Introduction to
George Bernard Shaw’s
Man and Superman

Dr. Siddhartha Biswas
Associate Professor
Department of English
University of Calcutta
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.
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.
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

- Basil Willey, ‘Samuel Butler’

- Ishrat Lindblad, ‘Creative Evolution and Shaw’s Dramatic Art with Special Reference to Man and Superman and Back to Methuselah’

- Monica A. Zabrouski 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)
Bibliography