

Critical Thinking Through Teaching World Modern Literature

Rregjina Gokaj

University "Aleksandër Moisiu", Durrës, Albania

E-mail: gokajrregji@yahoo.it

Doi: 10.5901/jesr.2012.02.01.233

Abstract In this article I will attempt to evoke the hidden effect literature has upon students' thought in educational studies. Teaching World Literature to college students requires not only analytical reading and critical thinking, but also the faculty of finding the right clues to this analysis. In teaching World Modern Literature, drama has not still gained its deserved space in college literature courses in Albania. Thus, I found it very appropriate to pick up two major figures of this genre. The late of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth are marked with a different flourishing of the literature in itself. New thoughts and ideas made their way through the works of very famous writers, two of which I am intending to analyse in this article. The founder of the modern drama, the outstanding Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen and his Irish successor, the Noble Prize winner, George Bernard Shaw are the focus of my study in the analysis of two plays: *Rosmersholm* of Ibsen and *Arms and the Man* of Shaw. These two representatives of the late 19th and early 20th century literature period have treated in their plays the most peculiar social problems and have revolutionarized the human thought away of the drama's Romantic hero.

Keywords: drama analysis, symbols, ambitions, aspirations.

1. Introduction

Bernard Shaw wrote *Arms and the Man* in 1894, eight years after Ibsen's *Rosmersholm* in 1886. Shaw's plays were written during the Victorian period of literature, common elements of which were humor and comic fiction. The theatre of this period, at its beginnings was also characterized by melodrama and artificial plots. Shaw was acquainted with these elements and made vast usage of humor and satire with the scope of educating the audience to lose ties with sentimentalism. Thus he was experimenting a way of criticism through a deep social analysis. Bernard Shaw made also use of his satire in attempt to brighten the minds of the audiences about the social problems that really existed in that period. The 'well-made play' was established during the Victorian period intended for a threefold statement of important facts in the play: first, for the intelligent and attentive; second, for the intelligent and inattentive; third, for the unintelligent and inattentive. (Kadija, 2001; 62) A new area for the realistic drama had previously shown itself through the plays of Ibsen, a major voice of Norwegian drama of whom Shaw was greatly influenced from in modeling his plays after the individualism and the moral issues that he found in Ibsen's plays. The realistic drama had the characteristics of the modern one in bringing a new spirit, in being particularly strong in realism, in dealing with the paradoxes of idealisms versus realisms of thoughts, ideas and attitudes. Ibsen also had the conviction that his aiming in the real concerns of the people and his portraying of characters in different plays could attack the hypocrisy of the social norms. So, Ibsen was writing real 'problem plays' at the time when Shaw started his career as a playwright. Although Shaw rejects the fact that the readers have vastly found in his plays the doctrines of Ibsen and Nietzsche, it is no doubt sure that both thinkers have greatly impressed Shaw. The unreal ideals that men have erected to govern their conduct, the principle of marriage, of democracy or religion which men blindly uphold, yet in secret evade are found in Ibsen's plays. Yet Shaw ridicules our romantic misconceptions of the hero of warfare, of love and of marriage with a liking for caricature quite foreign for Ibsen. (Chandler, 1914; 400-401)

2. Reflecting the two Dramas

In this article I will attempt to bring about some contrasts from the analysis of their two dramas: *'Rosmersholm'* of Ibsen and *Arms and the Man* of Shaw. In the first consideration of these two dramas we can hardly notice any ties. The distinctions are in the layout, in their structure, in the depiction of the characters, in the subtypes of drama itself because *'Rosmersholm'* is a tragedy and *'Arms and the Man'* is a comedy.

In *Rosmersholm* we have a tragedy with real people as victims and a moral tragedy with the death of the idealism in their consciousness. But another tragedy had previously occurred before the curtain rises. The play opens in the house of John Rosmer, one year after the suicide of his wife, Beata. There also lives Rebecca, a friend of Beata, since she was alive. It is weird enough to find that Mr. Rosmer still lives in the same house with a friend of his wife and believes that their friendship is genuine and pure. In fact it is only him who thinks so, because neither his friends nor even Rebecca believes it. Mr. Rosmer is a respectable person in the community where he lives; he is distinguished for setting forward the values and the traditions of his family; his way of living is an example to the others around. He got enrolled in the church affairs becoming a pastor and adhered to the ideals of the church, fact that helped him in his reputation in the community.

Considering *'Arms and the Man'*, it opens in a very rich Bulgarian home, the Petkoffs, where the daughter and the wife of Major Petkoff are delighted for the glory of the Bulgarian army against the Serbian one. The two women pretend to be the centre of emancipation, education and culture in town, preserving the traditions and the conventions as well as leading the lifestyle of the high social class families in Bulgaria. This counts nothing or only just a bit to a Serbian soldier who takes refuge in their house. In fact he is not even a Serbian, but a Swiss one, who ran away from his father's business in Switzerland in order to join the army. Raina, the protagonist of the play, accepts to save this soldier from the Bulgarian army, even though it costs her taking the risk of spotting the name of the family by hiding him in her own bedroom. This shows her bravery and soft-heartedness, but also her emancipated manners in dealing with unexpected events. Raina is a young girl, raised up with a lot of conventions and ideals; she is a romantic dreamer about love and war. In Raina's conversations with Captain Bluntschli (the Swiss soldier) we are faced with the satirical part of the play on the absurdity of glorifying something terrible as war is in itself. He explains Raina the two types of soldiers: *'You can always tell an old soldier by the inside of his holsters and cartridge boxes. The young ones carry pistols and cartridges; the old ones, grub.'* (*'Arms and the Man'*, Act I) There is no tragedy here, but in fact it is an odd element added to this play which is against the stream of the ideals of war: the chocolate cream soldier. She is too much convinced in her illusions and the idealism of war and patriotism, until Bluntschli pops up through her window which is a figurative means of opening her mind to reality.

2.1. Rebecca's Ambitions Versus Louka's Ambitions

There is Rebecca, on the other hand, that opens the window towards a hidden reality in *Rosmersholm*. She is not as genuine as Raina, because she knows what she wants and how to get it. Rebecca is an intruder in Mr. Rosmer's house, first as a close friend of Beata, then as a compassionate friend of John, helping him in over passing the loss of his beloved wife. The intentions of Rebecca are well hidden at first, and then Beata suspects the truth and makes herself apart to leave way to her husband in order to fulfill his ideals without spotting his reputation and the honorable name of the family. What forces Beata to her final step of committing suicide is not only the love for her husband, but another fact she comes to know. She is childless and Rebecca exploits this misfortune of hers driving Beata to deeper mental disorders. This way Rebecca makes use of Beata's love for Mr. Rosmer, her insanity, her infertility, her ties to moral conventions to pave her free way in reaching her ultimate goal: winning Mr. Rosmer. She also exerts the genuine behavior of Mr. Rosmer who treats her as he has always done, since the very beginning she lay foot in that house. He has

always considered her presence as a needed friend who he could trust his thoughts and ideas; who could share his friends' misunderstandings about his new political adherence. He could not have such conversations with Beata, so this need for Rebecca became indispensable for him after Beata's death. Another stunt is Rebecca's ability to act the naive role until the proper moment knocks at her door of smooth and uncomplaining expectation. She is smart enough to act the way Mr. Rosmer wants her to behave, until the proper moment will come. This is made quite clear in the play after the quarrel of Mr. Rosmer with Kroll, his ex brother-in-law. Mr. Rosmer turns hopefully to receive Rebecca's support which she offers him deliberately:

Rosmer. That does not matter, Rebecca. We shall be able to go through with it, for all that—we two trusty friends—you and I.

Rebecca. What do you suppose he meant just now when he said he was ashamed of himself?

Rosmer. My dear girl, don't bother your head about that. He didn't even believe what he meant, himself. But I will go and see him tomorrow. Goodnight!

Rebecca. Are you going up so early to-night—after this?

Rosmer. As early to-night as I usually do. I feel such a sense of relief now that it is over. You see, my dear Rebecca, I am perfectly calm—so you take it calmly, too. Goodnight.

Rebecca. Good-night, dear friend—and sleep well! (Rosmersholm, Act I)

Her behaviour reminds me of Raina's servant, Louka in 'Arms and the Man', whose motto 'carpe diem' initiates since she first comes to know about the refuge of Captain Bluntschli in Raina's bedchamber. This fact makes her dream of her real intentions in winning over Raina and not just being a sly lover for Sergius, Raina's betrothed. Louka is intelligent enough to foresee a possible love relation between Raina and Captain Bluntschli because she knows her mistress Raina is a romantic dreamer and Sergius is someone that she is not truly in love with, but she was just playing a role to meet social expectations but not her sentimental and emotional needs. In fact, Louka is a very proud servant, who fails to tolerate any discrimination to her because of social position. Her aspirations go beyond that, reminding to Sergius that she cannot be offended because of being a servant.

SERGIUS. That shews that you are an abominable little clod of common clay, with the soul of a servant. [He lets her go as if she were an unclean thing, and turns away, dusting his hands of her, to the bench by the wall, where he sits down with averted head, meditating gloomily].

LOUKA [whimpering angrily with her hands up her sleeves, feeling her bruised arms] You know how to hurt with your tongue as well as with your hands. But I dont care, now Ive found out that whatever clay I'm made of, youre made of the same. (B. Shaw, "Arms and the Man" Act Two)

With this determination Louka shows to have a high self esteem and requires respect from the others, no matter of her lower position. She also reminds to Raina, as well as to her mother, Catherine, that being a servant does not mean to allow humiliations of any kind, thus to a further bang for equality, Louka addresses Raina by her first name.

CATHERINE [threateningly] Louka: you have been telling stories.

LOUKA. I have done Raina no harm.

CATHERINE [haughtily] Raina! [Raina, equally indignant at the liberty.]

LOUKA. I have a right to call her Raina: she calls me Louka. (B. Shaw, "Arms and the Man" Act III)

Her ambitions are made clear further in the play when she tempts to persuade Sergius about his feelings and

about Raina's feelings. She really flirts with Sergius, which is very ignoble for both of them playing this behind Raina's back, but she is not content just with this. She wants to go beyond this; she wants to get married to Sergius because she really thinks he is no better person than she is. Louka debates with Sergius upon essential things, such as war, people and bravery which make him find many things in common with her. Sergius pretends being brave but Louka tells him that bravery is not shown only in the battlefield but also in decisions people take for their lives. She also reminds him that for them what matters is the social position, not the real feelings and emotions for people and for themselves; for them lack of freedom is something that can be tolerated in order to maintain the same social position. These arguments provoke Sergius's thoughts so far that make him admit that Louka is the woman he always wanted.

SERGIUS [releasing her in despair] *Damnation! Oh, damnation! Mockery! mockery everywhere: everything I think is mocked by everything I do. [He strikes himself frantically on the breast]. Coward! liar! fool! Shall I kill myself like a man, or live and pretend to laugh at myself? [She again turns to go]. Louka! [She stops near the door]. Remember: you belong to me.*

LOUKA [quietly] *What does that mean--an insult?*

SERGIUS [commandingly] *It means that you love me, and that I have had you here in my arms, and will perhaps have you there again. Whether that is an insult I neither know nor care: take it as you please. But [vehemently] I will not be a coward and a trifle. If I choose to love you, I dare marry you, in spite of all Bulgaria. If these hands ever touch you again, they shall touch my affianced bride. (B. Shaw, "Arms and the Man" Act III)*

Sergius honourably surpasses here his period of despair in which he is bewildered in the futility of life when the ideals on which he has laid the standards of his attitudes can't manage to hold up when exposed to reality. Thus he shows his courage in breaking the romanticized and idealized image of himself and accepts the reality for what he really is.

2.2. Mr. Rosmer Versus Sergius

The courage to break the social conventions does not touch Mr. Rosmer, however. First, he is astonished to know that Rebecca is in love with him; second he is astonished to realize that he is in love with her; third he is surprised to know that he might have caused Beata's death by his friendly behavior with Rebecca. In fact, he was convinced up to that moment of her mental illness, even though everybody else was thinking of a casual abandonment. Mr. Rosmer did never leave her apart intentionally; he just thought inappropriate her participation in certain conversations he has with Rebecca as a free thinker. So close they have become in thoughts and feelings with the passing of the time that Mr. Rosmer disregardingly addresses to Beata with 'her' and to himself and Rebecca with 'us'. The same is to be said about Rebecca but that is a way to express her intentions but also to hide them behind Mr. Rosmer's words.

Rebecca. Why have you never once been near us during the whole of your holidays?

Kroll. Oh, it doesn't do to be importunate, you know.

Rebecca. If you only knew how we have missed you.

Rosmer. It was a very kind thought on your part. You are always so considerate. But it was altogether unnecessary to keep away from us on that account. ... I can assure you it is not in the least painful for me to think about Beata. We talk about her every day. She seems to us to have a part in the house still.

Kroll. Does she really?

Rebecca (lighting the lamp). Yes, it is really quite true.

Rosmer. She really does. We both think so affectionately of her. And both Rebecca—both Miss West and I know in our hearts that we did all that lay in our power for the poor afflicted creature. We have nothing to reproach ourselves with.

That is why I feel there is something sweet and peaceful in the way we can think of Beata now. (*Rosmersholm, Act I*)

He doesn't even notice this consideration but it won't last long until Beata's brother, Mr. Kroll, alerts him on Rebecca's vile intentions about Rosmersholm.

2.3. *Dilemmas Resolved and Unresolved: Mr. Rosmer and Major Petkoff*

This is not the only difficulty that Mr. Rosmer comes across throughout the play. He was originally a parson of the church at Rosmersholm, but later he changed his political views and wanted to join the Liberation Party. This abrupt change makes Kroll believe that Mr. Rosmer is a traitor and that he has betrayed his ruling class roots. This becomes Mr. Rosmer's major effort, which is to convince his friend of the opposite. He is neither a traitor, nor an apostate but as he himself admits to Kroll, '*... it certainly seems to me that of late years individual thought has become somewhat more independent.*' (*Rosmersholm, Act I*) tells that he is likely to join the other part. The individualist standpoints of Mr. Rosmer as a freethinker seem to break all the conservative traditions of his family, so he keeps on holding that he wants to heal social problems with his emancipated ideas. Mr. Rosmer is that type of an idealist who thinks that he has found the key to emancipation: helping people to become noble by purifying their souls. He is not practical at all, comparing him with Major Petkoff in '*Arms and the Man*'. The contrast between these two main characters is the idealism versus the realism. The mission of Major Petkoff is to organize the army to win the war against the Serbians, which is a very courageous task to accomplish. This urges high motivation, bravery and strategy as well and Major Petkoff lacks none of them. Nonetheless, he does not idealize war as the sublime manner to reach the victory and regain the peace over the country. He agrees with Sergius saying that, "*Soldiering, my dear madam, is the coward's art of attacking mercilessly when you are strong, and keeping out of harm's way when you are weak.*" (*Arms and the Man, Act II*)

Both Mr. Rosmer and Major Petkoff have a task toward society, but its accomplishment does not go through the same path. Major Petkoff is more practical and he is well acquainted with the costs of the war, both economically and in human resources; so he is happy to having reached in signing the peace treaty although it may delude some people like Catherine, his wife, who were expecting a glorious victory over the defeated enemy. So, Major Petkoff meets the needs of the reality and leaves apart the romanticism and the idealism of war and victory. This means used by Shaw makes us think that the playwright does not turn down the values of romance and heroism, but he gives to his characters another dimension in redefining these values through the realistic point of view. On the other hand, the facing character of Rosmersholm, that is Mr. Rosmer, tackles some problems in dealing with reality and the facts that real life offers to him. First he is faced with two different but very important events within a short period time: his wife's death and his disengagement from the church. In his efforts to overpass the deep loss, he is leaned to a closer relationship with Rebecca which later results in the turn of his political views and emotional attitudes. In the due course of the actions occur the transformation of his expostulation (disengagement from the church) and the revelation of his most inner feelings (his love to Rebecca). The transformation of his soul goes further in finding out that his behaviour has been the cause of his wife's suicide. He feels deeply guilty for the loss and can't make a way out but to propose marriage to Rebecca. His proposal is turned down by her, because she has a catharsis ultimately in accepting herself as the real cause of Beata's suicide.

Mr. Rosmer goes blind in the light of such shining truths and completely loses the logic by asking

Rebecca to commit suicide in order to prove her devotion to him. This explains his incapacity of handling the situation and finding a worthier solution. His idealisms meet the vanity of realities: he can't purify the souls of the people thus he quits his mission impossible; and he also can't marry Rebecca thus he gives farewell to the world burying his love and ideals in his consciousness. They both failed to win over the traditional conventions so their ideals and ambitions remained subdued in their minds and souls forever. This marks a tragic solution to the problem in *Rosmersholm* as a play which is contrasted with the comic and happy ending way out given in *Arms and the Man*.

2.4. *Odd Elements and Symbols*

The layout of both dramas is more or less linear, but in *Rosmersholm* the technique of the retrospective and flashback plays a substantial part in the development of the play. While in *Arms and the Man* the events follow a smooth stream towards unexpectedness and surprise, where the situation turns topsy-turvy and everybody gets what it is best and most valuable for them. Martin Meisel states that it was 'in writing *Arms and the Man* Shaw found that melodrama was not simply a form to be ridiculed, but one to be converted and saved.' (Miesel, 1963: 186)

The small number of characters is a common element in both plays. In *Arms and the Man* we have seven characters in total, but each of them different from the other, which makes the tabloid of peculiar personae vivid and admirable. In *Rosmersholm* we also have seven characters, but the particular thing is that in this play one of these seven characters is lifeless, (Beata) but we come to know her through the other characters in the drama. It is important to notice the presence of Beata since the very beginning of the play until the end of it. That is why I consider her one of the characters taking part in the play: although she is defunct, she is enwrapped by the development of the plot in the play, her words and thoughts become voiced through the mouth of Mr. Rosmer, Rebecca and Mr. Kroll. *Rosmersholm* as a drama is haunted by Beata's ghost not even in affecting the behaviour of Mr. Rosmer or Rebecca but also in affecting their minds and illusions. Her symbol of presence in the play is the white horse. It is mentioned since the beginning of the play as a warning to the audience that something ominous might occur. Rebecca is concerned about the presence of the white horse in *Rosmersholm* and what it represents, but she wants to hide her disquietude pretending her disbelief in superstitions.

*Rebecca. Let us hope he doesn't meet the White Horse.
Because I am afraid it will not be long before we hear
something of the family ghost.*

*Mrs. Helseth. God forgive you, miss—don't talk of such
a dreadful thing!*

Rebecca. Oh, come, come!

*Mrs. Helseth (lowering her voice). Do you really think,
miss, that some one here is to go soon?*

*Rebecca. Not a bit of it. But there are so many sorts of
white horses in this world, Mrs. Helseth—Well, good-night.
I shall go to my room now. (Rosmersholm, Act I)*

She can manage to hide that trouble with the housemaid but she can never hide it with herself or with Mr. Rosmer. The white horse accompanies her thoughts all the play. As I previously mentioned above, she first does not want to believe these superstitions and rejects the presence of the white horse, then she has to convince Mr. Rosmer that the white horse does not exist, but her fear makes her at last accept that if it is not white horse, it is surely something sinister that it stands for. That is not her fear of death but the qualm of the consciousness for the harm and the injustice she did to poor Beata and to Mr. Rosmer himself. What is more,

Rebecca now understands that she has failed in almost everything, and even her last effort to give back the dignity and the innocence to Mr. Rosmer does not win her heartsease. So there is only one way out, to convince Mr. Rosmer for her loyalty to him by throwing herself in the millrace, the same place where Beata committed suicide. We see here that Rebecca has become another Beate, hence another encumbrance to Rosmer, and she accepts death as Beata did, to free him. (Marker & Innes, 1998: 26 – article by Marvin Carlson)

The symbol of the chocolate cream soldier used in *Arms and the Man* differs in all means from the white horse symbol. The chocolate cartridges show the sweetness of life and the worthless efforts of fighting when you surely have other opportunities. This symbol is embodied in Captain Bluntschli since the very opening of the play. The Swiss captain is a very practical person; a level headed one who knows the real values of life. In fact this odd event for a soldier to take refuge at the house of the enemy and being saved by a young girl makes us think of Captain Bluntschli as an adventurous dreamer seeking for romance during the war. In fact it has some notes of romanticism in the element of the balcony or the hiding behind the curtains of Raina's room when the Russian officer seeks for him. On the contrary, he is neither a dreamer nor a romantic soldier, but an open minded man who sweeps away Raina's illusions about love and war. Since the very beginning it is portrayed the prosaic viewpoint of Bluntschli, which moves Raina's role from romance to reality, but it is by no means uncrossed by contradictory currents. She undergoes an education under the influence of Bluntschli, but it involves an awakening of her latent impulses and insights more than an alteration of her basic disposition. (Berst, 1966: 197-211) By this awakening she feels more independent and more courageous to admit her emotional lean to Captain Bluntschli, and also more convinced to find a good excuse to break up with Sergius, to say to Catherine, her mother, that "*I dont care whether he finds out about the chocolate cream soldier or not. I half hope he may.*"

Even though these chocolates materially disappear in the due course of events, they are recalled by Raina now and then for having left their sweet taste for thoughtful living in Raina's mind. Once she tasted the chocolates, Raina started to see the differences between romanticism and realism. Due to these differences she feels free to make her right choice and to drop Sergius for Captain Bluntschli, her beloved chocolate cream soldier. In *Arms and the Man* the chocolate symbol comes back in the last act and wins over the bitterness of useless endeavour to hold tight to traditional conventions and to impede the free thought and choice to lead one's life.

References

- Carlson, Marvin. 1998 *Patterns of Structure and Character in Ibsen's Rosmersholm* in: *Modernism in European Drama: Ibsen, Strindberg, Pirandello, Becket. Essays from Modern Drama*. Frederick J. Marker & Christopher Innes. University of Toronto Press.
- Chandler, Frank Wadleigh. 1914. *Aspects of Modern Drama*. New York: Macmillan.
- Charles A. Berst, June 1966. "Romance and Reality in *Arms and the Man*," in *Modern Language Quarterly*, Vol. XXVII, No. 2, pp. 197–211.
- Ibsen, Henrik. *Rosmersholm A play in four acts by Henrik Ibsen* Translated by R. Farquharson Sharp, A Penn State Electronic Classics Series Publication, 2001
- Kadija, Refik. 2001. *Modernism and Postmodernism in English Literature*. Tiranë: AlbDesign.
- Meisel, Martin. 1963. *Shaw and the Nineteenth Century Theatre*. Princeton, N. J: Princeton University Press.
- Shaw, George Bernard. 1950. *Arms and the Man*. UK: Penguin Books.

