

Arms and the Man

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Introduction

George Bernard Shaw, who ruled the British theatre as its unquestioned master for almost half a century was an Irishman and was born in Dublin on the 26th July 1856. His father held a small job in Dublin law courts and his mother was a musician of considerable talents. It was from his mother that Shaw inherited his love of music, which was of much help to him in his future career as an art critic.

Shaw had his early schooling under the care of a clerical relative after which he went to Wesley College in Dublin. He was a failure both at school and in the college. He was an incorrigible lazy boy. He was hopelessly ignorant and miserably lacking in scholastic attainments. As he himself confessed in his memoirs, he hated the curriculum, the text-books and the examinations. He looked upon the school as something more cruel than a prison "(In a prison one was not forced to read books written by warders but in the school, one was forced through the hideous imposture of literature called the text-books)". In short, Shaw didn't learn anything in a school. Throughout his life he carried unhappy memories of his life as a student

Then Shaw worked for some time as a clerk in a land agent's office. But he soon became tired of this job. In the year 1876, he resigned his post in Ireland and went to London where his mother had gone already to make a living as a music teacher and opera singer. Shaw wanted to become a writer.

Shaw's career was not an easy and smooth one. During the first ten years of his stay in London he met with nothing but failure and disappointment. But he was a man of remarkable self-confidence and fought his way to success and recognition. At first he began to write novels. All the five novels, which he wrote proved to be flops. However, Shaw continued his career as a writer and sustained himself on newspapers. This brought him a little fame and enabled him to obtain a post as a reviewer on the staff of "Pall Mall Gazette". Then he became the art critic of another paper called 'The World'. By about the same time he also began to contribute articles on music to the "Star". The articles which he wrote to the "Star" established him as a Journalist.

But it was only after he started writing plays that Shaw found success. "Widower's Houses" published in 1892 was the first play he wrote. Then came 'Arms and the Man'. This was followed by "Candida" and before long, Shaw was the most successful and sought after dramatist in the British theatre. No other dramatist had so many plays running simultaneously in the play-houses of London. Bernard Shaw became a rage.

Shaw did not produce mere entertainers. Although he was a dramatist, his plays acted as a mouthpiece for the propagation of his social and economic views. His plays have therefore been termed as problem-plays.

Shaw was not a mere thinker and artist. He evinced an active interest in many social, economic and political problems of the world. He was a staunch advocate of socialism and very strongly urged for legislative measures to protect the interests of the poor and the working classes. But at the same time he was against all violent agitation and demonstration associated with communist and socialist movements. So, in the year 1884, with the help of friends like Sidney Web, Angle Bessnet and G.D.H Cole, he created a club called 'The Fabian Society'. The Fabian Socialistic Society did gradual and peaceful reforms.

Shaw held very strong and very individual views on the social utility of art, love, religion, morality, war and such other questions. He was opposed to Darwin's theory of Natural Selection and believed that mankind ought to raise itself to higher moral and intellectual levels by its own creative power which he called life-force. He developed this in a major work called *Back to Methuselah*.

The zest with which Bernard Shaw attacked the views of his opponents and advocated his own, put him in the vanguard of the intellectual movement of his age. An entire generation grew up in company with his writings and books. He was also a very powerful orator of his time. He lectured on a variety of subjects without missing a single opportunity to speak. The familiar figure of the tall and bearded Shaw was very popular at all public gatherings.

In the year 1925 Shaw received The Nobel Prize for Literature. He donated the entire money to the foundation of an Anglo-Irish academy. He evinced keen interest in English phonetics. He was of the opinion that the English alphabets and spelling needed a radical reform and bequeathed a considerable portion of his wealth as an endowment towards that end.

In personal life, Shaw was a man of spotless character. Though he amassed huge wealth by his writings, he led a very simple life that was almost ascetic. He was a strict vegetarian and teetotaler. He died in the year 1950 at the age of 94.

Bernard Shaw as a Dramatist

The position which Bernard Shaw occupies in the British Theatre is unique. By his intellectual vigour, brilliance of wit and persuasiveness of ideas he rose and overwhelmed the British theatre with unrivalled mastery. The general impact which he made on the English drama is considered next only to that of Shakespeare.

As a playwright Shaw is characterised by a purposefulness and reformative zeal that make his work so distinguished and so different from the rest of the dramatic literature. Though his plays proved highly successful productions on the theatre he claimed that he never

combined them as mere entertainers. A keen intellect and original thinker, he hated the naive senti-mentalist, smug complacency and false romanticism prevailing in the society and chose his plays as a vehicle to attack them. As he himself said, his business as a dramatist was to chasten morals with ridicule. My conscience is the genuine pulpit article; it annoys me to see people comfortable, when they ought to be uncomfortable and I insist on making them think in order to bring them to a conviction of sin. Shaw was a vehement opponent of the 'Art for art's sake' theory that was being advocated by men like Oscar Wilde and Walter Pater. He held the view that the significance of art lay in its utility. Once he said that he would never write a single sentence for art's sake. He maintained that art was essentially for the sake of life.

Even a cursory view of Shaw's plays would convince one of the wide range of subjects dealt by him and of the manner in which he used the form of drama as a forum for the discussion of his pet theories and ideas. 'Widower's Houses' which deals with the oppression of the poor by the slum-landlords is the first published play of Shaw, and is included in the group of plays called 'Plays Pleasant'. Mrs. Warren's Profession' which is another of prostitution with all its modern implications. In 'Arms and the Man' the playwright attacks the false romantic attitudes with which love and war are looked upon and places them in their true perspective. 'Man and Superman' which is one of most famous plays is on the relations between the sexes. 'Candida' makes fun of the irrational passion of love and pleads for a rational approach to it. 'Pygmalion' deals with his views on the English phonetics. 'The Apple Cart' throws a new light on the relationship between the king and his ministers in a constitutional monarchy and exposes the evil and corruption prevailing in our democratic institutions. 'St. Joan' which is the last work of Shaw is a chronicle play which deals with the story of Joan's incineration, rehabilitation, and final canonization as direct outcome of the times in which they take place, but it is 'Back to Methuselah' that may be regarded as Shaw's Magnum Opus. In this play, the dramatist attacks Darwin's theory of natural selection and puts forth his views on his well known concept of life-force.

In short, the plays of Shaw constitute what may be regarded as a theatre of ideas. Every one of them satirizes some accepted attitude or custom of the world. Every one of them is a dig at the ignorance, naivety and hollow pretensions of people. To rate thus Shaw is to take a comprehensive course in liberal education. It is therefore said that not to read Shaw is to be as much behind the times as he was ahead of them.

But, it is wrong to say that the greatness of Shaw depends only on extra-theatrical considerations. Besides his purposefulness, reformative zeal and fearless criticism, he possesses a gift for inventiveness and a very lively wit and humour. He clothes even very serious thoughts and problems in a brilliant form. So, though Shaw claimed that he never wrote for the theatre, the theatre claimed him as the most popular dramatist of his times.

The plays of Shaw have therefore a double significance. While they are remarkable for their stimulating quality, they can also be read for pure fun and entertainment. Even those who do not share his views on many problems and issues of our times are charmed by the aesthetic quality of his writings. This combination of intellectual stimulation with aesthetic entertainment makes Shaw the absorbing force that he is today.

Arms and the Man -Brief Introduction

"Arms and the Man" which attacks the false romantic attitudes, sentimentally idealizing Love and War issued against the background of a newly ended war between Bulgarians and Serbs which the former have won. The play opens on a night at the chamber of Raina, the daughter of Petkoff, a Bulgarian landlord of a small town and now a major in the army. The Bulgarian victory has obviously made Raina and her mother very happy-A report of a cavalry chief Sergius, a young Bulgarian to whom Raina is engaged and who is said to have displayed daring courage has sent them both to the height of ecstasy. But as Raina retires to bed, she discovers that a Serbian Artillery Officer who is being hunted by Bulgarian soldiers has concealed himself in her room. Prompted by a sense of false family pride, she chooses to shield him, and, as she talks to him, she indeed develops a secret admiration for the ease and nonchalance of his manners, although she tries her best to maintain a haughty and supercilious demeanour. The man is Captain Bluntschli, a professional Swiss soldier employed by the Serbian army.

In the Second Act of the play, Major Petkoff and Captain Sergius return from the war. They are welcomed home with obvious affection. But very soon, a sort of disenchantment develops in the relationship between Sergius and Raina. Sergius confesses that the much spoken of cavalry charge for which he was so much admired throughout Bulgaria was seen that he is not as true to Raina as he is expected to be. He feels that high love is a very fatiguing thing to keep up for any length of time and finds in the servant maid Louka a more satisfying mate than Raina. He also knows from Louka about the Raina-Bluntschli episode. Nor does Raina seem to be ideally devoted to Sergius. She is found spying on the man whom she once described as her soul's hero. She seems to know all about the flirtation of Sergius with Louka

Captain Bluntschli arrives to return the overcoat in which he was concealed and sent out of the Petkoff house by Raina and her mother. This gives a natural turning point to the false relations which Raina and Sergius try to keep up and in which neither of them is really interested. It is now proved that Captain Bluntschli, the professional soldier, is infinitely superior to both Petkoff and Sergius. Then comes the pleasant revelation that Bluntschli is the son of a millionaire who has a chain of hotels. Raina now openly confesses her admiration, which she once secretly cherished for Bluntschli and most willingly accepts the proposal made by him. Sergius marries Louka