

Realism in George Bernard Shaw's play *Arms and the Man*: A Critical and Analytical Study

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the manifestations of realism in George Bernard Shaw's "*Arms and the Man*" (1894) as a model of anti-romantic realistic theatre at the end of the nineteenth century. The study examines how Shaw employed realistic techniques to undermine romantic myths about war, love, and heroism, using a critical analytical methodology based on Shavian and Ibsenist dramatic theory. The study reveals that Shaw used realistic dialogue, pragmatic characters, and satirical social criticism to deconstruct Victorian ideals, presenting a realistic vision of human nature that transcends traditional melodrama. The study concludes that "*Arms and the Man*" represents a fundamental shift in English theatre toward social realism and ideological critique, making it a foundational text in the history of modern drama.

Keywords: *Arms and the Man*, Ibsenist, Shaw, traditional melodrama, social realism, and ideological critique.

1- Introduction

George Bernard Shaw's 1894 play, *Arms and the Man* is a landmark in the history of modern English theatre, representing a radical shift from the romantic melodrama prevalent in the Victorian era to critical social realism. This play emerged from Shaw's profound influence by Ibsenian realism and the European naturalist movement, as he sought to apply the principles of realistic theatre to contemporary social and political issues (Lyons, 2005). Set in Bulgaria during the Serb-Bulgarian War (1885-1886), the play tells the story of Captain Bluntschli, a pragmatic Swiss mercenary soldier, who infiltrates the lives of the aristocratic Bulgarian Petkoff family, shattering their romantic illusions about war, love, and honor.

Since its premiere at the Avenue Theatre in London in April 1894, the play has sparked considerable debate among critics and audiences. Some saw it as a blatant attack on military and patriotic values, while others considered it a comedic masterpiece that exposed the hypocrisy of social ideals. Shaw himself described the play as an anti-romantic comedy emphasizing his intention to deconstruct the romantic myths surrounding war and heroism (Kandel, 2025). Scholars have noted that Shaw employed various realistic techniques to achieve this goal, including naturalistic dialogue, complex characters with pragmatic motivations, and satirical social commentary (Siddiqui & Raza, 2012; Safder, 2019).

The study of realism in *Arms and the Man* is particularly relevant in the context of the development of modern drama, as the play represents an early example of what has become known as the problem play, which raises complex social and moral issues without offering simplistic solutions or melodramatic endings. Understanding Shaw's realism also

requires exploring the historical and intellectual context in which he produced his plays, particularly his influence by the Norwegian philosopher and theater critic Henrik Ibsen, whom Shaw considered a pioneer of modern realist theater. In 1891, Shaw wrote his famous critical work, "The Quintessence of Ibsenism" in which he defended Ibsenist realism and called for the application of its principles to the English theater (Bernd, 2018; Spencer, 1957).

The historical context of the writing of *Arms and the Man* reveals the political and social dimensions of the play. It was written during a period marked by European imperial expansion and military conflicts in the Balkans, a time that also saw the rise of socialist and reformist movements in Britain. Shaw himself was an active member of the Fabian Society, a socialist reformist organization that sought to achieve social change through education and rational debate rather than violent revolution (Panda, 2009). These political commitments are clearly reflected in *Arms and the Man* which criticizes militarism, classism, and romantic idealism, offering a realistic and pragmatic alternative for understanding human and social relations.

From a literary and theatrical perspective *Arms and the Man* represents a turning point in Shaw's career, being one of his early plays that established his distinctive dramatic style. The play combined satirical comedy with profound social critique, employing the traditional comedic structure a love story, character conflict, and a happy ending but subverting republican expectations by presenting complex, realistic characters instead of flat, romantic archetypes (Dukore, 1973). This fusion of comedic form and critical, realistic content became a hallmark

of the Shaw Theatre, distinguishing it from both Victorian melodrama and Ibsen's serious realism.

The play's significance is further underscored by its influence on the evolution of discourse surrounding war and militarism in Europe. Polish scholar Dariusz Faszczka (2023) noted that the play shaped the portrayal of Bulgarian soldiers in the European press during the Balkan Wars (1912–1913), demonstrating that its impact extended beyond the literary sphere into the political and media arenas. This historical dimension underscores the importance of studying realism in the play, revealing the capacity of theatrical art to influence collective consciousness and shape public discourse on sensitive issues such as war and patriotism.

Theoretically, *Arms and the Man* raises important questions about the nature and limits of theatrical realism. Realism in the play is not a photographic imitation of reality, but rather an artistic construct that employs selective techniques to offer a critical vision of social reality. Shaw uses what might be termed "selective realism," choosing elements from reality natural dialogue, pragmatic motivations, and everyday details and incorporating them into a comedic structure to achieve specific critical aims (AlJabban et al., 2023). This approach requires researchers to move beyond a narrow understanding of realism as simple imitation and to pay attention to the ideological and aesthetic dimensions of Shaw's realism.

The importance of studying the relationship between dramatic theory and theatrical practice in Shaw's works is also highlighted. Shaw was a prominent theater critic before becoming a playwright, and he wrote numerous articles and introductions explaining his vision of realistic theater. In his famous essay "A Dramatic Realist to His Critics" Shaw

defended his realist approach against criticisms leveled at his early plays, explaining that realism does not mean gloom or pessimism, but rather honesty in portraying human motivations and social conditions (Baxter, 2002). This profound theoretical awareness of the nature of theatrical realism is clearly reflected in *Arms and the Man* making the play an ideal text for studying the relationship between theory and practice in modern theater.

Moreover, studying *Arms and the Man* acquires contemporary relevance in light of the ongoing military conflicts and extreme nationalist rhetoric in the modern world. The issues raised by the play deconstructing war myths, critiquing false ideals, and exposing the contradictions between ideological discourse and actual practice remain highly relevant to the present reality. In an era marked by new wars and complex ideological conflicts, the play offers a model of critical thinking and social realism that can help in understanding contemporary political and military phenomena (Adam, 1999).

Furthermore, the play represents an important model for studying realistic dramatic techniques within the context of comedy. Unlike Ibsen's realism, which tends toward seriousness and tragedy *Arms and the Man* demonstrates that realism can be achieved within a comedic framework without losing its critical depth or intellectual rigor. This fusion of comedy and realism raises important theoretical questions about the relationship between dramatic form and ideological content, and about the potential of comedy as a tool for social critique.

Methodologically, studying realism in *Arms and the Man* requires a multidimensional approach that combines meticulous textual analysis with historical and cultural context and dramatic theory. Realism is not

merely a set of artistic techniques; it is an intellectual and ideological stance that demands a deep understanding of the context in which the play was produced. Moreover, studying realism in a single Shaw play necessitates familiarity with his entire dramatic and critical project, the theatrical developments in Europe at the end of the 19th century, and the ideological and social conflicts of the late Victorian era. It is also worth noting that the play presents an early model of what has become known in contemporary criticism as postcolonial criticism. The play addresses a military conflict in the Balkans from a critical perspective that deconstructs imperial and nationalist discourses. The character of Bluntschli, the Swiss mercenary soldier, represents an external voice that exposes the falsity of both Bulgarian and Serbian nationalist narratives, raising questions about the relationship between national identity and historical truth (Faszca, 2023). This dimension adds another layer of complexity to our understanding of realism in the play, revealing that Swiss realism is not limited to a critique of British society, but extends to a broader critique of nationalist and imperialist ideologies in Europe.

Finally, the importance of studying *Arms and the Man* lies in its representation of a model of socially and politically engaged theater that does not compromise its artistic and aesthetic value. The play demonstrates that committed art does not necessarily mean propaganda or direct art, but can be a refined art that combines intellectual depth, artistic complexity, and aesthetic pleasure. This delicate balance between commitment and artistry is what makes *Arms and the Man* a timeless theatrical text worthy of ongoing study and analysis. Exploring how Shaw achieved this balance through realistic techniques can offer valuable lessons for contemporary playwrights who seek to produce committed theater without sacrificing artistic quality.

1- Question of the Study

This study seeks to answer the following central question: How is realism manifested in George Bernard Shaw's play *Arms and the Man* and what dramatic techniques did the playwright employ to achieve his anti-romantic, realistic vision?

2- Significance of the Study

Theoretically, this study contributes to a more critical understanding of theatrical realism by analyzing a unique model that combines realism and comedy, challenging the narrow view of realism as a serious and somber literary doctrine. Shaw's realism, as exemplified in *Arms and the Man* demonstrates that realism can be achieved in diverse dramatic forms, including satirical comedy, without losing its critical depth or intellectual seriousness (Kandel, 2025). Historically, the study sheds light on a significant turning point in the history of English theatre: the transition from Victorian melodrama to social realist theatre in the 1890s (Dukore, 1973). Furthermore, studying the play within its historical context reveals the complex relationships between theater, politics, and ideology at the end of the Victorian era (Paulus, 1957). The study also contributes to developing analytical tools for examining the relationship between dramatic theory and theatrical practice, a relationship of paramount importance in the case of Shaw, who was a theater critic and theorist before becoming a playwright.

3- Aims of the Study

This study aims to achieve a set of interconnected objectives that collectively seek to provide a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of realism in George Bernard Shaw's play *Arms and the Man*. It aims to

analyze the realistic dramatic techniques Shaw employed in the play, including dialogue construction, character development, dramatic structure, and theatrical techniques, through a meticulous examination of the text and an analysis of how these techniques were utilized to achieve the author's realistic vision (Siddiqui & Raza, 2012). Exploring how Shaw used realism as a tool for social and ideological critique, specifically how he employed realist techniques to deconstruct romantic myths about war, love, and heroism (AlJabban et al., 2023).

4- Problem of the Study

This study stems from a central research problem: the need for a deeper and more complex understanding of realism in George Bernard Shaw's play *Arms and the Man*. This understanding transcends superficial readings that reduce the play to a mere satirical comedy or a direct critique of war. The primary challenge lies in the play's seemingly paradoxical nature, combining a lighthearted comedic form with profound critical content. This raises questions about how realism can be achieved within a comedic framework without sacrificing depth or seriousness (Dukore, 1973).

5- Scope of the Study

This study is defined by a set of objective, temporal, methodological, linguistic, and theoretical boundaries that determine its scope and focus. Objectively, the study focuses exclusively on George Bernard Shaw's play *Arms and the Man* (1894). Furthermore, the study concentrates on a specific aspect of the play: realism. It does not delve into other aspects, such as narrative structure or the psychological dimensions of the characters, except insofar as they relate to realism. Chronologically, the study examines the play within the context of its production in the 1890s,

focusing on the literary, theatrical, and social context of that period, without delving into the history of subsequent theatrical productions or various directorial interpretations over time. Methodologically, the study relies on a critical literary analysis of the written text, drawing on dramatic theory and historical context, without delving into performance studies or semiotic analysis of theatrical productions. Linguistically, the study relies on the original English text of the play, only mentioning Arabic or other translations in passing.

Theoretically, the study is based primarily on Schwarzeneggerian and Ibsenian dramatic theory and theories of theatrical realism, without engaging with other critical approaches such as psychoanalytic, feminist, or post-structuralism criticism, except insofar as they contribute to a realistic understanding of the play. These limitations are not constraints that diminish the value of the study, but rather methodological necessities that ensure focus and depth of analysis, preventing the digression and superficiality that can result from attempting to cover multiple aspects without sufficient depth.

6- Methodology

This study employs an integrated critical analytical methodology that combines several methodological approaches to achieve a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of realism in the play *Arms and the Man*. The first axis is a close textual analysis of the play, examining its various elements dialogue, characters, dramatic structure, stage directions, and linguistic techniques to reveal the realistic techniques employed and their function within the text (Siddiqui & Raza, 2012). The second axis is a historical contextual approach, placing the play within its historical, cultural, and social context and exploring its relationship to theatrical

developments in Europe, the Fabian socialist movement, and the political and military conflicts of the late 19th century (Faszczka, 2023; Paulus, 1957). The third axis is based on dramatic theory, particularly Shaw's critical and theoretical writings such as "The Essence of Ibsenism" and "A Dramatic Realism for Its Critics," as well as European realist theories, in order to understand the theoretical foundations of Shawian realism and its relationship to other realist currents (Bernd, 2018; Spencer, 1957; Baxter, 2002). The fourth axis involves a critical comparison between Shawian realism, Ibsenian realism, and European naturalism, in order to identify the distinctive characteristics of Shawian realism and its unique contribution to the development of realist theatre (Lyons, n.d.).

The fifth axis consists of an ideological analysis that explores how realism is employed as a tool for social and political critique, the relationship of realism to Shaw's socialist commitment, and how it deconstructs dominant discourses on war, class, and gender (Panda, 2009; Adam, 1999). The sixth axis includes a critical review of previous studies on the play, both classical and contemporary, in order to build upon and surpass previous critical achievements (Dukore, 1973; AlJabban et al., 2023; Kandel, 2025). Through this multi-dimensional methodological approach, the study seeks to provide a comprehensive critical analysis that combines theoretical depth, analytical precision, historical awareness, and ideological sensitivity, thus ensuring a complete understanding of realism in *Arms and the Man* as a complex artistic, intellectual, and social phenomenon.

7- Discussion

Anti-Romantic realism is evident in *Arms and the Man* as a comprehensive dramatic strategy aimed at dismantling romantic myths

surrounding war, love, and heroism. Shaw opens the play by introducing Raina Petkoff, a Bulgarian aristocratic girl influenced by romantic literature, who dreams of her lover, Sergius, as an ideal war hero. This romantic image gradually crumbles with the arrival of Bluntschli, the pragmatic Swiss mercenary, who reveals the harsh reality of war. In the first scene,

Bluntschli: "I am a professional soldier: I fight when I cannot avoid fighting, but I prefer chocolate to ammunition" (Shaw, 1894).

This simple statement encapsulates the play's anti-Romantic stance, where the idealized romantic hero is replaced by a pragmatic soldier more concerned with survival than military glory (Kandel, 2025). Anti-Romantic realism is further reinforced by the deconstruction of the myth of military heroism. Sergius, initially presented as a war hero who led a successful attack, is later revealed to have achieved a "heroism" that stemmed from sheer military folly, as the enemy possessed the wrong ammunition. Bluntschli reveals this truth:

"Your attack was suicidal... If Serbia had had the right ammunition, you would all have been killed" (Shaw, 1894).

This revelation transforms the romantic hero into a tragicomic figure, a victim of his own illusions and the blind chance of war (Siddiqui & Raza, 2012). Anti-romantic realism also extends to romantic relationships, where love is presented not as an ideal, transcendent emotion, but as a pragmatic relationship influenced by social, economic, and psychological considerations (AlJabban et al., 2023).

In analyzing his realistic characters, we find that Shaw departs from the flat, stereotypical models prevalent in Victorian melodrama, presenting

complex, multi-dimensional characters with pragmatic, realistic motivations. Bluntschli, the anti-hero, exemplifies Shaw's realism in character development. He is not an idealized romantic hero, but a mercenary who fights for money, prefers chocolate to ammunition, and flees from danger rather than confronting it. Yet, he is neither cowardly nor evil he is a pragmatic, intelligent man who understands the realities of war and acts according to his survival instinct. This complexity in character makes Bluntschli a realistic figure who transcends simple moral classifications (Safder, 2019).

Raina, for her part, undergoes a realistic transformation from a dreamy, romantic girl to a mature woman who understands the difference between romantic fantasies and reality. This transformation does not occur abruptly or melodramatically, but gradually through a series of revelations and confrontations that shatter her romantic illusions (Dukore, 1973). Sergius represents another example of a complex, realistic character. He is not merely a pseudo-romantic hero, but a figure grappling with the contradiction between the public image he must maintain as an aristocratic officer and his true human motivations. This contradiction is revealed in his clandestine affair with the maid Luca, which exposes the chasm between official class rhetoric and genuine human desires (Panda, 2009). Even minor characters like Catherine (Raina's mother) and Major Petkoff (her father) are presented as realistic figures with complex motivations, not simply as simplistic comedic archetypes.

The realistic dialogue and linguistic techniques in the play are among the most striking manifestations of Shaw's realism. Shaw employs natural language that mimics everyday speech, far removed from the affected

rhetoric and romantic discourse prevalent in Victorian melodrama. The dialogue in *Arms and the Man* reveals the characters and their motivations through what they say and how they say it, rather than relying on external descriptions or lengthy monologues. For example, when Bluntschli enters Rena's room fleeing from enemies, he doesn't deliver a romantic or heroic speech, but simply says:

"Don't scream. If you scream, I'll have to hurt you" (Shaw, 1894).

This direct and pragmatic language reveals the character's nature and circumstances immediately and realistically (Safder, 2019). Shaw also makes extensive use of verbal irony to expose the discrepancies between formal discourse and actual reality. When Sergius describes himself as a "hero" and "ideal," subsequent events reveal the gap between this self-description and his actual behavior (Siddiqui & Raza, 2012). The dialogue also reflects the class and cultural differences between the characters, with the aristocratic characters speaking in a more formal style, while those from the lower classes use simpler, more spontaneous language, thus enhancing the social realism of the play (Panda, 2009). Another important technique is the use of silence and gestures as part of the dialogue, where stage directions point to nonverbal reactions that reveal the true feelings and thoughts of the characters more truthfully than spoken words.

Social and ideological critique forms a central dimension of Shaw's realism. The play not only presents a realistic picture of life but also uses realism as a tool to critique social institutions and dominant ideologies. It criticizes the military as a social institution, showing that war is not a realm of heroism and honor, but rather a violent and senseless activity driven by ignorance, chance, and economic interests (Adam, 1999).

The play also criticizes the aristocracy and its claims to moral and cultural superiority, demonstrating that aristocratic values such as honor and glory are, in reality, masks concealing hypocrisy, cowardice, and selfishness (Panda, 2009). Marriage as a social institution is also subject to critique. Shaw shows that marriage in aristocratic society is not a free and emotional union, but rather an economic and social transaction governed by considerations of property and social status. This critique is embodied in the character of Catherine Petkoff, who is more concerned with Bluntschli economic situation than with her daughter's feelings (AlJabban et al., 2023). Romanticism itself is criticized as a dangerous ideology that obscures reality and leads to flawed decisions and human suffering. Through the character of Raina, Shaw demonstrates that romanticism is not merely an innocent aesthetic stance, but an ideology that distorts perception and prevents a realistic understanding of the world (Kandel, 2025). This multifaceted critique transforms *Arms and the Man* from a mere entertaining comedy into a committed work of art that seeks to shift social consciousness by exposing the truths hidden behind dominant ideologies.

The play's realistic dramatic techniques extend beyond dialogue and characters to encompass dramatic structure and stagecraft. Unlike melodrama, which relies on improbable coincidences and sudden twists, *Arms and the Man* follows a realistic dramatic structure where events unfold logically from the specific circumstances and motivations of the characters (Dukore, 1973). The conflict in the play is not an external, melodramatic struggle between good and evil, but an internal conflict between illusion and reality, between ideology and truth. This type of conflict is more realistic and complex than simple melodramatic conflicts (Bernd, 2018). The technique of gradual revelation is effectively used to

achieve realism, as truths are not revealed all at once, but gradually through a series of scenes and dialogues, mimicking how we discover truths in real life (Spencer, 1957).

The stage directions in the text reflect an attention to realistic details, from descriptions of sets and costumes to the gestures and physical movements of the characters. These details are not mere embellishments, but are important elements in creating theatrical reality and in revealing the characters and social relationships (Baxter, 2002). The ending also reflects a realistic approach. Although it is outwardly a "happy" ending, with Rena marrying Bluntschli, it is ironic, revealing that the marriage itself was based more on pragmatism and economics than romance, thus undermining romantic expectations even at the final moment (Kandel, 2025).

The portrayal of war, from myth to reality, is perhaps the most striking aspect of realism in the play. Shaw systematically dismantles the romanticized myth of war as a realm of heroism, honor, and glory, replacing it with a realistic image of war as a violent, senseless, and destructive activity. Through the character of Bluntschli, we obtain a realistic description of war from the perspective of a professional soldier, not from that of official discourse or romantic literature. Bluntschli describes real soldiers as:

"frightened men trying to survive, not brave heroes seeking glory" (Shaw, 1894).

This description contrasts sharply with the romanticized image of Rena and Sergius at the beginning of the play (Faszczka, 2023). Shaw also reveals the material and economic dimension of war, showing that it is not a noble ideological struggle, but an economic activity with specific

material dimensions. Bluntschli himself is a mercenary fighting for money, not for a national or ideological cause, thus revealing the hidden economic dimension of war (Adam, 1999). Shaw also demonstrates the absurdity of war by revealing that Sergius's "heroism" was the result of an ammunition malfunction, not courage or military skill. This revelation transforms war from an epic of heroism into an absurd farce governed by luck and chance (Siddiqui & Raza, 2012). The psychological impact of war on soldiers is also highlighted, with Bluntschli describing how exhausted soldiers prefer sleep to fighting, and how fear, not courage, is the dominant emotion on the battlefield. This realistic portrayal of war contrasts sharply with the romanticized depictions prevalent in Victorian literature and represents a significant contribution to the development of anti-war discourse in European literature (AlJabban et al., 2023).

Conclusion

In concluding this critical analytical study of realism in George Bernard Shaw's play *Arms and the Man* it can be affirmed that the play represents a remarkable artistic and intellectual achievement in the history of modern theater. Shaw succeeded in creating a unique model of theatrical realism that combines profound social critique with a satirical, comedic structure, challenging the narrow understanding of realism as a serious and somber literary doctrine. The study revealed that realism in *Arms and the Man* manifests itself on several interconnected levels: in the natural dialogue that mimics everyday speech and reveals the characters and their motivations in the construction of complex and multi-dimensional characters that transcend flat, romantic archetypes; in the dramatic structure that logically develops from specific circumstances and motivations in the theatrical techniques that create a convincing theatrical

reality in the realistic portrayal of war that dismantles romantic myths of heroism and honor; and in the social critique that exposes the class and ideological contradictions in Victorian society.

The study also revealed that Shaw's realism possesses unique characteristics that distinguish it from the Ibsenian realism that influenced him. While Ibsenian realism tends toward seriousness and tragedy, Shaw's realism combines profound social critique with a satirical comedic structure, creating a unique kind of theater that blends entertainment and enlightenment. This fusion of comedy and realism does not undermine the critical message rather, it enhances it by making it more accessible to a wider audience. The study confirmed that *Arms and the Man* is not merely an entertaining comedy, but a committed work of art that seeks to transform social consciousness by dismantling false ideals and revealing social truths. The play's critique of militarism, nationalism, the aristocracy, and romanticism as an ideology reflects Shaw's commitment to social reform and Fabian socialism.

Historically, the play represents a pivotal moment in the history of English theatre, contributing to the transition from Victorian melodrama to social realism. It influenced not only the development of English drama but also public discourse on war and militarism, as evidenced by its impact on the portrayal of Bulgarian soldiers in the European press. On a theoretical level, the play offers an important model for understanding the relationship between dramatic theory and theatrical practice. The realism in *Arms and the Man* is not merely a mechanical application of realist principles, but a creative development of these principles tailored to the English context and Shaw's artistic and ideological aims. *Arms and the Man* remains a text relevant to

contemporary reality, as the issues it raises the deconstruction of wartime myths, the critique of false ideals, and the exposure of class contradictions continue to be highly relevant. In a world still experiencing military conflicts and extreme nationalist rhetoric, the play offers an important lesson in critical thinking and social realism.

In conclusion, *Arms and the Man* represents a significant artistic and intellectual achievement in the history of modern drama. Through anti-romantic realism, Shaw succeeded in creating a theatrical work that combines high artistic value with deep social commitment, making it a foundational text in the history of Realist Theatre and a model to be emulated in using art as a tool for social criticism and enlightenment.

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