

# Literary Representation of “Life Force Theory” in George Bernard Shaw’s Play “Man and Superman”

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## Abstract

*This paper explores George Bernard Shaw's use of the “life force theory” in his seminal play Man and Superman. As a vital philosophical concept, life force is based on the belief in creative evolution. This doctrine becomes a drive to continuously perfect itself by creating better forms. The characters and themes of the novel are looked at in relation to one theory of how this occurs, in particular, the embodiment of the unconscious life force, Ann, and her relentless pursuit of Tanner, corresponding to the embodiment of the conscious life force. The analysis sets Man and Superman within the intellectual streams of its time while concurrently exploring Shaw's embrace of Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, and Lamarck's ideas. This study combines qualitative methods to spotlight the play's philosophical, comedic, and dramatic levels and advance the idea that Shaw utilizes the exchange of conscious and unconscious forces to espouse an evolutionary progression and social change.*

**Keywords:** Man and Superman, Life Force Theory, Evaluation, Nietzsche’s Idea

## Introduction

As an exacting and eloquent figure of modern drama, George Bernard Shaw breathed deep philosophical undercurrents into his plays, as well as incisive social commentary. *Man and Superman* is one of his most celebrated works and leads as a testament to his intellectual vigor and life force theory. The cornerstone of Shaw's vision of human progress is this idea, based upon the evolutionary philosophies of Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and Lamarck. Shaw combines comedy, satire, and philosophical discourse to explain the forces of conscious and unconscious birthing humanity toward 'Superman' in *Man and Superman*. The Shaw, its philosophy, and its animistic inclination are examined in this research. Ann Whitefield embodies the unconscious life force called to find herself within the play forms of the theme and drama. In this light, the study reinterprets *Man and Superman* as a theatrical masterpiece and a profound meditation on human purpose and social change.

Shaw wrote in 1921 about the play that, "I put all my intellectual goods in the shop window under the sign of *Man and Superman*" (Shaw, 2001). He also described the act of the play as a "dramatic parable of creative evolution" and a new religion in the center of an intellectual whirlpool that he feared might be neglected by the reader. Shaw's "new religion" speaks of supreme will or power, which acts as the guiding force for the betterment of the world. Besides, Shaw chose to call this

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power "life force." He believed life contains an ethical force that continuously struggles to perfect itself. Life force works through creative evolution to achieve the state of perfection. It continuously creates something better and greater beyond the life forms already developed.

Don Juan (Shaw's spokesman) in *Man and Superman* describes the ultimate purpose of life as creating a race of supermen as "higher individuals...being supreme, unflinching and also completely, perfectly self-conscious: in short, a god" (Shaw, 2001).

The doctrine of life force has so-called different names, such as 'the religion of vitalism means a belief that life in organisms is caused and maintained by a force that is distinct from all chemical and physical forces,' 'the will-to- life,' 'Elan Vital means a feeling of strong eagerness usually in favor of a person or cause,' or many others name all expressed one thing a zeal for a new life that Jonathan Rose honestly labelled as an "obsession" means that an irrational motive for performing trivial or repetitive actions against your will. A life force is the substitute religion of vitalism, worshipping the life process as a spiritual force. It primarily means the creation of new life. It is a break-up with Victorian constraints and is sometimes worshipped as a religion. According to the Christian concept, life is a spiritual quality that endowed human beings with identity, awareness, ethical sense and free will.

The new artists and intellectuals of Victorian society decided to develop their values that challenged the early assumptions of the Victorian mind and "to work out the implications of a new concept of liberation and evolutionary development (Ervine, 1956). Shaw painted the contrast between generations and attitudes in almost every play that Shaw wrote in the last twenty years of the nineteenth century.

*In You Never Can Tell* (1896) is Shaw's four-act play. It was published as part of a volume of Shaw's plays entitled *Plays Pleasant*. This opposition between old and new beliefs is manifested in Gloria's dismissal of her mother's education as old-fashioned because it is an education-based on studying Huxley, Mill and George Eliot, who are all mid-Victorian authors. However, Shaw's significant contribution was introducing the concept of a life force that acts through 'new women' to advance its sole purpose of creating the 'superman.'

*Candida*, a comedy by Shaw, was written in 1894 and first published in 1898 as part of his plays pleasant. The central characters are clergyman James Morell and his wife Candida. The titular character prefers Morell over her romantic lover, March Banks, because "the preserving instinct of life-force can be satisfied in the sheltering figure of Morell". Being an agent of life-force, Candida knows that romantic love is just a pleasant illusion, and she needs Morell's help to produce children who might have the making of Superman within them. Raina's love for the reluctant Bluntschli in *Arms and the Man* (1894) is the evidence of acting upon the natural wisdom that life-force bestowed on the 'New Woman' who, contrary to the conventional heroine, performed the role of pursuer of the intellectual man for breeding.

The abovementioned plays show the motivation of force in process, and it remains for the *Man and Superman* to dissect to see the essence of life-force, its purpose, and how it operates to achieve its purpose. It would not be an overstatement if we call *Man and Superman* the distillation of Shaw's evolutionary ideas, which have been infused into his dramatic career. Shaw's *Man and Superman* is "a paradoxical version of Don Juan story" (Chesterton, 1956), in which his hero, Jack Tanner, is pursued cunningly and relentlessly by Ann Whitfield (heroin of *Man and Superman*), his friend from childhood and now, after her father's death, his ward. Tanner was a young bachelor who had a negative attitude towards marriage. He believes that Men are better off without Women. "Marriage ennobles a man" (Bentry, 1957).

## Methodology

This research uses qualitative research to analyze the life force theory in Shaw's plays. The primary data source is Shaw's book *Man and Superman* play script. Secondary data sources are the writer's biography and other relevant information related to the study and websites about Shaw's *Man and Superman*. The researcher also collected secondary data sources, including references and materials related to the study, from books and the Internet.

## Literature Review

Much research has been conducted on *Man and Superman* since its publication. Dwight Culler (1968) elaborated *Man and Superman* as being Lamarckian but within a Darwinian comic structure and focused on the intellectual content. Another researcher, Culler, noted that Shaw "inherited his philosophy of Creative Evolution from Butler." Fromm (1967) also has the same idea as Culler: Butler deeply inspired Shaw with his "technique and argument." Roppen also detected the influence of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche in his writings and focused on the philosophical aspects of Shaw's *Man and Superman*. However, he described it as "vague and general".

David Daiches, in his essay *The Modern World* published in 1972, examined Shaw's drama as the epitome of anti-Darwinism and neo-Lamarckism. However, he failed to pursue the question of Shaw's evolutionary plays ideally. In his dissertation "the intellectual and literary background of George Bernard Shaw's *Man and Superman*" (1965), Carl Henry Mills focused on Schopenhauer's influence on the play. However, his elaboration is considerably different from those that form the topic of the present study. Mills' study is concerned with Schopenhauer, and Shaw's is limited to the process of sexual attraction described by Schopenhauer's essay on women. Nethercot believed Friedrich Nietzsche was the most influential German philosopher contemporary to Shaw. He also believed Nietzsche's *Übermensch* is the father of Shaw's *Superman*, even though Shaw denied any thoughts that he got any of his basic ideas from Nietzsche.

Not the only Nethercot who tinted the influence of Nietzsche on Shaw's *Man and Superman*. But also Nicholas Greened, in his book *Bernard Shaw: a Critical View* contends that "if English language owes the word *superman* to Shaw, Shaw owed the concept to Nietzsche". In respect to the probable influence of Schopenhauer, grebe wrote "Shaw's life-force may have been based on Schopenhauer's *World Will* but its positive evolutionary character was shaped by Samuel Butler and its final goal was the Nietzschean *superman*" (Black, 2003).

Shaw was considered to be a feminist by Edward V. Geist and cited Ann Whitefield as the essence of the New Woman that Shaw along with his Norwegian counterpart, Henrik Ibsen, introduced into modern drama: "Shaw describes Ann as one of the "vital geniuses" of humanity, a unique mixture of mind and will. She is a classic example of Shavian "new woman", one who follows like a man the law of her own".

For Barbara Watson, *Man and Superman* seems to be "the chief stumbling block for feminists approaching Shaw". Watson claimed that Ann Whitefield is not the heroine of all female flesh and feminine whim, but a person with ideas and conscious choice, a 'modern woman'. She believed that The feminist objection to the pursuit of wedding by Ann is irrelevant because "these critics are ignoring the fact that both Octavius and young Hector are as dedicated to that goal as the women, and that even Tanner, eloquent as he is on the subject, is not very reliable narrator of his own feelings on marriage or on the more relevant subject of his feelings about Ann herself". Another Character that Watson cited as an example of "new woman" is Octavius' sister, Violet.

She is named for a flower that is a symbol of feminine modesty but actually grows like a weed, simply wants her Hector and his father's money, which is standard and all right. In his *Dramatists and Dramas* (2005), Harold Bloom observed that “originality was hardly Shaw’s strength. Shavian ideas are quarried from Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Ibsen, Wagner, Ruskin, Samuel Butler, Shelley, Carlyle, Marx (more or less), William Morris, Lamarck, Bergson—the list could be extended”. Blooms firmly believed that Shaw is greatly in debt to Nietzsche in writing his play: “Everything about *Man and Superman*, paradoxical as the play was to begin with, now seems almost absurdly problematical.

The very title cannot mean (any more) what Shaw undoubtedly intended it to mean: the Superman of Nietzsche, Zarathustra, the heroic vitalist who prophesies the next phase of Creative Evolution, the next resting place of that cold God, the life-force”.

Michael Pharand in his book *Bernard Shaw and the French* (2006) made a long list of possible French sources for Shaw’s evolutionary ideas. His treatment of the influence of Lamarck on Shaw occupies a scant three pages. He found it sufficient to announce that “there is little in Lamarck that Shaw or his peers could have accepted as scientific fact, but Shaw found that the Frenchman’s concept reflected the underlying principles of his life-force idea: “that living organisms change because they wanted to” (Shaw, 2001).

A semiotic approach was adopted by Kelley Bentley Wright to the play. In his thesis “a barthes-shavian exploration: the uncharted theory of man and superman”, he utilizes Roland Barthes’s five codes (proairetic, hermeneutic, reference hemic, symbolic) for analysis of the text of the play. His structural analysis reveals the plurality of the text and reader as producer of the text’s meaning. Wright’s study is not so much concerned with the meaning of the text as with how the meaning is created (Evans, 1983).

Studies have been done by a handful of scholars but they are far from sufficient. Even the works of critics like Carl Henry Mills or Nethercot who took an interest in Shaw’s ideologies are restricted to his views on love and marriage which were mentioned above and fail to meet the demand for an in-depth, comprehensive study of Shaw’s drama and Philosophy.

## Discussion and Analysis

*Man and Superman* consists of four acts. Act III is often excluded when the play is performed. Shaw himself is unwilling to admit that act III is separated from the other acts. In the preface of *Back to Methuselah*, he writes “I took the legend of Don Juan in its Mozartian form and made it a dramatic parable of creative evolution. It works through the state perfection it continuously creates something better and greater beyond the life forms already developed. But being then at the height of my creation and comedic talent, I decorated it too brilliantly and profligately. I surrounded it with a comedy of which it formed only one act, and that act was so completely episodic (it was a dream which did not affect the action of the piece) that the comedy could be separate and played by itself”. Shaw doesn't make any concession here on grounds of the length of the play. It is only when considering this play as a comedy that act III can be separated. From the point of view of the statement of “creative evolution,” act III is indispensable to the play in spite of the length; it is what gives philosophical motive power to the drama and promotes the dramatic effect of the other acts.

Taken as a whole, the drama is a work of creative imagination. The philosophical dialogue in act Three is the deliberate product of thought.

By inserting act III, Shaw managed to get his philosophy into the play. Even this insertion, however, did not content him. So he added the Epistle Dedicatory and “revolutionist’s handbook” as well.

In this play, Shaw makes use of the double plot. The main plot has as its theme Ann’s inexorable pursuit of Tanner. Tanner’s attempted escape from Ann is in vain. Here, Shaw reverses a common idea about the relation of sexual roles. The usual assumption at the beginning of the 20th century was that the man hunts the woman. Ann, however, pursues Tanner while totally ignoring the love of Octavius Robinson, a sentimental poet. At first Tanner doesn’t notice her love. Then, from act II on, he tries desperately to elude Ann’s snares before ultimately being captured by her at the end of the play. Shaw describes the power of “life force” in Tanner and Ann’s final embrace. In this case, “life force” asserts itself as the true source of sexual attraction.

Comedy also conventionally includes a subplot. In *Man and Superman* the subplot concerns the relation between Octavius’ sister Violet, and a wealthy American, Hector Malone. Violet is pregnant, apparently without the blessing of the church, in act I.

Roebuck Ramsden, Octavius and Tanner are shocked at her shocking behavior. On the other hand, Ann already knows that she is in fact legitimately married to Hector.

Tanner with his progressive ideas praises her action and offers financial assistance. Violet, however, is unwilling to be seen as a supporter with Tanner’s radical thought and lets them partly into the secret of her formal marriage, without saying her husband’s name. It is only later, in act III she discloses that she has been married to Hector. The reason why they have kept the marriage secret in such a way is the fear of offending his father. Hector’s father, an Irish American millionaire, has been hoping for his son to acquire a British respectability through his marriage. Otherwise, he threatens to disinherit him. Finally, however, he reconciles himself with the true situation at the end of the play. In this sense, Violet wins a victory over her father-in-law. The Violet–Hector subplot is not essential to the play then, but it contributes to the element of Comedy. Now that I have given introduction of the plot, let me discuss what made Shaw choose Comedy as a means to express his philosophy of “creative evolution. In act III, Don Juan objects to Ann’s accompanying him. He leaves for Heaven behind Ann who shouts “I believe in the Life to come. A father! A father for the Superman!” (Shaw, 2001) On the other hand, in act III, Tanner surrenders to Ann. Does the surrender show that Tanner’s force of “will” is powerless, compared with Don Juan’s conscious “life force”? In order to solve the question, let me consider the relations of the dual, conscious and unconscious “life forces” in the case of Tanner and Ann.

Shaw looks upon woman as the personification of unconscious “life force. “ In this play, this role is given to Ann. Ann is not only a new woman but also a motherly woman who has an irresistible impulse to create a better man, a Superman. So it can be said that she is the embodiment of the creative “life force” behind the universe. Ann needs a fit father to procreate a Superman. That is why she so determinedly pursues Tanner all the way to Spain. On the other hand, Tanner is afraid of being captured by this unconscious “life force”.

Ann’s emotions, moved by unconscious “life force,” is so strong that they remind Tanner of a fierce animal: a boa constrictor, a lioness, a tigress, a bear and so on. Ann uses numerous tricks such as pretending to be modest and respectable in accordance with the conventional Victorian womanly virtues. Tanner tries to escape from her, because he is a representative of conscious “life force” and has to strive for self-consciousness to achieve self-realization.

Tanner as a Superman needs enough freedom and composure to be able to meditate on the purpose of “life force.” Also, he needs freedom to transfer the knowledge gained by meditation into action

at any time. Ann's tenacious pursuit in acts I, II and IV constitutes the comic plot of Man and Superman. The theme is doubled by what Don Juan says in act III:

My judgment was not to be corrupted: my brain still said No on every issue. And while I was in the act of framing my excuse to the lady, life seized me and threw me into her arms as a sailor throws a scrap of fish into the mouth of a seabird (Shaw, 2001). The above lines shows the wish of freedom from social constraints to his life of love. A woman's pursuit is very strong when it is stimulated by unconscious "life force." Even Don Juan finds it difficult to escape from it: "When the lady's instinct was set on me, there was nothing for it but lifelong slavery or flight".

In Act I, there is a scene in which Ann briefly brings Tanner to bay. She starts to seduce him by means of various amorous actions and utterances. Tanner and Ann have known each other since they were children. Although Tanner felt an attraction for Ann, he has stayed away from her for some time lest he should neglect his own principles of "veracity and honor." There is also another reason why he keeps away from her. It is because he worried about the inactivity of his "will" through his concern for women. For Tanner, woman is an obstacle in the way of the realization of self. Ann's determination to catch him by any means seems to Tanner to be pure ambitious.

Sexually, woman is nature's contrivance for perpetuating its highest achievement. Sexually, man is woman's contrivance for fulfilling Nature's behest in the most economical way. She knows by instinct that far back in the evolutionary process she invented him, differentiated him, and created him in order to produce something better than the single-sexed process can produce. "To a woman ... Man is only a means to the end of getting children and rearing them." Woman knows instinctively the man is produced by nature as the best means for serving her procreative function. The desirable man to marry is the male evolved and developed in mental outlook beyond the common standard. It is a Superman father.

Therefore, Ann pursues Tanner. Ann's aim is based on "nature's behest." It is unconscious "life force" that prompts Ann's impulse to procreate a Superman in this drama. The following description is found in the appended "revolutionist's handbook": the consequent survival of the intelligently fertile means the survival of the partizans of the Superman; for what is proposed is nothing but the replacement of the old unintelligent, unavoidable, almost unconscious fertility by an intelligently controlled, conscious fertility, and the removal of the mere voluptuary from the evolutionary process.

Shaw is seriously concerned for "the survival of the partizans of the Superman." The instinctive impulse of procreating a better race simultaneously assures the health of civilization in all its other aspect. In other words, the intellectual vitality of each generation's descendants brings about the reformation of society. "Unless we are replaced by a more highly evolved animal in short, by the Superman the world must remain a den of dangerous animals." To sum up, then, the procreation of a Superman is woman's sacred duty, and her contribution to the purpose of unconscious "life force," as it seeks for integration with conscious one.

In Shaw's drama, Tanner has an independent mind and strives to escape from the personal subjection of marriage, while in Ann personified vitality strives to fulfill its creative purpose. From Shaw's point of view, both are instruments in the evolution of the race. In act IV, Tanner reluctantly surrenders to Ann because "life force" as an integral whole compels him to cooperate with its merely unconscious operations.

Although Tanner cannot help submitting to her unconscious "life force, he recognizes the necessity of the birth of a better race. In contrast, it is blind and unconscious "life force" that urges Ann to make the biological choice of catching Tanner, as a father of Superman. At the end of this play, Tanner's surrender to Ann makes him abandon the free and creative activity of his subjective

intellect. Comically interpreting the situation, Tanner says, "I am in the grip of the life force." His speech here suggests the extra-personality created by "life force." He submits to woman so that "life force" can produce the Superman. In this way, he brings about a magnificent harmony of conscious and unconscious "life forces." The two forces have never ultimately been in conflict with each other. From the beginning, they have been collaborating together in the work of "creative evolution."

At the close of the play, after a furious dispute between Tanner and Ann, she asserts her love openly throwing away every subterfuge:

Tanner: I will not marry you.

Ann: Oh, you will, you will.

Tanner: I tell you, no, no, no.

Ann: I tell you, yes, yes, yes.

Tanner: No. Ann [coaxing–imploring–almost exhausted]

Yes. Before it is too late for repentance. Yes.

There is violence in Ann's courtship here. After the verbal fireworks, Tanner embraces Ann with the words: "I love you. The life force enchants me. I have the whole world in my arms when I clasp you" (Shaw, 2001).

Tanner comes to realize that the integration of conscious and unconscious "life force" is natural. "life force" leads him to accede to Ann's love. What we see here is the extra-personal operation of "life force." Shaw stresses the universal impulse above the individual one.

In act three, Don Juan has already referred to this:

In the sex relation the universal creative energy, of which the parties are both the helpless agents, overrides and sweeps away all personal consideration, and dispenses with all personal relations.

Tanner is thus finally convinced that conscious "life force" can achieve the purpose of evolution not by overcoming unconscious "life force" but by uniting with it.

## Conclusion

Shaw's play *Man and Superman* especially act III explains the idea of life force philosophically. Shaw in his play *Man and Superman* satirizes modern civilization for its lack of the consciousness of life force, and suggests a path along which mankind should be aiming to advance. Shaw in his play *Man and Superman* insists that all of us should be realizing creative evolution in our daily lives. Tanner and Don Juan are more exceptional figures, who speak as philosophers and advocate creative evolution which specially means the creation of new life.

Tanner who is the representative life force, rejects captivation by Ann, the representative of unconscious life force. Ann's ultimate capture of Tanner is a result of the integration of conscious and unconscious life forces. In other words, Tanner's surrender is itself attributable to the expansive working of life force. He comes to recognize the unity of life force and to understand the meaning of creative evolution. Tanner and Don Juan can be philosophically identified with Shaw to some extent. Shaw as a realist sees with the mind's eye and exposes the hypocrisy of the common respectability of the Victorian age, expressed by the Statue and the Devil.

The purpose of life, life force is also the motive power of creative evolution which is realized through will in individuals. Namely, will is the individual representation of life force. When the will becomes conscious of life force the owner of the will comes to be super-personal.

The process of creative evolution is constructive of self-realization. Man's task is to strive to higher organization, that is, to become a Superman. To begin with, mankind should assume its responsibility for improvement and become conscious of life force. Then, mankind should strive

to build up a new civilization in which almighty life force can act freely without any obstacles like vulgar conventions or materialism.

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