

Question:

Comment briefly on Sergius' character as revealed through Act I and Act II.

Answer:

The theme of romance versus realism is chiefly embodied in the characters of Raina and Sergius. Major Sergius Saranoff is therefore one of the instruments in Shaw's message. Like Raina, Sergius too has adopted a fashionable pose, borrowed from Western European ideals of the Romantic hero.

Sergius plays his part well. He is described as “*a tall romantically handsome man*”, with a “*lofty bearing*”, “*flashing eyes and lovely moustache*”. At the beginning of the play, he is described as a war hero, who won a great military victory. The enthusiasm with which Raina and her mother greet the news of his victory reflects the way a young lady of the time was expected to react to such an act of heroism. This sounds superbly dashing, virile and romantic. Sergius talks in a dignified, consciously literary style, like the heroes of romances. Like Raina, Sergius commits himself to the ideal of “higher love”.

However Raina herself admits to having

had doubts about the ideas about Sergius she shares with her mother. And her doubts were further intensified by Captain Bluntschli, who unlike an audience does not know the foolhardy cavalry man. He contemptuously describes to Raina Sergius' foolishness in the battlefield. The facts stated by him prosaically, seemed to prove that Raina's hero is nothing more than a lucky amateur who won the battle by fluke.

The entrance of the warrior hero Sergius, is dramatically postponed until several minutes into Act II. Shaw's stage direction indicates that Sergius is a case study in Byronism rather than a hero. The Byronic temperament as seen by Shaw and as illustrated through Sergius' character is moody, volatile and idealistic. The Byronic man is liable to alternatives between peaks of delight in his achievements and troughs of depressions in which no one seems to be able to line up to his ideals, least of all he himself. A Byronic turns into a cynic convinced that the world cannot fulfil his aspiration. This does not prevent him from trying to reassert himself by uttering lofty ideals and striking majestic poses with ladies. With women, he successfully gallant and amorous.

Sergius' sense of his own worth and the mediocrity of others emerges in his condemnation of the army establishment and his petulant resignation. He was of the opinion that there seemed to be no fair play and no sense of honour in the battle. Thus Shaw uses the character of Sergius to attack romanticisation of war.

The Sergius-Louka flirtation scene demonstrates a Byronic hero's sexual self-confidence. He is sure that few woman can resist his manly charm, which takes the form of courtesy when he is dealing with ladies of high social rank, but it comes more directly when he is preying on the women of the lower class. Thus in love also he tries to follow the beautiful ideals that he admires, but he finds the fatiguing experience of the "higher love" too difficult to keep up for very long. As he flirts with Louka, he also realises that his personal sense of honour is pretty flexible and that he is not as noble gentlemanly as he pretends to be. His pretence of being a man of ideals and principles seems dashed on several occasions, notably when he turns briskly from admiration of Raina's soul to admiration of Louka's body.

Sergius is intermittently aware of his inconsistencies as he confesses to Louka,

“I am surprised at myself, Louka. What would Sergius, the hero of Slivnitza, say if he saw me now? What would Sergius the apostle of higher love, say if he saw me now? What would the half dozen Sergius who keep popping in and out of this handsome figure of mine say if they caught us here?”.

Sergius is bewildered at his various faces :

“Which of the six is the real man? That’s the question that torments me. One of them is a hero, another a buffoon, another a humbug, another perhaps a bit of a blackguard ...And one, at least, is a coward: jealous, like all cowards.”

But moreover like a romantic hero he consistently believes that he is superbly isolated, misunderstood by the common herd. Soldiering he has found, is for calculating cowards, not dashing spirits like his.