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Superwoman: A Breakthrough from Conventional Victorian Society in Shaw's "Man and Superman"

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Superwoman: A Breakthrough from Conventional Victorian Society in Shaw's "Man and Superman"

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Abstract

This research explores G.B. Shaw's play "Man and Superman" through Jacques Derrida's theoretical lens of Deconstruction and Eugenic feminism. Traditionally, in the novel, the protagonist Ann Whitefield is labeled as a liar, bully, hypocrite, and coquette, which led critics to view Shaw as antifeminist. However, this study argues that Shaw's portrayal of Ann Whitefield reflects a subversive and progressive feminist vision that refuses and contradicts Victorian norms of ideal womanhood. Shaw dismantles gender binaries by presenting Ann not as a passive woman, but as a dominant, intellectually superior Figure—a Superwoman. This study repositions Shaw as a pioneering feminist thinker who critiques patriarchal norms and envisions women as active architects of evolutionary and societal progress. This study concludes that Shaw dismantles traditional male-female binaries and highlights Ann's agency in emphasizing women's crucial roles in reproduction and social leadership, thus underscoring her transformative impact on both personal and societal evolution.

Keywords: George Bernard Shaw, Eugenic Feminism, Man And Superman, 19th-Century Traditional Society, Theory of Deconstruction

Introduction

George Bernard Shaw (1972) was an Irish playwright, critic, and social reformer, and one of the most influential dramatists of the English Language. In 1925, he won the Nobel Prize in Literature for the acknowledgment of his work as witty, provocative,

and full of acute social criticism. Shaw writes dramas that commonly broke the moral, political, and cultural norms of late Victorian and Edwardian society, and his close touch on subjects like class inequality, women's rights, marriage, religion, and political reform. Man and Superman is a play written by Bernard Shaw in 1903. It is considered one of the most



intellectually stimulating modern comedies due to its incorporation of philosophy, social, and political issues. Ann Whitefield is the protagonist of the play. She is perhaps the most controversial character in G.B. Shaw, characterized by dramatic bias stemming from the limited morals of her time. This fabrication portrays her as a crude, unreasonable, and uncivilized woman, often unfaithful and a flirt. These assumptions presented Shaw as an antifeminist writer of the Victorian age, but in reality, Ann is, instead, a subversive of the archetype. She defies the expectations of an early 20th-century British woman. Selflessness, purity, and moral elevation were some qualities that were expected of Victorian women. In contrast, Shaw designs Ann to be a woman of will, intellect, and agency, and makes her fight for power, partnership, and purpose to make it thematic to the play's core. Her characterization creates discomfort as it reveals a contradiction: the womanly version of these traits praised in men—ambition, confidence, and strategic thinking—must now be renounced.

This paper seeks to reinterpret Ann's supposedly manipulative behaviors as strategic empowerment, and in doing so, tackles the critical framework that has dismissed Shaw as an antifeminist through the theoretical lens of Eugenic Feminism and Deconstruction theory. This essay analyzes *Man and Superman* within the scope of deconstruction by Jacques Derrida and Eugenic Feminism (1983), allowing for the consideration of Ann's role not as a distortion but as an advancement in feminist portrayal. Deconstruction reveals the gendered binary opposition in the play's context, where Shaw breaks the "male-active/female-passive" division and constructs Ann as a rounded character, a power holder who exercises control through humor, will, and motherhood. Eugenic Feminism, in addition, situates Ann's agency amid the early discourse on selective breeding, social advancement, and women as active shapers of the moral and intellectual life of the nation.

Problem Statement

Ann Whitefield is a good-looking and vital young woman. She is a strong force towards the creation of Superman. So, she is Shaw's superwoman, although

she is a liar, hypocrite, a bully, and a coquette. Taking account of these immoral qualities of Ann, most of the critics have labelled Shaw as an "antifeminist" writer but according to my stance he is a feminist, breaking the conventions of 19th century Victorian society, staging a new image of a woman by presenting his heroines as strong head, clever, dominant, and winner of the men. Shaw believed that only such androgynous women could change the perception of nineteenth-century Victorian society.

Research Questions

1. How does G.B. Shaw deconstruct the traditional 19th-century gender binaries through his character, Ann Whitefield, in his play 'Man and Superman'?
2. Can Shaw be considered a feminist despite his misogynist portrayal of his main female characters, and how does the theory of deconstruction reveal his feminist stance?

Research Objectives

1. To analyse G.B. Shaw's deconstruction of the traditional 19th-century gender binaries through his character, Ann Whitefield, in his play "Man and Superman".
2. To evaluate Shaw's feminist stance despite his misogynist portrayal of his main female characters through the theory of deconstruction.

Research Methodology

The research design of this study is a qualitative and interpretative approach. The primary data of this research paper is the textbook "Man and Superman" written by G.B. Shaw, with a main focus on dialogue analysis and themes. The secondary sources include some scholarly journals, research papers, and critical essays. Furthermore, Jacques Derrida's theory of "Deconstruction" and the theory of Eugenic Feminism have been applied as a research tool to analyze the text "Man and Superman," demonstrating how Shaw exploits the binaries of man and woman by introducing the concept of the superwoman through Ann Whitefield.

Literature Review

Man and Superman by George Bernard Shaw has always been surrounded by critical debate about its philosophical underpinning, cunning dialogues, and a breakthrough from the social conventions in a satirical way. Twentieth-century critics have frequently taken the play to be mainly a philosophical comedy with Shavian-style socialism and influence of Nietzsche and Life Force (Henderson, 1998; Bentley, 947). Nevertheless, this character of Ann Whitefield, seemingly at the center of the play's conflict, was often disregarded as a manipulator or an ethically questionable human being, which was further supported by patriarchal tendencies that upheld the importance of male independence over female will.

More of a feminist interpretation of the works of Shaw started appearing in the second half of the twentieth century. Both the early and late Shaw criticism uses females to figure as the engine of Shavian evolution. Weintraub (2003) points out Ann to be a purposeful pursuer of Tanner in "SHAW: The Journal of Bernard Shaw Studies" but places her motivation not so much as coquetry, managing to frame her motivation as a driving force of the play instead; and more recently in the same publication, concern to re-fashion marriage and heredity can still be read in Man and Superman as a theatre of selection conceptualized by female will. These readings help de-stabilize Ann's image as a manipulative woman, instead portraying her as a woman who is strategically directive. Man and Superman are read by Upadhyaya (2022) in terms of vitalism, marriage, and male and female relations, and the selection of females is shown to be a subject of social futurity, an analytical doorway to eugenic-feminist understanding.

Whether to view Ann as a forward-looking New Woman or a comic restatement of biological determinism is an issue long sorely divided in critical opinion. Shaw, as catalogued by Adams (1974), includes Ann as a character who deviates from Victorian conventions. The essay provides descriptions of how Ann shaped Tanner into a social figure with a tightening grip, significantly influencing the reception towards portraying Ann as an "agent" rather than a "coquette". Nevertheless,

more recent essays and appraisals have also claimed that Shaw can be overtly misogynistic when understood as woman as Life Force as the nature taming the male mind.

Further, the threads of late-Victorian/Edwardian feminism reinvented women's reproductive choice and transformed it into civic leadership through mobilizing eugenic ideologies. As Ziegler (2008) illustrates, the settling of adopting the male eugenics was in no way a submission to it but a redefinition that bestowed the right to marriage and maternity. Critical responses to the book "Love and Eugenics" by Angelique Richardson in the Late 19th Century also demonstrate how New-Woman authors are connecting selective mating with social improvement. However, in such readings as well, there is a conflict. Is Ann an agent of female liberation, or is the reproductive imperative the framework through which her agency is defined?

These conflicts are resettable in a fruitful way with the help of the theory of deconstruction published by Jacques Derrida. 1991 Deconstruction reveals the instability of the binary oppositions (male/female, dominance/submission, intellect/emotion) in discourses under which the traditional reading of the play is organized. Whereas scholars like Innes (1998) have agreed with Shaw on his inclination toward blurring these categories, it is not common to find any of them applying Derrida to Man and Superman in a direct way. This research gap provides an opportunity to demonstrate how Shaw subverts the traditional gender status quo by portraying Ann as the intellectual and tactical equal of her male counterpart, John Tanner.

On the same note, Eugenic feminism, a related vision of feminism guided by the ideology of upgrading the human race through proper discipline in reproduction, has been a controversial but enlightening route of reading the heroines of Shaw. The parallels between feminist agency and the eugenic vision have been traced in the works of such scholars as Angelique Richardson (2003), who found examples of how a specific woman, such as Ann Whitefield, represents the ideological collision between social liberation and biological determinism.

Although contributions to Shaw as an eugenic thinker have been examined in regard to other plays like *Major Barbara* and *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, there is a relative lack of literature concerning the eugenic implications of *Man and Superman*.

This study lies in the middle of these two important frameworks. It is an addition to feminist reevaluation of Shaw heroines, but relies on the deconstructive criticism to find out how the play struggles against the stable moral typecast.

Theoretical Framework

This research article is based on Jacques Derrida's theory of Deconstruction. The deconstruction is not an idea or a type of examination; rather, it is a process of deconstructing and analyzing the text for its hidden meanings. Deconstructing a text means uncovering the hidden meaning behind the words in the text. This hypothesis is a critique of certain scholarly suppositions and intellectuals that underlie all Western values and ideas. According to R. Gnanasekaran (2015) a South Indian scholar, deconstructing a text focuses on the interior and innate inconsistencies in language and elucidation. In *Man and Superman*, we observe the binary opposition: the role of men as victims and women as hunters and chasers. Shaw has deconstructed the conventions of Victorian society by depicting a strong, dominant, hypocritical, and clever heroine as a superwoman. There is a breakdown of the Victorian concept of an ideal woman, "angel in the house", to a superwoman despite so many immoral qualities. There is a shift from "womanly women" to "un-womanly women" in *Man and Superman*.

The second theory I have applied to the text is Feminism, specifically Eugenic Feminism. Keum-Hee Jang argues that, in Eugenic feminism, women encourage selective breeding for the production of superior offspring. To produce better offspring, women were seeking those partners who gave them significance in society. In Eugenics, women are encouraged to choose breeding partners who will have better children. Eugenic feminists believe that rational reproduction is the new method for the improvement of humankind. In terms of Eugenics, women played a crucial role in evolution, with the

primary goal of finding a competitive husband to secure a better future for their children. In *Man and Superman*, the importance of racial improvement and of motherhood is emphasized as an aspect of the relationship between Feminism and Eugenics.

Analysis and Discussion

In 19th-century literature, female characters were prominently presented as naive, helpless, and subordinate to male characters. They were presented as dependent on men for their livelihood, as marriage was considered the only means of support. Nineteenth-century Victorian society was considered a pillar of society. With the rise of Feminism, people began to question the moral, social, and political values of Victorian society. Feminists revealed the decadent, morbid, and infected side of Victorian society. On gender issues, "female role became a focal point to investigate the conventional womanly womanliness, compared to the feminist concept of new woman" (Banthakit 2011). The concept of a new woman emerged as a dominant theme in the last decade of modern literature, with Shaw's name being echoed most frequently. Shaw's plays are related to aspects of Feminism, not to anti-feminism. He devoted a chapter, "The Womanly Woman," in the *Quintessence* to criticize the morals and values of Victorian society. He mentioned that a woman cannot achieve her legal rights "unless she repudiates her womanliness, her duty to her husband, to her children, to society, to the Law and to everyone but to herself, she cannot emancipate herself (Shaw, 1913, p. 56). Therefore, he presented his female characters as "unwomanly women" to prioritize their desires and duties and not to surrender to the conventional gendered roles of man and woman. Shaw's leading heroines in his plays, who emancipate themselves from domesticity and marriage suppression, and their conflict with society, show his feminist stance.

Throughout the play *Man and Superman*, the characters' roles are paradoxically reversed, with men as victims and women as chasers of love. Alice Ravenhill describes Victorian women's limitations by arguing that they were to limit themselves to merely familial or personal business, as Chutarat Banthakit

mentions in her article "The enormous influence of women can only be rightly exercised with the support of and in co-operation with men...Most urgent of all, the girl growing to womanhood, whether in the humblest or most exalted sphere of life, should study the needs of infancy and the art of the right rearing of children" (Banthakit 2011). Shaw depicted influential, domestic characters of the Victorian era in his plays to show the women's position as they were considered as "inferior to man and legally subordinate" (Banthakit 2011). The Ideal woman was considered "The womanly woman" in the house. The conventional marriage was prioritised by Victorian women because they were made to believe that through marriage, they could achieve a higher social status, security of health, and wealth.

Shaw has redefined the portrayal of female characters from the traditional Victorian ideal by introducing self-determined women in his plays. In "Man and Superman," his character Ann Whitefield represents a shift from the image of women as the "angel in the house" to the idea of the "new woman". Most middle-class Victorian women married for personal, economic, or social reasons, but Ann's motivations differ. She is not seeking a husband for love or emotional fulfillment, but rather to find a "father for Superman" with the goal of producing better offspring through eugenics. She explains that her search for a spouse is not driven by a desire for a lifetime of romantic happiness, but by an unconscious wish to create the best possible children who can help elevate the human race. As Jang notes, "it has a eugenic rather than a romantic basis" (Jang 2006). According to Shaw's views on eugenics, women play a crucial role in the regeneration of a higher human race. Indeed, "Man and Superman" is about the replacement of man by a superior species, as shown in Act III when he says:

1. Ana:... Tell me, where can I find Superman?
2. The Devil: He is not yet created, Senora.
3. The Statue: And never will be, probably....
4. Ana: Not yet created! Then my work is not done yet. I believe in the life to come... A
5. father! A father for Superman! (Ill, 173).

Here, Shaw has emphasized the importance of Ann as a creator of Superman, as Ann says her work is not done before the creation of Superman.

Further, in "Man and Superman", Shaw introduces the idea of the "new woman," described as the embodiment of a powerful force, acting as a sexual aggressor and the key driver of the play's action, like Ann Whitefield. She achieves her goals by choosing a partner without considering his objections. As a heroine in the play, she pretends to be a traditional, feminine woman, adopting the Victorian role of a domestic figure. However, her actions are not typical of a woman, as she hides her real desires through her perfect imitation of proper Victorian behavior. Shaw uses the contrasting roles of male and female characters to explore the concept of the "life force" in his plays. He moves away from the traditional roles of women being instinctive and men being intellectual, instead focusing on evolution for a better human race. Ann Whitefield is seen as a biological force in human evolution, a real, flesh-and-blood person. Shaw called her his most beautiful female creation. She is ready to break rules, lie, and deceive to win her man. She uses many means, and she even uses people to achieve her goals. She is bound as an "instrument of the life force for the eugenic breeding of superman" (Sterner 1998).

Further, Ann Whitefield is a combination of Shaw's complex literary types. When we look at her through Tanner's eyes, we see her as the dangerous huntress, "the femme fatale: "a cat" (Man and Superman, p. 10), "a boa constrictor" (p. 11), "the lioness" (p. 22), "a Bengal tiger" (p. 24), "Lady Mephistopheles" (p. 31). At the surface level, while noticing the names of these animals that he called Ann with, most of the critics have labelled Shaw as antifeminist, but when we look at the deeper level, we observe the power behind these words that Shaw is giving to Ann, as these animals are powerful in their domain. In Act II, Tanner escapes from her, realizing that he is "the marked down victim, the destined prey" (Shaw 67). At the end of the play, he feels caught in her grip. In contrast to him, Ramsden sees her as the epitome of innocence and female propriety: "a wonderfully dutiful girl" (6), "only a woman, a young and inexperienced woman at that" (p. 13). Also,

Octavius worships her as a goddess as Shaw says "She is to him the reality of romance, the inner good sense of nonsense, the unveiling of his eyes, the freeing of his soul, the abolition of time, place and circumstance, the etherealization of his blood into rapturous rivers of the very water of life itself, the revelation of all the mysteries and the sanctification of all the dogmas" (p. 16). Here she is linked with the source of life and so with Eve. Ann babies' men: she tells Tanner that he is "a perfect baby in the things I do understand" (p. 39) and she calls "Ricky-Ticky-Tavvy" "a nice creature - a good boy" (p. 151). This phrase "Ricky-Ticky-Tavvy" symbolizes her dominance over Octavius. At the end of Act 4, Shaw describes Ann as "one of the vital geniuses who inspires confidence . . . also some fear" (p. 16). He regards Ann as "Every woman" (Epistle Dedicatory, p. xxviii).

Shaw has dismantled the concept of woman in a patriarchal setting. He has used the symbolic mode of language in a way that shows the strength of a woman instead of her weakness. As Ouahiba Temouh remarks, "in *Man and Superman* the female portraits represent another marker of Shaw's feminist stance" (Temouh 2012). Shaw's Ann is a confident, active, and powerful human being who can decide on her own without taking help from anybody. She represents the modern woman, who is different from the conventional woman, as Temouh opines, "Ann is an unwomanly woman who challenges the phallogocentric ideal of feminine behavior and transcends the stereotypical image of the romantic passive female" (Temouh 2012). He has presented Ann as an unconventional woman of patriarchal society, where women are supposed to remain submissive and inferior to male members of the society. She is a manipulator of all male characters. She manipulates Tanner and Ramsden to serve as co-guardians. Shaw has made Ann a character who is intelligent enough to control the male characters with her "vital geniuses" (Shaw 119). The phrase "vital geniuses" symbolizes the intellectual capacity of Ann. Here, Shaw dismantles the concept of traditional Victorian society that women are stupid, spendthrift, or featherheaded.

Moreover, Ann Whitefield is presented as a superwoman who is not only able to control male

characters but also has the power to control her emotions and feelings. In Shaw's views, "she is a perfectly self-controlled woman" (Shaw 189), which symbolizes the quality of Ann as a superwoman. According to Nietzsche, "When man learns to control and suppress his brutal desires and overpowering feelings, he will turn into the superman whose mind will govern his body according to the natural law of *The Will to Power*" (qtd. in Mansour 189). Likewise, Wisam Mansour remarks that Nietzsche has presented men as heroes, but in Shaw's views, women are heroes "whose will to power manifests itself in several ways that include their control and management of their emotions and desires, their command of sexual selection" (Mansour 189). According to Nietzsche (1964) higher civilizations will be made with only heroic men, but Shaw gives this heroism to women by stating that the heroes are there. "They are the women whose will to power manifests itself in several ways that include their control and management of their emotions and desires, their command of sexual selection, and their control of the process of reproduction" (Mansour 2008). In Henderson's words, the woman has the "key to the materialization of the superman" (1998:37). Shaw opines that "woman is fully conscious of her supremacy in the course of breeding the race to come" (Mansour 2008).

Additionally, Shaw explores the theme of female empowerment in "*Man and Superman*". Marriage becomes a central topic through which Shaw entertains his audience by mocking and criticizing Victorian norms, values, and beliefs. In the play, he introduces three main characters—Tanner, Ann, and Octavius—to examine the relationship between men and women. Tanner is shown as a progressive thinker who understands the role of women in marriage. Octavius is a simple-minded lover whose actions are used by Shaw to mock Victorian romantic ideas and highlight the traits of the new woman. Ann is depicted as a strong, power-driven character, influenced by the "force of Nature" and her own "Will to Power". Tanner comments on women's vitality, saying, "Vitality in a woman is a blind fury of creation". He also notes that women possess a strong will.

“have a purpose which is not their own purpose, but that of the whole universe, a man is nothing to them but an instrument of that purpose. ... They accuse us of treating them as a mere means to our pleasure; but how can so feeble and transient a folly as a man's selfish pleasure enslave a woman as the whole purpose of Nature embodied in a woman can enslave a man? (I, 61)

Here, Shaw presents a divine purpose of women as the creators of the new generation, which is the main focus of nature. This reflects women's superiority over men. We also see women's dominance in marriage, as shown when Tanner compares women to "bees and spiders." This symbolizes women's predatory nature. Shaw also shows some awareness of women's tricks and plans. Ann says, "You seem to understand all the things I don't understand, but you are a perfect baby in the things I do understand" (Shaw 78). Clearly, Ann performs these complicated things better than honey bees. Tanner wonders if Octavius has ever read about the relationship between the mother bee and the male in natural history. He points him toward the lesson of Life Force in the bee world.

Go to the bee, thou poet: consider her ways and be wise. By heaven, Tavy, if women could do without our work, and we ate their children's bread instead of making it, they would kill us as the spider kills its mate or as the bee kills the drone. And they would be right if we were good for nothing but love. (II, 92)

Don Juan addresses Ana, while emphasizing the reproductive power of the body, believing that to the ladies, “man's duties and responsibilities begin and end with the task of getting bread for the children. To her, man is only a means to the end of getting children and rearing them.” (III, 147). When Ana asks him if this is his “idea of a woman's mind?” Don Juan replies;

A 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. Whilst he fulfils the purpose for

which she made him, he is welcome to his dreams, his follies, his ideals, his heroisms, provided that the keystone of them all is the worship of woman, of motherhood, of the family, of the hearth. (III, 147)

Moreover, Shaw views men as needing to worship women and their motherhood. Though both partners in the reproduction process are treated equally, Shaw specially praises women's creative energy and natural ability, which she uses to control men and make them follow her life-force goals. Ann, whom Shaw loves and empowers, manages to bring all the men in the play under her influence: Octavius, who is deeply in love with her and is willing to do anything to make her happy; Ramsden, a middle-aged Victorian man who is a guardian to Ann but lacks the courage to control her behavior or enforce social norms; and finally, Tanner, who tries to escape her dominance but fails. These examples show Shaw's most feminine views and what he sees as the qualities of an ideal woman in a modern society.

Further, in Act IV (192-196), Ann rejects Octavius's romantic love and announces she wants to marry Tanner. Eric Bentley points out three important points that show modern trends in man-woman relationships: the failure of romantic love, the new woman's focus on practical utility, and the right of the new woman to choose a partner she considers the best fit. Also, men often suffer for mistakes that are not their own. It is clear that Shaw uses two valid Victorian principles to support his argument: the utilitarian view of man-woman relationships and the Darwinian idea of sexual selection, as described in Darwin's "The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex" (1871). Therefore, for Shaw, it is natural to argue that women have a strong role in marriage, love, and reproduction. Tanner, the second victim of Ann, expresses his unwillingness to be her guardian because he knows his attempts to control her are useless. He claims she will force them to do her bidding and then blame her guardians for her actions. He is also afraid he might become her victim. So, he wants to go to a "Mahometan country where men are protected from women" (Act II, 107). He tries to escape from her but fails.

Tanner to Ann (despairingly): Oh, you are witty: at the supreme moment, the Life Force endows you with every quality. Well, I, too, can be a hypocrite. Your father's will appointed me your guardian, not your suitor. I shall be faithful to my trust.

Ann (in low siren tones): He asked me who I would have as my guardian before he made that will. I chose you!

Tanner: The will is yours then! The trap was laid from the beginning.

Ann (concentrating all her magic): From the beginning - from our childhood - for both of us - by the Life Force. (IV, 205)

In other words, Shaw's superwoman has the ability to make Superman. In Shaw's view, "woman has the ascendancy in this evolutionary process of breeding for she is the only one who can eliminate the useless members of the society through conscious selection, the way the bees instinctively purge their cells of the idle drone" (Mansour 191). So, women can breed, so society is higher.

Conclusion

On a concluding note, Shaw sees perfectibility as a woman's natural and original aim in the process of breeding. He opposed the Victorian views on marriage, love, and prudery, seeing them as harmful to the Life Force. Shaw clearly describes a unique type of woman who plays a key role in creating Superman. Not just any woman can give birth to him; she has to be like Ann—strong, brave, determined, and practical. Ultimately, Tanner's loss highlights the strength of Ann's will to power, which represents Shaw's idea of the superwoman. This shows how powerless Victorian men are in the face of such a dominant female character, and how women can be superior to men. As Bentley says, "Tanner's intellectual ideas become insignificant compared to Ann's real strength" (1979: 157). Shaw believes that women shape their morals, values, and beauty through a selective biological process, which is the only way to create Superman.

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