Theme:

One of Shaw's aims in this play is to debunk the romantic heroics of war; he wanted to present a realistic account of war and to remove all pretensions of nobility from war. It is not, however, an anti-war play; instead, it is a satire on those attitudes which would glorify war. To create this satire, Shaw chose as his title the opening lines of Virgil's Aeneid, the Roman epic which glorifies war and the heroic feats of man in war, and which begins, "Of arms and the man I sing. . . ."

When the play opens, we hear about the glorious exploits which were performed by Major Sergius Saranoff during his daring and magnificent cavalry raid, an event that turned the war against the Serbs toward victory for the Bulgarians. He thus becomes Raina Petkoff's ideal hero; yet the more that we learn about this raid, the more we realize that it was a futile, ridiculous gesture, one that bordered on an utter suicidal escapade.

In contrast, Captain Bluntschli's actions in Raina's bedroom strike us, at first, as being the actions of a coward. (Bluntschli is a Swiss, a professional soldier fighting for the Serbs.) He climbs up a water pipe and onto a balcony to escape capture, he threatens a defenseless woman with his gun, he allows her to hide him behind the curtains, and then he reveals that he carries chocolates rather than cartridges in his cartridge box because chocolates are more practical on the battlefield. Yet, as the play progresses, Bluntschli's unheroic actions become reasonable when we see that he survives, whereas had the war continued, Sergius' absurd heroic exploits would soon have left him dead.

Throughout the play, Shaw arranged his material so as to satirize the glories associated with war and to ultimately suggest that aristocratic pretensions have no place in today's wars, which are won by using business-like efficiency, such as the practical matters of which Bluntschli is a master. For example, Bluntschli is able to deal with the business of dispensing an army to another town with ease, while this was a feat that left the aristocrats (Majors Petkoff and Saranoff) completely baffled. This early play by Shaw, therefore, cuts through the noble ideals of war and the "higher love" that Raina and Sergius claim to share; Arms and the Man presents a world where the practical man who lives with no illusions and no poetic views about either love or war is shown to be the superior creature.