

The Character of Bluntschli in Arms and the Man

Shaw conceived of Bluntschli almost as a Hegelian character, in the sense that through him he has presented an antithesis of the conventional morality, romantic ideas of love and war and feudal notions of the place of the individual in society. Shaw does all this, however, under a dramatic scheme. The very name 'Blunt(sch)li' itself is perhaps deliberately chosen to cover up the potentialities of the man, with which he threatens the fragile facade of the complacent society. Through his character, however, Shaw attacks not only the ethos, romantic ideas and feudal concepts, he also inverts the tradition of the nature and role of the hero in comedy. But it should not be thought that Shaw presented Bluntschli with the sole object of satirising, which is a destructive art; in fact, he presents his unheroic hero from a system of thought that seeks a better society, where the individual's status will not be determined and fixed by class and gender, but by what s/he is capable of contributing to the making of a higher forms of individuals and society. This point leads to the discussion of Shaw's theory of 'Superman'. In this respect it can be said that, though Shaw did not present a theoretical exposition of the theory, the idea is anticipated in the creation of the character of Bluntschli. For, such a man—freed from all the illusions about his life and the world—can participate in or volunteer himself in the making of Superman.

The audience meet Bluntschli in the very opening of the drama in an unusual state for a hero. This becomes more perceptible because the exotic stage setup (or stage direction) and the conversation between a girl of imagination and a typically worried mother prepare the room for something melodramatically unexpected for the western European audience (for whom it was meant originally). Quite contrary to the fantasies of a young girl, a fugitive enters the chamber (the stage) in a very sorry state in the form of Bluntschli, whose terrible make-up and prosaic appearance - bluntly contrasted with those of the man in picture—would hardly pass for a hero with the audience and , of course, with the heroine. The dramatist describes him as he appears to Raina and the audience:

“...he is of middling stature and undistinguished appearance, with strong neck and shoulders, roundish obstinate looking head covered with short crisp bronze curls, clear quick eyes and good brows and mouth, hopelessly prosaic nose like that of a strong minded baby...”

What is striking about the man is the quick sense of the situation by which he blackmails the girl with repeated warning: “Do you understand that?” but what is more striking is his honesty about his predicament: “I don't intend to get killed if I can help.” The confession, however, does not appeal to Raina, who owing to her Romantic, predisposition about war, reacts with disdain: “Some soldiers, I know, are afraid to die”. To this, quite contrary to her expectation, Bluntschli returns a plain statement which, though does not lessen her disdain, does create curiosity about the truths about a soldier and war: “All of them, dear lady, all of them, believe me.” He almost demonstrates the truth by resorting to using the young girl's cloak as “a better

weapon than the revolver". Raina is, on the one hand, deeply hurt by the 'unchivalrous' cynicism, and on the other, is forced to believe and take pity on the man who surrenders everything to her at the sounds of impending death. As she arranges for hiding him and saving his life, Bluntschli utters a warning as well as lesson, which summarises his situation: "Remember—nine soldiers out of ten are born fools".

After Raina befools the soldiers and saves his life, Bluntschli appears seemingly a greater fool with his display of fear "like a frightened horse" and with the revelation that the revolver was empty. Raina gets "outraged" as the dramatist says, "in her most cherished ideals of manhood" when Bluntschli declares:

"What use are cartridges in battle? I always carry chocolate instead; and I finished the last cake of that hours ago."

This leads to the famous (or infamous) chocolate cream episode, and with this begins Bluntschli's gradual transformation from a mercenary into "chocolate cream soldier". But the transformation—which may be called a metamorphosis, does not happen solely to Bluntschli; in fact, as a result of the action of the play, Raina changes and the fugitive causes her transformation with his new ideas and true reports of the battlefield and contradicting her ideas. For instance, when, irritated at un-heroic behaviour, she expresses her false confidence, "Our soldiers are not like that", Bluntschli replies with authority:

"Oh yes they are. There are only two sorts of soldiers: old ones and young ones. I've served fourteen years: half of your fellows never smelt powder before..."

In the course of talking when it comes to the cavalry charge launched by Sergius, Bluntschli exposes the glory in an authentic Shavian manner: "

"Well, it is a funny sight. It's like slinging a handful of peas against a window pane: first one comes; then two or three close behind him; and then all the rest in a lump."

Bluntschli, however, in the enthusiasm of justifying his retreat also exposes the accidental heroism of Sergius, whom he describes as a "regular handsome fellow, with flashing eyes and lovely moustache, shouting his war-cry and charging like Don Quixote at the windmills." His words produce tremendous effect on Raina, who, in an attempt to neutralise her position shows him off Sergius' picture. Here it can be said that Bluntschli forces Raina to examine Sergius and their relationship in new light of realism.

While Bluntschli's display of his fatigue, inability and ignorance provide entertainment to the audience, it also underscores the sufferings, fatigue and tortures a soldier has to undergo in real situation. Quite contrary to the feudal

glorification of a soldier's job as an orderly one of service of higher kind, Bluntschli lets himself into a loose delirium created by fatigue and accelerated by suddenly found refuge:

“I'm to go to bed, but not to sleep. Be sure not to sleep, because of danger. Not to lie down either, only sit down...”

On the other hand, he chooses the best option to avoid getting killed through completely surrendering to the woman, in whom he has found instinctively a saviour.

In Act II Bluntschli enters the stage in the middle of the action and once again his entrance creates a lot of confusion as he comes himself to return Major Petcoff's coat. The way Major Petcoff and Sergius receive him at the last moment of his being turned away from the house, makes it amply clear that Bluntschli is well known for his abilities as a captain among the higher ranks of the conflicting armies. Even before his arrival, we hear from Major Petcoff and Sergius how a Swiss managed them to accept his terms. Here we find both Major Petcoff and Sergius somewhat changed in their attitude to war and Bluntschli as a captain caused this subtle change. Major Petcoff acknowledges that “soldiering has to be a trade like any other trade”. As Bluntschli confidently proceeds upstairs to solve the transit problems, he comes across Raina for whom precisely he has come to “sneak a look” as he will confess later. It just because of this that he casts a “whimsical glance at her” and that he agrees to stay much to the pleasure of Raina and to the displeasure of Catherine.

At the beginning of the Act III Bluntschli's capacity in transacting business is well demonstrated and at the same time is contrasted with the utter inability of Major Petcoff and Sergius. After he finishes off sending the garrisons, perhaps he deliberately succeeds in sending others out so that he may get an opportunity to talk to the girl, who, before him, comes forward to start the conversation. As Raina begins in almost flirting tone, he keeps his cool even in such provocative words as: “You look ever so much nicer than when we last met...What have you done to yourself?” The sweet start, however, gives way to serious exchange of words. Here Bluntschli seems to have chosen to appeal to Raina by contradicting and doubting her words. In fact, he takes her words lightly, but questioned seriously he is forced to declare the following words which completely unsettle Raina from her Romantic disposition:

“When you strike that noble attitude and soak in that thrilling voice, I admire you; but I find it impossible to believe a single word you say.”

Then he successfully transforms her statement into his favour by forcing her to acknowledge that he is “the first man that has even taken you quite seriously”. But as soon as he finds Raina emotionally breaking down at her inner person being discovered, he balances the emotional sway in her favour (at the same time in his favour) by announcing the naturalist truth Shaw reiterates in other plays:

“ I’m like all the rest of them, the nurse, your parents, Sergius: I’m your infatuated admirer.”

In other words, Raina, like other Shavian heroines, has got the charm and ability to attract and involve men in the making of Superman. However, for the first time the audience perceive the extent to which Bluntschli has impressed Raina when in the middle of the conversation he suddenly informs her of his father’s death and decides to start for Switzerland.

After Bluntschli returns to the stage Bluntschli faces Sergius who challenges him for a duel as the former feels that he has been cheated by the Switzer. The way he accepts the challenge and answers the charges brought against him disheartens Sergius, who, on the other hand, is charged by Raina of making love to Louka in her back. Bluntschli sympathetically refuses to judge Louka, who, according to him, has acted in accordance with the reality of the situation she was in. Then as Raina’s photograph with the inscription leads to Bluntschli’s being discovered as “Chocolate Cream Soldier”, he tries to clear the doubts by stating what happened actually at the night of his escape from the front. But quite unexpectedly he falls into the trap of Raina’s arguments and he is led to declare that he is not married and, therefore, should consider marrying her. At this point once again Bluntschli shows his principle of judging people on their capacity to perform practical works in real situation, not on what they do by adhering to foolish ideals, while he defends Nicola.

As Louka successfully traps down and hooks up Sergius, she tries to justify herself mischievously by pointing out, quite correctly, Raina’s targeting of Bluntschli. Bluntschli goes on refute the charges against him and Raina, he does the greatest by taking her for a girl of seventeen. By the time he understands his mistake, he has been totally outsmarted by Raina, who has chosen him long before as an agent of nature needed to fulfill her mission in creating Superman in the process of Creative Evolution. But even as he is proved to be “a romantic idiot” by her, he comes out triumphantly with the declaration of his material possessions and, above all, of his position:

“My rank is the highest in Switzerland: I am a free citizen.”

But as soon as he finds that Raina is not ready “to be sold to the highest bidder”, he changes his approach and wins her and the audience’s favour by declaring himself once again “a fugitive, a beggar and a starving man”.

In conclusion, we can say that Bluntschli’s character undergoes a transformation as he comes in contact with Raina. Here it should be remembered that the transformation is preconceived by the dramatist so that he may present him as an agent for destroying the conventional romantic ideas about love and war and feudal concepts of man’s place in society. But ironically enough, towards the end of the play he is forced

to acknowledge—perhaps as a matter of habitual slip, his “incurably romantic disposition”. However, this should not be confused with those of Raina or Sergius, for, while in Bluntschli’s case the romantic tendencies are innate and, therefore, necessary in the process of Creative Evolution, in the cases of Raina and Sergius those are partly self-imposed and partly imposed by their education. In other words, Bluntschli opposes the principles of romanticism with his creative brand of romanticism. And he does so with what a difference!