**George Bernard Shaw and Arms and the Man Background**

In 1856 George Bernard Shaw was born in a lower-middle class neighborhood in Dublin, Ireland, and was the youngest of three siblings. His mother, who was a professional singer, encouraged his interests in the arts, and eventually left Shaw’s alcoholic father. In his twenties, Shaw began a course of private reading at the British Museum, allowing him to engage not only with English poets like William Blake and Percy Shelley, but with political thought then brewing in the 1870s. By the 1880s, Shaw was committed to the ideals of the “Fabians,” a branch of socialists operating in England who preferred to transform Britain not through revolution, but through intellectual pursuits. Shaw wrote newspaper articles and gave speeches on the subject, and on related issues of social and political concern in England. He soon met drama critic William Archer, who asked Shaw to review plays as well. Shaw took Archer’s encouragement to start writing his own plays, and created the works for which he is now famous: *Man and Superman* (1903), *Major Barbara* (1905), *Saint Joan* (1924), along with a great many others, and with “theoretical prefaces” explaining the construction and political impact of his works. Shaw won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1925, for, as the Nobel Committee put it, “his work which is marked by both idealism and humanity, its stimulating satire often being infused with a singular poetic beauty.”

**Arms and the Man**

Written in 1893-4 and first performed in 1894, *Arms and the Man* is one of Shaw’s earlier plays, and one that grows out of several contexts. The first is historical. There was a Serbo-Bulgarian War in 1885, and there was, too, an historic Battle of Slivnitza, won by the Bulgarians. Although Shaw takes advantage of actual historical information in the construction of the work, he is more concerned not with what allowed the Bulgarians to gain power in the region, but in broader forces of political and social agitation, and in the manner by which love can create, and redraw, relations between groups. Raina, Bluntschli, Sergius, and the rest of the characters are simply figures through which these political and social forces play out, as much as they are characters with which the viewer is to identify.

Some scholars have called *Arms and the Man* a satire, or a work that criticizes political or social issues of the day through humor or exaggeration. It is also a comedy, as evidenced from its ending in a flurry of weddings. But there is a great deal of *dark* comedy evident. The stakes of the work are high; the characters in it fear death and flee it, and characters off-stage, like Bluntschli’s friend, suffer terrible ends. This kind of comedy allows Shaw to broach serious issues like equality among the sexes, the nature and necessity of war, and the impact of technological development on European war making.

*Arms and the Man* is considered to be one of the dramas that investigates the nature of relationships between men and women. In his prefaces to the works, collected later in his life, Shaw explains how certain settings, scenes, characters, and dialogue might help the reader or viewer to find political truths in these works of fiction