

**Introduction to  
George Bernard Shaw's  
*Man and Superman***

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# The Play

- Published in 1903
- First performed in 1905
- Primary issues include the idea of ‘superman’, the concept of Creative Evolution and the Life Force which leads to good breeding
- *The Revolutionist’s Handbook* – the supplement to the main dramatic text, it is a political treatise supposedly written by the protagonist, Jack Tanner, containing much of Shaw’s own thoughts
- The ‘Don Juan in Hell’ segment is one of the first sustained major dream sequences in theatrical performance

# The Superman idea

- Original German word *Übermensch*. Corresponds to: Superman / Overman / Beyond *Man*
- The superior man
- Used by Friedrich Nietzsche, particularly in *Also sprach Zarathustra* (1883–85)
- Also used by Goethe and others
- In *Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche speaks of the tragic hero – the balance between the Apollonian (rational) and the Dionysian (irrational)
- This superior man would be rational
- Rationality in this case defined vis-à-vis a number of humanist/moral codes used to define humanity
- Rejects conventional religio-moralistic ‘herd’ morality
- Goes against Kantian view of rational action as a part of ‘**universal**’ morality
- Will be more than ‘human’ by focusing beyond his own self
- His existence or creation will justify the existence of the human race
- The Superman’s existence is entirely for the augmentation of humanity

# The Superman Idea

- Nietzsche asserts that the Superman's life is the will-to-power
  - Power is perhaps more important than survival and this, according to Nietzsche, is intrinsic to the nature of men
- The superior man would have the capability of moving history
- This superior man would not be a product of long routine *normal* evolution
- In order to become the superior man one with such potential will have to absolutely master himself
- This superior man would answer to values created by himself for himself
- These values would not be based on any established moral codification
- This superior man would not change humanity as such, but will remain superior in his understanding of life's absurdities and sufferings, knowing larger humanity will remain within their selfish shells
- The Nazi idea of the superman is not what Nietzsche was speaking about.

## Life Force

- Shaw's knowledge of Economics and Philosophy was comprehensive.
- His aim was to establish a better world by the efforts of realists who acted out of a genuine unselfish love for humanity.
- Shaw was influenced by socialistic ideals and he found in Samuel Butler (1835-1902) an answer to the Darwinian system of evolution. Darwin's natural selection did not speak of a overarching purpose. Butler was speaking in social and socio-evolutionary terms.
- From Butler he found this idea of Life Force which was essentially the motivating factor for human progression.
- Combining it with the idea of the superior man, Shaw created his idea of the Shavian *superman*.

# The Shavian Life Force

- Shaw wanted to show through his plays how men, using their Life Force, try to create a paradigm of a higher socio-intellectual standard with a newer sense of morality and a new economic system.
- Two most significant plays in this regard are *Man and Superman* and *Back to Methuselah*.
- In his other plays other ideas dominate but the idea of Life Force remains the primary construct behind the protagonists.

# Nature of Life Force

- Life Force rejects/removes the old to create the new.
- The process is essentially a re-birth of the old in a superior form.
- It is not life that is challenged. But the old outdated and outmoded form of life that is targeted and re-formed.
- This is the socio-moral evolution Shaw is talking about.
- It is also known as Creative Evolution (Henri Bergson).
- It is a process in which Life and Matter combine – matter is inhabited by life to exercise its instincts.
- Creative Evolution's goal is to create 'superman' and fulfilling his purposes as configured by the universe.
- This may be thought of as Eugenics, the science of creating only *advantageous* traits in children, keeping the *undesirable* traits at bay.

# Lifeforce and Women

- The idea of elective *breeding* is seen as necessary in the process of Creative Evolution, and as seen in *Man and Superman*, has a specific view of women.
- This Life Force allocates a problematic (from the modern point of view) location for women as conditioned to seek the perfect mate. That becomes their primary function.
- This in fact clashes with the idea of a ‘liberated’ ‘new’ woman figure as perceived in Shavian drama.
- Shaw specifically speaks of the super-man, the gender of that figure is not negotiable.



# The Shavian Hero

- Mostly internal conflict
- Often no external contest (Bluntschli, in *Arms and the Man*, does not actually contest)
- Real conquest is the conquest of self – Will over Passion
- Genius consists in the possession of *original* values – not conventions – judgment and perception should be *independent*
- No adherence to external, therefore mechanical, morality – in Bluntschli particularly (*Arms and the Man* – 1894 / *Candida* – 1898)
- The hero is a result of Creative Evolution
- According to Shaw man has not really evolved in the last two millennia
- Jack Tanner becomes the representative figure

# Ann Whitfield

- The female protagonist of *Man and Superman*.
- Intelligent, graceful and respectable
- Charming and calculating
- Often called the archetype of the *vital* woman – conforming to the Creative Evolution theory
- Her aim is to find the perfect mate – the perfect father for her progeny
- Her target is the male protagonist of the play
- She becomes successful in her quest
- She has no moral qualms and deceives people when she feels the need to do so
- She manipulates people into doing what she wants
- Tanner calls her deceptive but cannot reject her at the end

# Don Juan in Hell

- Third act of *Man and Superman* often excluded from the performance of the play and often performed as a separate piece
- It is a dream/nightmare sequence involving four characters who are not a part of the primary dramatic narrative
- Jack Tanner – apparently the descendent of Don Juan – has this dream
- This sequence has the Devil and three characters from Mozart's *Don Giovanni*
- Hell is imagined as a place where there is *sinful* enjoyment.
- But Don Juan is bored and chooses to lead the 'life contemplative' in heaven
- The segment contains serious, though witty, discussions on the purpose of human life and the Life Force and the idea of evolution
- This segment is perceived as presenting Shaw's own philosophy

# Useful Links

- Emrys Westacott, 'Nietzsche's Concept of the Will to Power'  
<https://www.thoughtco.com/nietzsches-concept-of-the-will-to-power-2670658>
- Kant and Hume on Morality  
<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/kant-hume-morality/>
- Eva Cybulska, Nietzsche's Übermensch: A Hero of Our Time?  
[https://philosophynow.org/issues/93/Nietzsches\\_Ubermensch\\_A\\_Hero\\_of\\_Our\\_Time](https://philosophynow.org/issues/93/Nietzsches_Ubermensch_A_Hero_of_Our_Time)
- Basil Willey, 'Samuel Butler'  
<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Samuel-Butler-English-author-1835-1902>
- Ishrat Lindblad, 'Creative Evolution and Shaw's Dramatic Art with Special Reference to *Man and Superman* and *Back to Methuselah*'  
<https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1243468/FULLTEXT01.pdf>
- Monica A. Zabrowski and Robert P. Kirschmann, 'The Ungendered Will and the Shavian Superman'  
<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/202036>
- 'Henri Bergson'  
<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/bergson/>

# Suggested Further Reading

- Molière – *Don Juan* (1665)
- Henrik Ibsen – *An Enemy of the People* (1882)
- August Strindberg – *Miss Julie* (1889)
- George Bernard Shaw – *Mrs. Warren’s Profession* (1893)
- George Bernard Shaw – *Candida* (1894)
- George Bernard Shaw – *Arms and the Man* (1894)
- George Bernard Shaw – *The Man of Destiny* (1897)
- Henri Bergson – *Creative Evolution* (1907)
- George Bernard Shaw – *Back to Methuselah* (1922)
- Eugene O’Neill – *Strange Interlude* (1928)
- Alick West – *A Good Man Fallen Among Fabians* (1969)
- Dan Stone – *Breeding Superman: Nietzsche, Race and Eugenics in Edwardian and Interwar Britain* (2002)

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