

# A Study on the Dramatic works of George Bernard Shaw

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## Abstract

For Property divides society into classes and Marriage becomes class-ridden in the society. Equality is, therefore, an essential condition for the free functioning of the Life Force. It is, however, true that the Life Force has occasionally produced the Superman, one here, another there; they are what Shaw calls "our casual Superman." But for all their super humanity they could not do much. Why? Here is Shaw's own explanation : "We have been driven to Proletarian Democracy by the failure of all the alternative systems; for these depended on the existence of Supermen acting as despots or oligarchs; and not only were these Supermen not always or even often forthcoming at the right moment and in an eligible social position, but when they were forthcoming they could not, except for a short time and by morally suicidal coercive methods, impose super humanity on those whom they governed; so, by force of "human nature"

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## The Superman a political necessity

Nietzsche published his Thus Spake Zarathustra in 1883, and the idea of the Superman came into English drama in 1901 with Shaw's *Man and Superman*. But in his own mind the idea was fermenting from an earlier time, at least from the time of his writing of *Caesar and Cleopatra* in 1898, in which the creation of Caesar was greatly influenced by his concept of the Superman. Shaw acknowledged his debt to Nietzsche for the word "Superman", but vehemently objected to the assumption that he was looking for "salvation of society to the despotism of a single Napoleonic Superman, in spite of my careful demonstration of the folly of that outworn infatuation. Shaw's rejection of conventional Christianity and conventional morality preceded his conversion to Socialism. But it was as a Socialist that he came to realise the failure of Man to tackle the gigantic problem modern civilization has raised

and of the inadequacy of the political system he has evolved so far. True, there have been changes since civilization began, but they are changes only in names and labels or, as Shaw says, from Tweedledum to Tweedledee. There has been not a single change due to human character. Man has basically remained the same as before. This is how John Tanner (Shaw's Zoroaster) has visualized the situation: "The mere transfiguration of institutions, as from military and priestly dominance to commercial and scientific dominance, from commercial dominance to proletarian democracy, from slavery to serfdom, from serfdom to capitalism, from monarchy to republicanism, from polytheism to monotheism, from monotheism to atheism, from atheism to

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pantheistic humanitarianism, from general illiteracy to general literacy, from romance to realism, from realism to mysticism, from metaphysics to physics, are all but changes from Tweedledum to Tweedledee, So long as man remains what he is, a slave to conventional morality with all his prejudices and superstitions, his hatred and jealousy, his cowardice and selfishness, the world will be a 'den of dangerous animals' and the future of mankind is bleak. The catastrophe of 1914, followed by a bigger one in 1939, bore testimony to Shaw's apprehensions and confirmed his prognosis. Moreover, in respect of the genesis of slave morality he preferred the opinion of Stuart-Glennie to that of Nietzsche. He says, "Nietzsche, as I gather, regarded the slave-morality as having been invented and imposed on the world by the slaves making a virtue of necessity and religion of their servitude. Stuart-Glennie regarded the slave-morality as an invention of the superior white race to subjugate the minds of the inferior races whom they wished to exploit, and who would have destroyed them by force of numbers if their minds had not been subjugated. As this process is in operation still, and can be studied at first hand not only in our Church schools and in the struggle between our modern proprietary classes and the proletariat, but in the part played by Christian missionaries in reconciling the black races of Africa to their subjugation by European Capitalism, we can judge for ourselves whether the initiative came from above or below").

Finally, by way of giving aid to his critics, who always chattered about Nietzsche whenever the word "Superman" occurred in his writings, he observed: "The cry for the Superman did not begin with Nietzsche, nor will it end with his vogue, But it has always been silenced by the same question: what kind of person is this Superman to be? Shaw answers the question in the Revolutionist's Handbook since his play on the Superman ends before the Superman is born. He describes the Superman as 'some sort of good looking philosopher-athlete, with a handsome healthy woman for his mate, perhaps.'" However casual the definition or specification might be, it clearly brings out Shaw's emphasis not on the body or the mind alone but on both. Besides being good looking, the Superman must have the body of an athlete and the mind of philosopher. And it is natural that he should have a handsome healthy

mate, this time the emphasis falling on the physical aspect alone. The Superman needs a woman to perpetuate the race of Supermen. But how is the Superman to be born? Shaw emphatically says that he is to be born of Man and Woman; there is no other way. The task is difficult, very difficult but not impossible. The Life Force will do the miracle as it has already done other miracles, beginning with the microbe and coming up to Man. Is the evolution of Man from the ape any less a miracle? So it is practicable; only Man has to co-operate with the Life Force by working up its Will to the highest pitch of intensity for the creation of the Superman and by removing all sorts of artificial barriers that stand in its way. Shaw argues that Property (private property) is the greatest of impediments to the emergence of the Superman, for Property divides society into classes and Marriage becomes class-ridden in the society. Equality is, therefore, an essential condition for the free functioning of the Life Force.

It is, however, true that the Life Force has occasionally produced the Superman, one here, another there; they are what Shaw calls "our casual Superman." But for all their super humanity they could not do much. Why? Here is Shaw's own explanation : "We have been driven to Proletarian Democracy by the failure of all the alternative systems; for these depended on the existence of Supermen acting as despots or oligarchs; and not only were these Supermen not always or even often forthcoming at the right moment and in an eligible social position, but when they were forthcoming they could not, except for a short time and by morally suicidal coercive methods, impose super humanity on those whom they governed; so, by force of "human nature", government by consent of the governed has supplanted the old plan of governing citizen as a public-schoolboy is governed."° Now Proletarian Democracy has also failed and Shaw never had faith in it as an efficient political system. Supermen, and the production of such a Democracy is the only change that is now hopeful enough to nerve us to the effort that Revolution demands." The Will of Man functioning freely in a classless society alone can produce a race of Supermen and "until there is an England in which every man is a Cromwell, a France in which every man is a Napoleon, a Rome in which every man is a Caesar, a Germany in which

every man is a Luther plus a Goethe, the world will be no more improved by its heroes than a Brixton villa is improved by the pyramid of Cheops.

## DISCUSSION

It is worthwhile, in this context, to recall. Carlyle who, long before Shaw, thought of Great Men as the makers of human history and civilization. In *Heroes and Hero Worship*, which first appeared in Lecture form in 1841, Carlyle says, "Universal History, the history of what man has accomplished in this world, is at bottom the History of the Great Men who have worked here. They were the teachers of men, these great ones; the modelers, patterns, and in a wide sense creators, of whatsoever the general mass of men contrived to do or to attain; all things that we see standing accomplished in the world are properly the outer material result, the practical realisation and embodiment, of Thoughts that dwelt in the Great Men sent into the world : the soul of the whole world's history, it may justly be considered, were the history of these "(Lecture I). He gives no importance to common people. In his concept of History the masses have no part to play. Moreover, socio-economic forces as determining the upbringing, growth and development of individuals are outside Carlyle's idealism. All this is natural, because he belongs to the pre-Marxian era, and it is in these respects that Shaw differs from Carlyle. Shaw's idea of the Superman, his Creative Evolution is organically related to his Socialism. Unlike Carlyle, he does not believe that human civilization can be built up or sustained or saved by a dozen Great Men born in this or that age. The history of the past, Shaw believes, has been a history of shame.

Caesar is not only a conqueror of the world but he is a political philosopher also. To him the past history of the world is a history of exploitation and persecution, of how the rich squeezed the poor, how the powerful subjugated the weak. Caesar has little sympathy for such a history. The Sooner it is destroyed the better. Theodotus rushes in, alarmed, shouting for help: "The first of the seven wonders of the world perishes. The history of Alexandria is in flames." Caesar's reaction embodied in "Is that all?" naturally exasperates Theodotus. To understand Caesar's attitude to the past one has to go through the following dialogue:"

- ♦ Theodotus All! Caesar: will you go down to posterity as a barbarous soldier too ignorant to know the value of books?
- ♦ Caesar Theodotus: I am an author myself and I tell you it is better that the Egyptians should live their lives than dream away with the help of books.
- ♦ Theodotus Caesar: once in ten generations of men, the world gains an immortal book. Caesar If it did not flatter mankind, the common executioner would burn it.
- ♦ Theodotus: Without history, death will lay you beside your me antes soldier.
- ♦ Caesar Death will do that in any case, I ask no better grave.
- ♦ Theodotus: What is burning there is the memory of mankind.
- ♦ Caesar: A shameful memory, Let it burn" (Act II).

Caesar wants to destroy the past and build the future upon its ruin. Thus Caesar is not only Shaw's Superman but he is a Revolutionist too. Is not the similarity between Marx and Shaw in their attack on the past history of mankind only too obvious?

Now it is not difficult to understand why Shaw stresses the need for breeding the Supermen by our determined, sincere and willful efforts. Man has made a mess of his power, culture and civilization through the ages, but in the modern age the situation has turned more serious with the invention of nuclear weapons. Problems like this are clearly beyond the capacity and comprehension of modern politicians like Burge and Lubin whom we have seen in Shaw's play *Back to Methuselah*. The future of mankind is never safe in their hands. Hence the cry for the Supermen.

## CONCLUSION

It has already been noted that conditions prevailing in our society are not favourable to the emergence of Supermen. Yet when occasionally one like them appears in our midst we persecute him or kill him. This is the place where Socrates had been poisoned, Christ crucified, and Joan of Arc burnt to death. In the Epilogue to *Saint Joan* Shaw makes Joan say : ' God that maddest this beautiful earth, when will it

be ready to receive thy saints? How long, O Lord, how long?" The life of the Superman is safe only in a society of Supermen. This is the reason why Shaw speaks in terms of a race, not a score or two, of Supermen. What he wants us to do is to create conditions which will quicken the birth of a race of Supermen.

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