speakers but they have only the life of the mind, since they lack the warmth of human beings. The dialogue remains the best element, since it conveys consistent ideological implications about the consequences of capitalism as well as other contemporary problems, such as militarism, the equality of women, the relationship between husband and wife, and religion. Stage directions are written in narrative style; they are extremely detailed and they are not only for stage producers but also for readers, since Shaw had realised that the play-reading public was larger than the theatre-going public. Shaw prefaced his plays with introductory essays dealing not only with the plays themselves but with the themes suggested.
Style
As for his style, Shaw’s writing followed upon his long experience as a platform speaker, so that it was as effective when spoken as when read. Facts and arguments are skilfully ordered, and although sentences are usually long and contain many statements, the whole effect is one of speed and simplicity and the tone is generally one of vitality and gaiety. His main devices are the paradox, the inversion of ideas, the unexpected, the outspoken truth and exaggeration: his characters say exactly what they think, instead of what is conventionally expected they should say.
**Arms and the Man (1894)**

The plot
The title comes from the English translation of the opening lines 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, portrayed as a typical romantic heroine, 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 (Text Bank 73). 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, and in the end Raina marries him (Text Bank 74), while Sergius marries the maid. The play was also turned into a musical, *The Chocolate Soldier*.

Themes and techniques
The main subjects of the play are the survival of militarism, which raises its head from time to time to cast a doubt on the reality of our civilization, and the opposition of reality to romance. 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.
The chocolate-cream soldier
George Bernard Shaw
Arms and the Man (1894), act III

The scene closes the comedy. It takes place in the Petkoffs’ library where Bluntschili, the Swiss soldier, confesses that he is the chocolate-cream soldier of the photograph Major Petkoff has found inside the pocket of his old coat.

Bluntschili. What nonsense! I assure you, my dear Major, my dear Madame, the gracious young lady simply saved my life, nothing else. She never cared two straws for me¹. Why, bless my heart and soul, look at the young lady and look at me. She, rich, young, beautiful, with her imagination full of fairy princes and noble natures and cavalry charges and goodness knows what! And I, a common-place Swiss soldier who hardly knows what a decent life is after fifteen years of barracks² and battles: a vagabond, a man who has spoiled all his chances in life through an incurably romantic disposition, a man—

Sergius (starting as if a needle had pricked him³ and interrupting Bluntschili in incredulous amazement). Excuse me, Bluntschili: what did you say had spoiled your chances in life?

Bluntschili (promptly). An incurably romantic disposition. 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 cellar⁴. I came sneaking⁵ back here to have another look at the young lady when any other man of my age would have sent the coat back—

Petkoff. My coat!

Bluntschili. – Yes: that’s the coat I mean – would have sent it back and gone quietly home. Do you suppose I am the sort of fellow a young girl falls in love with? Why, look at our ages! I’m thirty-four: I don’t suppose the young lady is much over seventeen. (This estimate produces a marked sensation, all the rest turning and staring at one another. He proceeds innocently.) All that adventure which was life or death to me, was only a schoolgirl’s game to her—chocolate creams and hide and seek⁶. Here’s the proof! (He takes the photograph from the table.) Now, I ask you, would a woman who took the affair seriously have sent me this and written on it: “Raina, to her chocolate cream soldier: a souvenir”? (He exhibits the photograph triumphantly, as if it settled the matter beyond all possibility of refutation⁷.)

Petkoff. Thats what I was looking for. How the deuce⁸ did it get there? (He comes from the stove to look at it, and sits down on the ottoman.)

Bluntschili (to Raina complacently⁹). I have put everything right, I hope, gracious young lady!

Raina (going to the table to face him). I quite agree with your account of yourself. You are a romantic idiot. (Bluntschili is unspeakably taken aback¹⁰.) Next time I hope you will know the difference between a schoolgirl of seventeen and a woman of twenty-three.

Bluntschili (stupefied). Twenty-three!

Raina snaps¹¹ the photograph contemptuously from his hand; tears it up¹²; throws the pieces in his face; and sweeps back to her former place.)
Sergius (with grim enjoyment of his rival discomfiture\(^\text{13}\)). Bluntschli: my one last belief is gone. Your sagacity is a fraud, like everything else. You have less sense than even I!

Bluntschli (overwhelmed). Twenty-three! Twenty-three!! (He considers.) Hm! (Swiftly making up his mind and coming to his host.) In that case, Major Petkoff, I beg to propose formally to become a suitor\(^\text{14}\) for your daughter's hand, in place of Major Saranoff retired. […]

catherine (severely). My daughter, sir, is accustomed to a first-rate stable\(^\text{15}\).

Raina. Hush, mother, youre making me ridiculous.

Bluntschli. Oh, well, if it comes to a question of an establishment, here goes! (He goes impetuously to the table; seizes the papers in the blue envelope; and turns to Sergius.) How many horses did you say?

Sergius. Twenty, noble Switzer!

Bluntschli. I have two hundred horses. (They are amazed.) How many carriages?

Sergius. Three.

Bluntschli. I have seventy. Twenty-four of them will hold twelve inside, besides two on the box, without counting the driver and conductor. How many tablecloths have you?

Sergius. How the deuce do I know?

Bluntschli. Have you four thousand?

Sergius. No.

Bluntschli. I have. I have nine thousand six hundred pairs of sheets and blankets, with two thousand four hundred eider-down quilts\(^\text{16}\). I have ten thousand knives and forks, and the same quantity of dessert spoons. I have six hundred servants. I have six palatial establishments\(^\text{17}\), besides two livery stables\(^\text{18}\), a tea garden and a private house. I have four medals for distinguished services; I have the rank of an officer and the standing of a gentleman; and I have three native languages. Shew me any man in Bulgaria that can offer as much.

Petkoff (with childish awe\(^\text{19}\)). Are you Emperor of Switzerland?

Bluntschli. My rank is the highest known in Switzerland: I'm a free citizen.

Catherine. Then Captain Bluntschli, since you are my daughter's choice –

Raina (ignoring her). I shall not stand in the way of her happiness.

(Petkoff is about to speak.) That is Major Petkoff's feeling also.

Petkoff. Oh, I shall be only too glad. Two hundred horses! Whew!

Sergius. What says the lady?

Raina (pretending to sulk\(^\text{21}\)). The lady says that he can keep his tablecloths and his omnibuses. I am not here to be sold to the highest bidder\(^\text{22}\).

(She turns her back on him.)

Bluntschli. I wont take that answer. I appealed to you as a fugitive, a beggar, and a starving man. You accepted me. You gave me your hand to kiss, your bed to sleep in, and your roof to shelter me\(^\text{23}\).

Raina. I did not give them to the Emperor of Switzerland!

Bluntschli. Thats just what I say. (He catches her by the shoulders and turns her face-to-face with him.) Now tell us who you did give them to.

Raina (suckcumbing with a shy smile). To my chocolate cream soldier!

Bluntschli (with a boyish laugh of delight). Thatll do. Thank you.
text analysis

Comprehension
1. Read the extract and answer the following questions:
   1. What does Bluntschili contrast in lines 1-9?
   2. Why is Sergius amazed?
   3. Which word causes Major Petkoff’s surprise?
   4. What does Bluntschili exaggerate?
   5. What does he pretend to think in lines 25-27?
   6. How does Raina answer the Swiss soldier?
   7. What does she do in lines 41-42?
   8. What formal proposal does Bluntschili make through Major Petkoff?
   9. What does Catherine refer to?
   10. What makes her change her mind quickly at the end?
   11. What does Raina refuse at first?
   12. How does the play end?

Structure and Style
2. This passage gives an example of Shaw’s favourite device of inversion of the conventional situations regarding the relations of men and women. Focus on Catherine and her husband and state their difference.
3. This extract presents the real nature of Raina. Describe it.
4. State how all the complications and awkward situations of the play are cleared up at the end.
5. Sum up Shaw’s favourite themes and dramatic techniques employed in the passage.

Personal Response
6. Imagine to act out this extract from Arms and the Man with the characters in contemporary clothes. Write a detailed description of the characters’ costumes, the scenery, the lighting and sound effects and acting specifying if the dialogue would seem anachronistic or it would sound more comic.