Shaw's comic tone: from laughter to the broken harp string

R. K. Thomas

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SHAW'S COMIC TONE:
FROM LAUGHTER TO THE BROKEN HARP STRING

A Paper
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements of the
Honors Program
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by
R. K. Thomas
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George Bernard Shaw's literary career lasted over seventy years. He wrote prolifically. The most complete collection of his work, the Ayot St. Lawrence Edition, runs to over thirty-one volumes, yet it is not all inclusive. His efforts were always motivated by the desire to expand and expound his social and political philosophy. Although the canon of Shavian criticism approaches his motives from a wide variety of angles and avenues, Shaw singled out "a passion of pure political Weltverbesserungswahn (worldbettermentcraze)" as his "own devouring malady."\(^1\)

Defining his artistic objectives as conveying a "feeling" to an audience and making "them sympathetic with it," Shaw declared, "my plays are all propaganda plays."\(^2\)

So, Shaw's dramatic work was attempting, in essence, to create sympathy for his political viewpoint and, thereby, gain converts to the system he felt could best improve the world.

In a word, Shaw's system is generally referred to as socialism, but his socialism developed along Fabian lines rather than those of conventional Marxism or Communism. This distinction is important. For, as a Fabian, Shaw was

\(^1\)Frank Harris, \textit{Bernard Shaw} (Garden City, New York: Garden City Publishing Co., 1931), p. 428.

able to develop a highly personal political philosophy. The Fabians were not a typical political party. The group had no formal structure or organization. When he wrote of the society's early history in "Fabian Tract No. 40," Shaw pointed out the group never lost the ability to laugh at itself.

These particular elements of Fabianism are essential to an understanding of the development of Shavian Socialism since advancement of this philosophy supplied the motivating factor for writing his plays.

As Eric Bentley aptly explains it, the Fabian Society had no "party line" and, therefore, Shaw's development as a Socialist was fluid. Although Shaw credits the "Fabian Politbureau" with acting as "an incomparable critical threshing machine for his ideas," his unique blending of these ideas which were drawn from a wide array of sources retained a distinctively personal flavor. The feelings for which he desired to create sympathy were not parroted party doctrine but the outpourings of his own intellect.

Shaw realized the power of laughter. He wanted to harness its power in order to ridicule what he considered society's shortcomings. "I want people to go away from my plays feeling a little bigger than when they came to them," he told his friend.

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Henry Salt, "to have laughed themselves out of littleness." So, George Bernard Shaw wrote comedy with the avowed purpose of gaining converts to his brand of socialism through laughter. Ridiculing "littleness", he hoped to make the world a better place by making its inhabitants bigger people. As he wrote in the "Preface to Heartbreak House" in 1919, "like a fertile country flooded with mud, England showed (sic) no sign of her greatness in the days when she was putting forth all her strength to save herself from the worst of her littleness." Shaw never seemed to recover from the shock of the war. *St. Joan* (1923), is his only exceptional postwar play.

The consensus of critical opinion seems to hold that just prior to the war years Shaw reached his zenith as a dramatic artist. Those who suggest that Shaw continued artistic and philosophical progress in his postwar plays tend to agree that the war made a heavy impression on him. The image of G. B. S. emerging from the war a changed man is reflected in the various divisions suggested for organizing his career into component phases. For those dividing Shaw's work into periods - Epic Bentley, Robert Brustein, Martin Meisel, or Charles Carpenter - the war serves as the pivotal period leading to the final segment in his career. He was still popular as a playwright, and actually, there was a boom in postwar productions of Shawian plays. But these productions were often staged as farces that provoked what Shaw called "a lot of shallow but willing laughter, and then producing disappointment and irritation."6

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The first world war had turned Shaw's plays into sources for hollow laughter. After the war Shaw was no longer obtaining his stated dramatic objective; the "littleness" had somehow overcome the laughter.

Shaw categorized his own plays as he had the works of Beethoven and Handel. He divided them into a juvenile and a middle period which was followed by a Third Manner. Interestingly, these periods are each divided by a war. In the "Preface to Back to Methuselah", the play he places at the start of his Third Manner in 1920, Shaw further reveals that *Man and Superman* marked the beginning of his middle phase during 1903. The juvenile phase ended with the Boer War (1899-1902); the middle terminated with World War I (1919). Shaw hinged the turning points of his dramatic career on wars. The impact of these wars was, therefore, influential on his philosophy.

Detailing the war's mutation of art, specifically dramatic art in the comic form, is not intended here. For the scope is limited to observing the change in Shaw's comic tone produced by the war. Somehow, war raised the tone in pitch and the resulting upward modulation in frequency, although subtle, was readily discernable. While this shift did not involve a movement from the treble range of comedy to the bass keys of tragedy, it did increase intensity in the tone. This change produced laughter which was higher, shriller, more bitter in register.

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But to detect change, naturally, the original tone must be heard.

Observation of the change in Shavian comic tone at the onset of the Third Manner requires tracing it from its origins during the first period. By monitoring Shaw's "feelings" on war to this shift, the true degree of variation in comic tone can be determined. Shaw's plays are, as previously noted, the embodiment of those "feelings" for which he wanted to enlist the sympathy of his audiences. So, if his plays are searched for his prevailing "feelings" toward war, any changes in Shaw's philosophy can be matched with changes in comic tone. By understanding Shaw's "feelings" on warfare, insight can be gained into the nature of the transmogrification of the Shavian comic tone and possible causes can be suggested for the laughter turning sour, a souring which would prompt Shaw to say that "only those who have lived through a first-rate war can possibly understand the bitterness." 8

Each of the first two periods contains a play in which war is thematically important. Analyzing the thematic application of war in *Arms and the Man* (1894) and *Major Barbara* (1905) can reveal Shaw's emerging attitude pattern for war. When this pattern is considered in relation to the attitudes exposed in *Heartbreak House*, the transitional work with which the middle phase ends, Shaw's source of embitterment becomes clear. For, in *Heartbreak House* are reflected the modifications

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forced on the Shavian philosophy by the harshness of world war.

The change in Shaw's outlook on war can then be compared with change in the Shavian comic tone. When Shaw's concept of the proper place of warfare in his philosophical scheme of things became drastically modified, the tone of the comedy in which he presented these concepts was also changed.

Arms and the Man was George Bernard Shaw's first dramatic success, but ironically the message he hoped to deliver was largely interpreted incorrectly by his first audiences. The play's tone caused many playgoers and theatre critics to miss the "feeling" intended for sympathetic reaction. In the first run the play cost its backer a considerable loss. Anne Horniman, who had financed it through Florence Farr, lost several thousand pounds. Generally the play was typed as simply a romantic comedy or a light opera, and Shaw was referred to as a Gilbert without Sullivan. Shaw's rebuttal takes form in "A Dramatic Realist to His Critics" (1894) which later became the "Preface to Arms and the Man". The play and its explication in this self-criticism hold the key to Shaw's attitude toward warfare until the beginning of the Boer War in 1899 when the juvenile phase ends. But many background factors must be established before Shaw's philosophical objectives in Arms and the Man and its subsequent influence on the Shavian comic tone become clear.

In the early 1880's Shaw had been converted to socialism. His fascination began at a street lecture given by Henry George and he began to investigate economic theory. He joined the newly formed Fabian Society late in 1884. The effects of Fabianism on Shaw are subject to debate, but that the group
was to prove important in his life and dramatic career is rarely disputed. A loose knit club for socialist intellectuals, the Fabian society was an important springboard for Shaw. As a Fabian he wrote political essays as well as lecturing extensively, and the basis for his personal socio-political philosophy developed under the society's auspices.

Shaw's research into economics had converted him from Marxism to Jevonism by the late 1880's. Although he credited Marx with the cure for his political blindness, Shaw was not a Marxist. He disagreed with the concept of class struggle and the Marxian system of values. Like Marx, he felt society should be classless, but he disagreed as to how this was to be achieved. Shaw wanted each individual to have his fair social and economic share rather than merely elevating the poor and dethroning the rich. He was concerned with elevation of the individual in proportion to the individual's efforts. In economics, he embraced the reformed-capitalistic theory of Jevon, who was ironically an anti-socialist, because it left room for the operation of individual will somewhere between capitalism and Marxism.

About the same time, during 1887, he encountered the work of Samuel Butler. Shaw believed firmly in evolution, but he scorned Darwin's concept of natural selection because it eliminated the individual will as an evolutionary factor. Asked to review Butler's *Luck or Cunning?* he balked until informed that the book was an attack on Darwin. As implied by the title, Butler's work challenged the natural selection theory and it deeply influenced Shaw.
Butler's chief influence was in the development of Shaw's life force idea, but Shavian philosophy is a complex mixture of Nietzsche, Bergson, Schopenhauer, and Lamarck, as well as Butler. The complexity results from Shaw's policy of embracing what he agreed with philosophically and discarding what he did not. For example, he claimed to have never read Nietzsche in German and to have only read excerpts in translation, yet critics consistently make comparisons which imply Shaw was directly influenced by him. "If all this talk about Schopenhauer and Nietzsche continues," he said, "I really will have to read their works to determine what we have in common." 9

Shaw made no claim of originality. He selected what he considered to be the best of available ideas and incorporated the results to form the Shavian philosophy. The "life force" concept is the core of this philosophy, although Shaw did not use this terminology until after the turn of the century. The life force was Shaw's translation of Henri Bergson's phrase, *élan vitale*. Shaw had used the expression *Zeitgeist* (*world-spirit* or *world will*) prior to using the term life force, but the concept is the same. The basis for the life force or will is the desire for more control over the forces in nature which determine individual destiny. The "will" is motivated toward fulfillment of this desire by the "purpose". The "purpose" consists of the driving force which motivates life, referred to as Shaw used the term *God*, but he himself an atheist. *God*, in Shavian terms, is the life force which is constantly trying to become

more aware of itself or, in other words, the will accomplishing the purpose through self realization. With each self realization there is an evolution to a higher stage in awareness and a resulting moral improvement. Self realization increases self respect and a sufficient quantity of self respect precludes the possibility of immoral action. Man is not the ultimate because he is only a stage in the process of moral evolution. But each fulfillment for man brings the life force a stage closer to the ultimate self realization. Shaw's philosophy of the life force was combined with his economic theory during the course of a series of confrontations between Shaw and A. M. Hyndman, a rival socialist and the founder of the Social Democratic Foundation. Hyndman was an outspokenly militant socialist who had no use for the Fabian policy of the "inevitability of gradualness." Developed by Sidney Webb, Shaw's friend and fellow Fabian, the gradualness theory involved the "permeation" or infiltration of society's regulating bodies to promote internal reform. The S. D. F. wanted revolution but Shaw wanted evolution. Hyndman invited Shaw to actively join the class war, but he declined. "I am a moral revolutionary, interested, not in class war, but in the struggle between human vitality and the artificial system of morality," was Shaw's reply. Shaw's revolution was to be intellectual. Social and economic reform were intended to be the byproducts of the evolutionary process.

After writing five novels which had met with little success,

Shaw tried playwriting in 1885. He collaborated in the effort with William Archer. For the next seven years he worked as a critic of music, art, literature, and drama, honing his artistic skill and working out the ethics of Shawian philosophy. Then in 1892 he completed his and Archer's unfinished play, *Widower's House*, and began his stage career. Shaw explained his purpose for turning to drama in the "Preface to Plays Pleasant" which was published as part of the two volume collection of his first seven plays in 1898. He declared his aim in writing then had been to create an "onslaught on idealism."

In *Arms and the Man* the one particular idealism attached is warfare. Shaw wanted positive and realistic values applied to soldiers and war. His reasons can be traced both to prevailing political situations and to the artistic advancement of part of his philosophy of socialistic reform. In terms of warfare, there were at least two major political factors at issue in the early 1890's which helped shape Shaw's attitude, one national and one international. Moreover, he was motivated by his desire to advance his philosophy of the life force through his work as an artist. This play represents a step forward in the presentation of that philosophy because certain ethical considerations of Shawian socialism are advanced especially in terms of the individual's responsibility. Each of these factors has a common source in Shaw's "feelings" and each is part of his motivation for the play.

On the national scene, Shaw worried about the possibility of a genuine revolution. During 1886 and 1887, England had experienced a serious depression which sparked several riots.
These riots spurred the growth of unions, and unionism produced strikes in the late 1880's and early 1890's. The S. D. F., along with a somewhat less militant splinter group headed by Shaw's friend, William Morris, was attempting to foment social revolution within the dissatisfied working class. But "Bloody Sunday", the result of an attempted mass rally in Trafalgar Square during November, 1887, clearly illustrated for Shaw the senselessness of peasant revolt against armed police and cavalry troops. This fiasco reinforced the "feelings" on a class war that Shaw had expressed to Hyndman. Violent revolution was not the answer, and Shaw felt that a potent army was essential as a peace-keeping deterrent on the home front. Domestic tranquility was necessary for effective employment of the gradualness theory. When more bellicose associates would question this non-violent course of action, Shaw would counter with an analogy to the French Revolution. The spirit of this revolt was often invoked by those who supported violent action. But Shaw felt the revolt would have been crushed if the French King would have attended to his soldier's payroll before Marie Antoinette's gambling debts.11

The relative strength of peace-keeping forces probably concerned Shaw in the early 1890's since a serious and sharp depression much like that of the 1886-87 period had developed in 1892 and 1893. Chronicles of the period refer to the situation as one "which led to great misery at a time when there was no

11 Pearson, op. cit., p. 66.
unemployment pay. Tension was added to this volatile situation by Shaw's knowledge that revolutionaries had been chafing to initiate revolt. The original target date had been 1889, in order to coincide with the centennial of the French Revolution, and, as a result, revolutionary furor was at fever pitch in the early 1890's.

Since 1882 the forces of the British Empire had occupied Egypt, a situation which resulted in considerable international tension. This action began British involvement in Africa, which was later to result in a serious international confrontation. Shaw was sympathetic to the government's policy of intervention. As a member of the Charing Cross Parliament, a socialist government formed within a debate society, he co-authored a statement proposing that "the withdrawal of the troops from Egypt will be completed only as rapidly as is consistent with the welfare and independence of the country." Late that same year, 1887, he also wrote a sympathetic article entitled "A Word for War". Shaw believed that British colonialism, despite its inherent flaws, was more fully evolved than the uncivilized state. To insure evolutionary progress the more advanced form of civilization was required to exert its influence on the emerging primitive society.


Shaw's "feelings" on the national factor, maintenance of internal security, and the international factor, advancement for the more primitive, are firmly grounded in the ethics of Shavian Socialism. The life force required an atmosphere conducive to evolution and more advanced states were expected to provide it.

Artistic factors were also involved as adjuncts of his reform concepts. Shaw's first three plays had dealt with problems inherent in a social system — prostitution, marriage, slums. With Arms and the Man Shaw began to emphasize the individual and his function within society's institutions. One of the largest and most important of these was the military establishment. Shaw noted in reference to the play that "my conclusion is that a soldier ought to be made a citizen and treated like any other citizen." The military, as a part of society, was subject to the life force-world will concept.

Within the play Shaw attempted to satisfy these objectives by systematically contrasting the deluding nineteenth century ideals of war and love with reality. But Shaw reveals that the clash with romantic idealism was only a device to aid interpretation of the play in a letter written to William Archer several days after production first opened. "It is the positive element in my philosophy that makes Arms & the Man (sic) a perfectly genuine play about real people," he wrote.

"if you could only rid yourself of the intense unreality of your own preconceptions; and of your obsession by the ideals which you grow pessimistic over, you would not find that an effect due to the ridiculous obviousness and common sense of realism breaking through the mist and glamour of idealism was a mere mechanical topsy-turveyism."¹⁵ His intention was to produce his desired effect through the reactions of "real" people in situations in which they overcome false idealism under the influence of the evolutionary life force.

The citizen soldier, Bluntschli, acts as a catalyst for the life force. Raina, the romantic, and Louka, the pragmatic, each evolve a stage toward conscious awareness of themselves through interaction with him. As a practical romantic he shares an element distinctive in each girl. Bluntschli freely admits to "an incurable romantic disposition."¹⁶ Sergius describes him as "a soldier: every inch a soldier!" after denigrating success in martial affairs. He complains Bluntschli's skill as a soldier demonstrated the ability "to shine as a tradesman" (A & M, p. 34). All three characters advance on a moral plane by self-discovery of an inner truth. This is the essence of the life force's process. In discovering this new "awareness," a degree of social equality is achieved and relevant sidelights


¹⁶S. Bernard Shaw, Arms and the Man (Baltimore: Penguin Books, Inc., 1967), p. 74. For convenience in notation, all references to the text of this play will be taken from this edition and the page cited will be prefixed with the abbreviation A & M.
are thrown on the soldier's place in the scheme of things which reflects important aspects of Shavian Socialism in the process.

Raina's poetic vision of idealized warriors and battles is systematically blurred by Bluntschli throughout the first act. The image of the romantic warrior hero figure, Sergius, which she had venerated, gradually lacklusters and the forces of evolution begin to stir in her as she watches the sleeping Bluntschli, unconsciously referring to him as "darling" (A & M, p. 25). Her self-awareness forges to the surface as she converses with Bluntschli when he comes to return the coat. Raina is forced to admit to herself that she has always played a role in her interpersonal relationships, and begins to see Sergius is playing a similar role. In the play's closing lines her process of self realization is completed as she drops the sham of denying her real affections and "succumbs with a shy smile", capitulating, "to my chocolate cream soldier" (A & M, p. 77). Progressing from behavior which Bluntschli assumes is that of a seventeen year old, Raina transcends the inhibitions of class distinctions and accepts the relationship she had established with "a fugitive, a beggar, and a starving man" (A & M, p. 77). Hushing her mother's pretentiousness, she declares, "I am not here to be sold to the highest bidder." Rather, she is determined to marry her soldier whose "rank is the highest known... a free citizen" (A & M, p. 76-77).

Louka moves on a slightly higher evolutionary plane than Raina. From the first act's opening lines she is described as "proud" and "so defiant that her servility to Raina is almost
insolent" (A & M, p. 8). As a very "real" person, Louka is aware of her worth as an individual. Her "will" senses the "purpose" but until she is exposed to catalytic Bluntschli she lacks the self-realization necessary for evolution. Her contrast with the "dreamy" Raina is emphasized in the manner in which she handles Sergius' condescending pass. Realizing the significance of Bluntschli's and Raina's relationship, she is able to cast what she had sensed for sometime in concrete terms. Sergius berates her as a "clod of common clay", but she retorts, "I've found out whatever clay I'm made of, you are made of the same" (A & M, p. 59). Being more perceptive, she is aware of Raina's and Bluntschli's mutual attraction before they are. "Miss Raina will marry him, whether he likes it or not."

"she informs Sergius, "I know the difference between the sort of manners you and she put on before one another and the real manner" (A & M, p. 63). Presuming Raina, she scorns her fellow servant, Nicola's attempt to buy her. "Keep your money," she scathes, "you were born to be a servant. I was not" (A & M, p. 59). Her self-realization gives her the impetus to "dare to be the equal of my inferior" (A & M, p. 63). Her fulfillment is near when she says that "I have a right to call her Raina; she calls me Louka." (A & M, p. 74). She breaks the bonds of arbitrary social distinctions.

In her moment of triumph over Sergius, Louka muses over martial courage. Her dramatic function includes aiding in the communication of a positive viewpoint on war. Just as with each of the other major characters, she relays a message containing part of the Shavian "feelings" on warfare. She
successfully baits her trap for Sergius with romantic military ethics. For as a participant in the evolution of the life force, she can see military ethics in proper perspective and makes use of Sergius cannot. When Louka achieves her goal by transcending class limitations and winning Sergius, Nicola cooly summerizes her character. "She had a soul above her station", (A & M, p. 72). Like Raina, she evolved to a more advanced stage, but, significantly, her evolution takes place in a higher strata because of her greater awareness, her closer touch with reality, and the distance she had to cover from servant to master.

Bluntschli is the play's most complex character in terms of the evolutionary life force. He is acted upon by a purpose, as well as, inducing its action in others. He is also the vehicle for the essential comments on soldiers and warfare. As the positive agent placed in contrast to Sergius, the negative aspect, Bluntschli instills the "feelings" on war which Shaw wants his audience to feel sympathy.

Even as a imported expert, Bluntschli is subject to evolution's forces. He is able to enkindle the life spirit's fire in others because he has the longest experience under its influence. Since boyhood he has been self-searching under its force. He is unsure of whatever draws him to Raina. "I come sneaking back here to have another look at the young lady when any other man of my age would have sent the coat back," he reveals (A & M, p. 74). He knows it is not gratitude or pity, but his "will" senses some compelling "purpose". "There's reason in everything", he says, beginning instinctively to
realize she desires a relationship with him (A & M, p. 55). Bluntschli's vision begins to clear when he adds up the coincidences which are so purposeful, picking the correct balcony, the narrow miss of not getting wisked out the door by Raina's apprehensive mother, the inheritance which comes that afternoon. He turns within himself and lays bare his soul. The final obstruction which was a false illusion is then torn away.

Not hesitating, he successfully bids for Raina. Her acceptance is based on his value as an individual. She has realized his importance as an individual, thereby establishing the basis for a true relationship. Just as in Louka's case, her decision is evolutionary because it represents acceptance of an evolutionary opportunity. Bluntschli's proposal is evolutionary because he has evolved to the realization that he should advance it. His searching and soldiering days are over.

Raina and Louka evolve through introductions to Bluntschli, but Sergius does not. As his foil, Sergius can reflect Bluntschli's evolutionary force, but he cannot benefit from it. His system of values cannot cope with the necessities of the evolutionary force. His "never withdrawing" and "never surrendering" attitude dooms him to never evolve. He can not come to grips with the life force. As he tells Bluntschli, "I could no more fight you than I could make love to an ugly woman". (A & M, p. 67).

Rather than expanding through self-realization, he merely swings from one idealistic pole to its opposite when confronted by life's vicissitudes. Sergius is blind, and while those around him evolve, he only revolves. Each of the main characters
develops to self-realization in the course of the play except Sergius. Notably, Sergius embodies all of the warrior's flaws which Shaw wished to point out. He exemplifies all the values Shaw wanted to ridicule with his comedy.

At the time he wrote Arms and the Man, Shaw saw war as a nasty business. It involved not only grave danger but physical and aesthetic privations for those who were forced to wage it. Yet there was a place for the professional soldier, Bluntschli, in the life force's evolutionary process. The professional soldier was a skilled tradesman and as such was an asset for civilized society. But there was no evolutionary potential in the romantic idealism of pathetic amateurs such as Sergius. The life force was active in a man who could "fight when I have to" and "be very glad to get out of it when I haven't to," because this represented a rather important self-realization (A & M, p. 67). Only contempt existed for those who "think fighting's an amusement" (A & M, p. 67).

In the Shawian philosophy there is considerable external evidence to support this interpretation. Early in 1894 Florence Farr of the Independent Theatre Society approached Shaw on the possibility of reviving Widower's House, but Shaw preferred the production of a new effort. The plot had already been worked out on the theme of war. Shaw revealed in a newspaper release that "in the original MS the names of the places were blank, and the characters were simply The Father, The Daughter, The Stranger, The Heroic Lover, and so on."

Thus, Shaw definitely had a play in mind that would explicate his philosophical views on war, and, once having written the play, he later adapted it to an actual historical conflict. Additional evidence for this is suggested by Shaw's choice of models for his then unnamed characters.

Cunningham Graham "figures in my play Arms and the Man," Shaw said, "with (Sidney) Webb in strong contrast."18 Sergius: "I never withdraw" lines (A & M, p. 33 and p. 73) were actually uttered by Graham in the House of Commons. Graham is described as a swashbuckling and romantic type. He was an active revolutionary and was imprisoned as a result of "Bloody Sunday". The effects of that fiasco on Shaw's attitude have already been noted, but the basic contrast in philosophy between Shaw and Graham did emerge as a result of the incident. Graham declared that Shaw was the first man to flee the square when trouble broke out. Shaw's reply that he only wished he had that much sense was later to be echoed by Bluntschli's similar remark to Sergius. The Stranger, who was eventually to be named Bluntschli, was patterned after Sidney Webb, Shaw's extremely close friend. For a Shavian character to be molded on Webb represented Shaw's ultimate compliment. Shaw described his friend as "the ablest man in England."19 He characterized his friend as "one of the most extraordinary and capable men

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alive." The dramatic contrast between Sergius and Bluntschli actually existed between Graham and Webb. While Graham was advocating revolution, Webb developed the doctrine of permeation. Shaw attested to Webb's influence on him. "Webb's brains, knowledge, and official experience," prompted Shaw to reveal, "that the difference between Shaw with (Webb) and Shaw by himself was enormous." The role he played in Shaw's intellectual life was mirrored by Bluntschli.

With these individuals as sources for the basic ideological clash within the play, the suggestion that Shaw hoped to point out the danger of violent revolution is qualified somewhat. The revolutionary personality was satirized in contrast with the dedicated professional. Shaw considered Webb a living exponent of the life force in action. With Webb as the model for his soldier, Shaw indicated that he felt there was a definite potential for evolutionary progress within the military life. Blind, idealistic fervor, on the other hand, often could inhibit the life force with its excessive passion. As Bluntschli advised Sergius on several occasions, the military is no place for his type of man.

The life force factor also figures in the choice of setting for Arms and the Man. Shaw's philosophical motives included advancing the principle of a civilization's role as a part of social evolution. He treated Britain's role in Egypt via this motif. The more advanced civilization need not have reached fulfillment, as was obviously the case with


Britain. It only needed to be evolved sufficiently to provide effective stimulation and atmosphere for evolution of the life force. Bluntschli, the republican democrat as Shaw terms him, creates just such an effect in his relationship to the Bulgarians. His arrival pervades the Petkoff house with the energy of the life force which he directly stimulates in several characters. Louka, the most perceptive of the characters evolved through Bluntschli, has been primed for his influence by limited previous exposure to this evolution through exposure to a more advanced stage. Nicola has been able to enhance her natural beauty by teaching her to look and act "like a fine Russian lady" (A & M, p.60). Her receptiveness to even this limited exposure to a more advanced culture can be ascertained in Bluntschli's remark that she is a "remarkable looking young woman" (A & M, p. 64.). Bluntschli had not reached a fulfilled stage, but he could sense potential and in the process of his own self-realization, he facilitated that of others who were not as highly evolved as he. The analogy between his role and Britain's is obvious.

As already noted, Shaw had carefully worked out the plot and characterization before worrying about names or geography. In choosing his locale for the play, he searched for a war which both satisfied his political allegory and complimented his choice of real characters as models for the primary conflict in ideals. Sidney Webb suggested the Servo-Bulgarian War of 1885, a conflict that had received considerable press coverage in England during the Gladstone era of Eastern involvement for the Empire. Shaw's original title was Alps and Balkans to emphasize the intervention motif. A friend suggested
Battlefields and Boudoirs, but Shaw declined this because it overemphasized the clash in idealism. After several readings and discussions, he chose Arms and the Man as a blend of the primary theme which emphasized the function of the individual in war, yet remained universal in tone.22 The fact that most of the critics failed to make the intended connections between his realistic world on stage and the real world angered Shaw. "Put a thing on the stage for them as it is in real life, and instead of receiving it with the blank wonder of plain ignorance, they reject it with scorn as an imposture," he complained.23

Part of Shaw's disappointment at the play's reception may have been his own fault. Shaw worked very hard at creating a realistic atmosphere for this comedy, but the production was too funny. Except for a few disgruntled souls who were offended by its satire, the play was taken very lightly. An angry Prince Edward, later Edward VII, stalked out on a performance, referring to the playwright as a madman. Some critics quibbled over minor details but most of them wrote the play off as an anti-romantic satire with light operatic overtones. Shaw had wanted laughter, but intelligent laughter. "To laugh without sympathy," he wrote, "is a serious abuse of a noble function."24 His problem was one of comic tone. The dialogue in the play was so humorous that the audience often laughed

22 Henderson, 1956, p. 426n.
inordinately. The actors took this as a cue and played their lines as "conventional farce comedy." Shaw's "feelings" were unable to surface in the sea of unsympathetic laughter.

Shaw had labored to create a realistic atmosphere for the play. In a long essay, "A Dramatic Realist to His Critics," Shaw detailed the considerable research he undertook. Point by point he cited the specific sources for nearly every aspect of the plot from "real life at first hand, or from authentic documents." If he felt such an extensive defense was necessary, Shaw probably realized he had failed to achieve his objectives.

His essay also contains the indication that Shaw was aware of the reason for this shortcoming. The play had attempted to attack false idealism with ridicule. By rendering Sergius as a ludicrous character, Shaw hoped to purge audiences of romantic illusions about war with laughter. Bluntschli's many hilarious lines were designed to be laughed with and not at, because Shaw saw in them universal truth. But his mock heroic comedy had the opposite effect. His audiences felt sympathy for Sergius and considered Bluntschli "a poltroon." Shaw felt compelled to explain that the play was "not burlesque, but legitimate comedy." He explained, as he had earlier in his letter to Archer, that he was not a humourous cynic as was

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27 Ibid., p. 34.
W. S. Gilbert, because unlike Gilbert he proposed concrete alternatives for the ideals which he ridiculed.

"The comedy is the comedy of the collision of the realities represented by the realistic playwright with the preconceptions of stageland," summarized Shaw.28 By using the conventions of romantic comedy, Shaw intended to heighten the comic impact for his message, exposing the fallaciousness of romantic conventions. But he was too effective in employing these conventions, and his critics and audiences did not make the distinction. The realistic elements Shaw had worked to create were misinterpreted as idealistic. Even his authorized biographer, Archibald Henderson, writes that, "Arms and the Man was not a play, but a light opera," and then goes to some length to compare Shaw with W. S. Gilbert, dismissing the play as fantasy written "to amuse the public."29 Because this misinterpretation has lingered, some contemporary critics hold the play in low regard in comparison with later works. Robert Brustein's The Theatre of Revolt in its chapter on Shaw refers to the play as a "potboiler." Eric Bentley and Martin Meisel go overboard in attempting to link the play with conventional drama of its period, the well-made play and pure romantic comedy. Shaw's effort to enhance the satire of romantic idealism by satirizing its vehicle resulted in overkill. Shaw intended the tone of light romantic comedy to purge his audiences with gentle laughter. Instead, the playbill of the

30 Ibid., p. 311.
first production quotes excerpts from reviews which ironically acclaim *Arms and the Man* as "quite as funny as Charley's Aunt," "we laughed wildly, hysterically," and "my sides are still aching with laughter."\(^{30}\) Shaw considered the play a failure because of this misinterpretation of his comic tone. At the turn of the century he remarked that he was "startled to find what flimsy, fantastic, unsafe stuff it is."\(^{31}\)

The political scene in the late 1890's and early 1900's was largely responsible for the change in Shaw. The British Empire was at the zenith of its imperial power. The efforts of reform activists such as Shaw and the Fabians had begun to make measureable gains. The London slums as well as those of other large cities were under official scrutiny, and the Factory Acts were made more comprehensive in an effort to deal with "sweated" labor. Sidney Webb was particularly effective in the field of expanding education. The Married Women's Property Act of 1893 represented a considerable step forward in the social evolution of the distaff set. Shaw's evolutionary philosophy continued its growth, and Shavian Socialism made continuing headway. "The Sanity of Art" and "The Problem Play – a Symposium," both written in 1895, are examples of Shaw's effort to establish a foundation for his dramatic philosophy through critical essays. In an effort to avoid the possibilities of misleading audiences as to his intentions again, he repeatedly reaffirmed the Shavian philosophy. In the "Preface to Plays

\(^{30}\) Ibid., p. 311.

\(^{31}\) Pearson, op. cit., p. 168.
Unpleasant" (1898), for example, he wrote, "Equality is the only possible permanent basis of social organization." But the outbreak of the Boer War in late 1899 confirmed for Shaw that his message on equality in military matters had indeed been misinterpreted by the audiences of *Arms and the Man*.

The situation in Africa had become more tense with each year of British occupation. There was limited conflict with the French and internal trouble with native elements throughout the early 1890's. A confrontation with the Boers who had a powerful ally in the German Emperor, however, represented a major military entanglement. When the trouble began Britain mobilized a squadron of warships to neutralize the possibility of intervention by foreign powers. But the Boers were undeterred, and with the official declaration of war, crushed local opposition. Britain quickly called up and dispatched fifty thousand troops to South Africa, but through mismanagement and military blundering, the war dragged on for over three years. Ultimate victory cost Britain over twenty thousand casualties. The war "shook the Empire to its foundations."32 Great Britain found she had not a single ally in Europe. Except for the steadfast support of her colonies, she was alone. The army performed pitifully, and a small republic of approximately fifty thousand people in population repulsed the might of the Empire. The Boer confrontation also forced realization of the threat posed by Germany's growing strength to the nation.

This resulted in a militaristic surge of spending to update and realign Britain's forces which drained funds previously earmarked for social reform. More ominously, it ushered in the era of international tension which would culminate in World War I.

As Arms and The Man would indicate, Shaw felt considerably concerned about the war. The progress of social reform had dulled the edge of revolutionary fervor, but the social plight of the average trooper was still largely unabated. The romantic illusions of war had also lingered. Despite the fact that the Boers quickly discredited the British troops already in South Africa, there was a confident feeling on the home front that the war would prove short-lived.

Shaw shared this optimism, and he was sympathetic to the war effort, despite the fact that most Fabians were pro-Boer. This pro-Boer sentiment was based on the idealistic notion that the underdog, smaller republic was bravely repelling the onslaught of the imperialistic warmonger. "I should like to do a pamphlet on the war," he declared, "only it will be over before I could find time." He felt that the Boer movement with its outdated theocracy under Druiger represented a return to the seventeenth century. This obviously would be detrimental to the evolution of the life force and Britain had an obligation to impose her more advanced civilization as she had in Egypt.

As Arms and the Man had indicated, Shaw was aware of war's potential for social evil, but he also was under the impression that in certain circumstances the end justified the means. In the 1900 elections he even went so far as to support an Imperialist candidate, which badly divided the Fabians.

33 Pearson, op. cit., p. 217.
While the war plodded into its eleventh month, Shaw completed putting his views of the conflict on paper in "Fabianism and the Empire." This book length essay contains the Boer War's confirmation of those "feelings" Shaw had tried to advance six years earlier with *Arms and the Man*. He proposed reforms for the army, "full civil rights," "a living wage," "adequate pension," and "salary on the civil scale." He suggested a program to provide military training for every male by including "drill, exercise, and technical training" as part of the work day routine under the Factory Acts. All of which was designed to build a great British Army of the Bluntschli type, rather that the Sergius type.

The romantic idealism he had unsuccessfully attacked in 1894 cost the British Army thousands of lives from 1899 to 1902. General Buller and his troops had marched off proudly and confidently only to be cut to pieces by the business-like and everpractical Boers. Lord Kitchener saved the campaign and became a national hero by employing tactics which had caused critics to declare Bluntschli a "cowardly and cynical mercenary" and "a poltroon who prefers chocolate to fighting."[^34] Ironically, among the gear issued to each soldier was a personal gift from Queen Victoria, an issue of chocolate candy.

The post-Boer War period from 1902 until 1914 represents Shaw's middle period. Philosophically he had come of age, and his plays during this era are generally his most profound. From *Man and Superman* (1903), *John Bull's Other Island* (1904), *Major Barbara* (1905), through *The Doctor's Dilemma* (1906),

[^34]: West, ed., 1958, p.40.
the progression is overwhelming. Shaw, with his apprenticeship over and the details of his philosophy carefully established in his prose, attacked every major issue of the day, from organized religion to the Irish question. In the plays before *Man and Superman* he had gradually shifted his target from particular false ideals about society and the individual's function in society to generalizations on humanity. With his maturation as a dramatic artist, Shaw's comedy mellowed in tone. The Boer War had sobered Shaw. It confirmed the fears which had prompted *Arms and the Man*. The war had been undertaken by a romantically idealistic general staff which marched off to Pretoria only to be cut to pieces for the effort. British tactics had to be completely revised before any military superiority over the Boers was achieved.

Shaw readily admitted he had little love for combat. "I am a thinker, not a fighter," he said. "When shooting begins I shall get under the bed."35 His research for *Arms and the Man* had provided him with considerable insight into the more grotesque realities of war. The privation of the troops appalled Shaw. Over thirteen thousand of the British casualties were due to disease or accidents, most of which he felt could have been avoided if the army had been administered more realistically.

Shaw wanted to incorporate his renewed consciousness of warfare in his drama, and did so in *Major Barbara*. But he had learned from the failure of the technique he had used in *Arms and the Man*. "The extent to which the method brought me into conflict with the martial imaginings of the critics is

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hardly to be conveyed by language," he wrote. Rather than risk another misinterpretation, he decided to incorporate the war theme into a larger whole. His "feelings" on the theme were expressed by serious characters so that his intentions would not be lost in comic dialogue. In *Arms and the Man* Shaw had satirized the false ideals in an effort to reduce them through ridicule. The comic tone of *Major Barbara* is more subtle. Satiric anti-romantic comedy is superceded by the high comedy of ideals. The intention is the same, advancement of the Shavian philosophy by discrediting opposing school of thought. The discrediting device is the same, intelligent, thought-provoking laughter. But the tone of the comedy, which is designed to evoke the laugh reaction, is different. *Major Barbara* contains humorous dialogue between the major characters but the humor operates on a higher plane because of the play's more serious tone. Shaw's "feelings" on war are expressed primarily through the more serious characters in the play, Cusins and Undershaft. Rather than contrasting a character imbued with the life force to one without it, the "feelings" are reflected by characters who have established a rapport. Thus, there is less danger of the comic tone degenerating into parody.

The play has several objectives, but in terms of the Shavian philosophy on war, it represents the culminating effort. In *Arms and the Man* the true function of the individual soldier is evolved and the Boer War serves as confirmation of this function. *Major Barbara* restates this function in light of this confirmation and advances the ultimate function of

war. The ability to wage war in its ultimate form will be the deterrent which eliminates war. Peace will only be available to those who can and will, if necessary, fight with maximum ability.

Barbara Undershaft represents the force which draws together the two spokesmen for the Shavian philosophy, her father and her soul mate. Both are introduced in the first act, and each comes to life in terms of interaction with her. She broaches the subject of religion to her father who then begins to unravel the morality of munitions making. "I am a manufacturer of mutilation, and murder," he says. "My morality—my religion—must have a place for cannons and torpedoes in it." Cusins's reply established the initial conflict. "One man's meat is another man's poison usually" (MB, p. 222). As the play moves into the second act, Barbara and her father, Andrew, are engaged in an effort to convert each other. Cusins is along as an interested party whose main concern has been revealed as Barbara rather than religion. Undershaft uses Barbara to once again start a discussion of his religion of "money and gunpowder," and Cusins is "surprised, but interested," for he is a "collector of religions" (MB, pp. 246-47). At this point Undershaft presents the essence of the play's message. Cusins quips that "you will have to choose between your religion and Barbara," to which Undershaft replies, "So will you, my friend" (MB, p. 247). Once Barbara is converted he will shift the spotlight to Cusins. Andrew prepares his

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Bernard Shaw, John Bull's Other Island and Major Barbara (New York: Brentano's, 1916) pp. 221-222. As with Arms and the Man, a simplified notation will be used and the abbreviation MB indicates this edition for references to the text of the play.
potential converts by destroying the ideals which serve them as philosophical bases, Barbara's with a check, Cusin's with bottles of burgundy. He then transports them together to his stronghold to administer the coup de grâce. Cusin's is offered the Undershawf inheritance, but he is apprehensive. "There is an abyss of moral horror," he warns, "Between me and your accursed aerial battleships" (MB, p. 292). But Undershawf uses the trump, when Cusins uses his last defense, hatred of war, Andrew extends the ultimate challenge. "Dare you make war on war?" he asks (MB, p. 305). Cusins capitulates. "Barbara," he says, "I am going to accept this offer" (MB, p. 306). His answer to Undershawf completes his conversion. "I dare, I must, I will," he replies (MB, p. 308). Barbara joins him in his decision to face the challenge without "turning our backs on life" (MB, p. 309). Cusins effectively delivers the finally completed message of the play, in his rhetorical question, "the way of life lies through the factory of death?" to which Barbara simply answers, "Yes" (MB, p. 310).

Barbara reconciles the agent of peace with the agent of war, for in Shavian terms, only through this union can the life force continue to evolve. Her father, who had developed the ultimate weapon for peace in his munitions complex, seeks fulfillment through her. As the developer of the power of weaponry, he cannot utilize it for peaceful progress, but must continue producing destruction. His constant quest is more destructive power, and he progresses from dummy soldiers to "the real thing" (MB, p. 287). It is through Barbara that he encounters his alter-ego, the agent of peace, Cusins.
Cusins can fulfill Undershaft by harnessing his power for peace. "I want a democratic power strong enough to force the intellectual oligarchy to use its genius for the general good or else perish," he declares (MB, p. 307). Barbara is his introduction to the source of such power and through her he achieves fulfillment.

Barbara is fulfilled by both Cusins and her father. The father strips away her false illusions and Cusins becomes her partner in self-realization of the true purpose in life. Barbara's religious dilemma, although an issue, is not the core of the matter. The issue is the self-realization of reality, which allows evolutionary advancement. "Don't make too much of you little tinpot tragedy," Undershaft says. "It doesn't fit the facts. Well scrap it." And, "If your old religion broke down yesterday, get a newer and better one tomorrow" (MB, p. 297).

In terms of warfare, the suggested message is clear. Only superior power in the implements of war and the skillful ability and courage to use them when necessary can insure the evolution of the life force. Undershaft reveals that reason alone is not sufficient for progress. "Don't preach at them; don't reason with them, kill them," he declares (MB, p. 300). Cusins understands he can never again merely pass the revolver to another for he must take it up himself and make it work for peace.

This was Shaw's post-Boer War message. In "Fabianism and the Empire" he laid the groundwork when he wrote, "It is to be hoped that the Powers will soon have the good sense to take
concerted steps to use their armaments as an international police to suppress war." He expressed a serious and sober "feeling", and he advanced it in a serious manner. *Major Barbara* realizes this feeling in its comedy, which is comedy of the highest form. The laughter produced accomplishes the self-realization of the truth which can enable an individual to effectively deal with tragedy.

This serious comic tone was also realized because of the political situation in which the play developed. "The end of the century saw the major questions of social reform being subordinated to the problems of empire."\(^{38}\) Important measures such as unemployment compensation had to be shelved because of the heavy expense of the war. Shaw attempted to point out the importance of economic factors in the arms race. For Undershaft the seven deadly sins are all variations on the poverty theme. This is echoed in Shavian socialism. For Shaw as well as for Undershaft, poverty was the "worse of crimes" (*MB*, p. 298). It could only be dealt with once there was enough military power to insure peace in which the life force could operate to complete social reform.

Shaw's projected title supports this since he planned to call the play "Andrew Undershaft's Profession." It was to be a continuation of the pattern of treating social injustice in terms of occupation. *Cashel Byron's Profession*, a novel about prizefighting, and *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, a play about prostitution, are earlier examples. Shaw first conceived of the play as a pamphlet on the Salvation Army, but the religious theme became secondary to the war theme as the drama evolved.

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\(^{38}\)Pelling, *op. cit.*, p. 27.
Since Barbara is the agent of the life force who links together the principle characters, Shaw named the play for her.

Once again his choice of models for his characters is revealing. Early in the formative stages of the play, Shaw wrote Gilbert Murray and secured permission to use him as a basis for the professor of Greek. Murray, a classical scholar and linguist, was named Adolphus Cusins in the play. The name was based on Gustavus Adolphus, a Swedish king, who became a masterful warrior after an early career as a linguist.39 Murray gave Shaw several suggestions for the play including a model for Undershaft. In a letter he gave Shaw the idea of using a screw maker from Birmingham who wore glasses and carried an orchid. This characterization has been identified as Joseph Chamberlain.40 Chamberlain was the Colonial Secretary whose policies had precipitated the Boer War and as such, his conversion of Murray, who was strongly pro-Boer, strengthened the war theme. Alfred Nobel has been suggested as Undershaft, but he had been dead several years at the time the play was first produced. Letters which Murray and Shaw exchanged indicate that considerable effort was expended in disguising the actor who play Undershaft.41 This would hardly have been necessary in Nobel's case. Cusins as Murray represented

39 Crompton, op. cit., p. 241n.


41 Ibid., pp. 393-395.
the anti-war intellectual who was converted by the imperialist warmonger, Undershaft, who was based on Chamberlain.

During the years from 1902 to 1905, the nation was caught in the grip of the arms race which Shaw portrays in *Major Barbara*. The German Empire loomed as a major international threat to Britain, both during and after the Boer War. In an effort to compensate for the display of ineptitude by the Army in South Africa, the country turned to its Navy. An all out drive to build a fleet of battleships in the Dreadnaught class was undertaken in hopes that a superior sea power would prove an effective deterrent to aggression. Undershaft's jubilation at the success of his "aerial battleships" mirrors the public's clamor for a strong national defense. Shaw's philosophy on war contained as mixture of popular sentiment. He wanted social reform and knew that economics was the key to social problems, but he also felt economic sacrifices were necessary to maintain adequate national defense. Without a strong military force, the society which Shaw hoped to reform was in danger.

*Major Barbara* was a tremendous financial success. Playing to capacity crowds for six weeks, it enjoyed the longest continuous run recorded for the Court Theatre. In the general election which was held during the last week of performances, twenty-seven new seats went to reform candidates whom Shaw had supported. Thus, as a vehicle for propaganda, *Major Barbara* was also measureably successful. Aside from Shaw's disgust with Louis Calvert, whom he had literally begged to play Andrew Undershaft, the first production created no complications. He had written the part with Calvert in mind because of his resemblance to Chamberlain, but Calvert had trouble learning
the vast number of lines the part required. After the first performance Shaw wrote him, "You are the most infamous amateur that ever disgraced the boards," he fumed. What spurred this reaction was Calvert's "taking it as if Undershaft were an old uncle in a farce." The fear of repeating the degradation of Arms and the Man haunted Shaw. He wrote to Calvert warning him that "I have taken a box for Friday and had a hundredweight of cabbages, dead cats, eggs, and gingerbeer bottles stacked in it. Every word you fluff, every speech you unact, I will shy something at you... the last act MUST (Shaw's emphasis) be saved." 42

Shaw presented the summation for his feelings on war in the central theme of the play. "The need for preliminary good physical envirgment before anything could be done to raise the intelligence and morality of the average sensual man," was Shaw's message. 43 It was delivered via different themes in different plays to establish his criteria for the "good enviroment", and it was delivered in different comic tones as he evolved it. But in terms of war's social function, Shaw clearly indicated that martial arts possessed a definite positive value in obtaining the atmosphere conducive to the life force's evolution in the "average sensual man."

But the tide of rapid disintegration in the political situation of Europe could not be stemmed. The first World War and its attendant horrors ranged across Europe less than ten years after Shaw delivered the message of Major Barbara. The war rebuffed the Shavian philosophy and impeded Shavian Socialism.

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43 Henderson, 1956, p. 584.
By the time of the armistice Shaw was sixty years old and had been converted to cynicism. "To appreciate the moral shock," Shaw collected his thoughts on the war in a three hundred and seventy page, folio sized volume which was entitled *What I Really Wrote About the War*. His summary of the book's conclusions, "only under fire will Englishmen listen to reason or think of anything outside their immediate profits and pleasure," quoted an indication of his post-war bitterness.

This bitterness had begun to surface in the *Playlets of the War*, four vitriolic satires which were intended to lay bare the frustrations of war's massive inefficiency and waste. O'Flaherty, *V. O.* (1915), in which an aged father assumes his son is fighting against England as a good Irish boy would and should, and *Augustus Does His Bit* (1916), which exposes the incompetence of the officers' corps through a mock court martial, are both examples of Shaw slashing out at the military establishment. In the *Inca of Jerusalem* (1916), Kaiser Wilhelm is satirized as a man who can not maintain control of his empire while *Annajanska, the Bolshevist Empress* (1917) commiserates with the Russian Revolution. With *Heartbreak House* (1913 through 1919), Shaw's philosophy of evolution is bombed into oblivion. The play is pervaded with futility, frustration, and aimless drifting. Rather than expanding a philosophical exemplum on the life force, Shaw kills the type of character he had previously evolved. Both the "practical businessmen" are destroyed by a bomb which lands on them. A bomb which is ironically dropped by an Undershaw creation, the aerial battleship. This weapon, which had once been the symbol of Shaw's ideal of peace through armed might, has been transformed into the agent of destruction of the potential of the

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life force.  

Shaw's feelings on war had come a full cycle. The early attempt to evolve a realistic and practical model for evolutionary development had failed because its comic tone was too light. When the Boer War reinforced Shaw's original outlook on the viability of war as an adjunct of the life force, he tried again in a more serious tone of comedy. He felt this effort was a success and that it contained his final statement on the function of war in terms of the life force. But World War I shattered these ideas. In *Heartbreak House* the comic tone is painfully intense and high pitched. In Chekhov's classic of disillusionment, *The Cherry Orchard*, which Shaw credited as an important source of inspiration for his play, there is a sound "like a breaking harp string, dying away mournfully." With *Heartbreak House* the Shavian comic tone took on a similar wistfulness. The trees falling under the axe in Shaw's orchard suggest the evolutionary ideals he had nurtured and developed for so long, victims of forces with which his Shavian Socialism could not cope.

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