

## The Concept of Life Force in the Plays of George Bernard Shaw

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### Abstract

The Victorian Age is known not only for its technological advancements but also for compromises that resulted in a battle between reason and faith. The impact of Darwin's 'Origin of Species' was widely seen in the works of contemporary writers. While Dickens presented the crude realities of society in a serious manner, Shaw, who wrote in the later part of the century, painted the gloomy picture in color. He ridiculed the follies of society by comparing the conventional notions with the idealistic ones. He dealt with numerous subjects like war, medicine, law, politics, prostitution, love, etc. but his approach towards these themes remained alien to the society. Love, for example, was considered divine and beautiful by writers and poets before Shaw, but he exposed the motive behind falling in love and the concept of Life Force in his plays. In this research paper I am discussing the theme of Life Force in the selected plays of George Bernard Shaw and the plays I have taken for my research are Arms and the Man and Man and the Superman.

**Keywords:** Life Force, New Drama, New Woman, love, marriage, heroine.

### Introduction

Shaw wrote the new kind of drama or simply what he called New Drama, and introduced in it the New Woman who was different from the preconceived notions of a woman. His women were not only confident but also had a mind of their own which was rare in his time, and they were determined to achieve what they desired. He never wrote a woman who would succumb to the circumstances of the society. His women may not always be good but they all had qualities of a heroine. While presenting his heroines he made sure to present not just a delicate figure but a strong will as well. And although he has not introduced the phrase of New Love in his plays but his treatment of love is surely novel. When everyone was busy falling in love and presenting the feelings associated with it, the after effects and side effects of the emotion, Shaw raised curtains from the motive behind it. Though he discussed the theme of Life Force in Man and Superman but even in his previous plays he has not portrayed love as a pure emotion, instead he writes about it as a necessity to flourish the earth with superior beings. Woman, according to Shaw, is a Life Force which compels her to get married and bring into world a superior mankind. Shaw explains that a woman is always in search of a man who would prove to be a good husband by giving her children and thereafter earning bread for them.

Shaw made popular the concept of New Woman through his plays. The heroines of his plays somehow emerge stronger than his heroes. In Man and Superman Jack Tanner says, "woman is the pursuer and man the pursued... It is the business of a woman to get married as soon as possible and a man to remain bachelor as long as possible." Through his plays he has propagated that the ultimate end of a woman is to find a man who would prove to be a suitable father to her children and thus she is the Life Force in the nature. Shaw did not agree with Darwin's theory of survival of the fittest and natural selection, he believed that the world relies upon the process of creative selection. In Arms and the Man, Raina is revealed to be engaged to Sergius but gradually changes her opinion about him and falls for Bluntschli because even he might not appear to be superficially heroic but he makes her understand the reality of war and somehow appears more realistic. Raina finds Bluntschli a superior being as he looks more honest and loyal and hence a better father for her children than Sergius, who she finds out, is unfaithful to her and pretentious in the matters of courage and bravery. Louka, on the other hand cheats on Nicola because, according to her, he is too faithful to his masters and hence will not achieve anything in his life. She is portrayed as an ambitious woman who wants to have comforts and luxuries in her life and hence a man who can satisfy her demands and take care of her and her children for the rest of her life.

The theme of Life Force is most prominently discussed in Shaw's Man and Superman. The play is about Ann Whitefield who is a beautifully wrought woman. In the beginning of the play Ann is portrayed as a docile, naïve woman who would never go against her parents' wishes. When Ramsden asks Ann that he cannot be her co-guardian along with Tanner, she manipulates the situation by involving her mother and later on convincing both the men to be her guardian. It is towards the end of the play we realize that it was one her suggestion only that Mr. Whitefield had made Tanner her co-guardian. Throughout the play we read Octavius making efforts to woo Ann and she keeps playing with his heart while at the same time keeping an eye on Tanner. Tanner, on the contrary, being fully aware of the situation tries to escape from her *paws* but fails miserably at the end. The dialogue between Tanner and Ann makes the audience understand what Ann thought about men like Octavius and that the poetic hearts like him never marry but endure the pain of a broken heart throughout their lives. It is men like Tanner who marry and prove to be good husbands.

### Conclusion

Shaw proclaimed that life is about the creative selection. He explains to the readers that it is the duty of man and woman to bring into the world a superior man or as Nietzsche had put it “ubersmench”. Shaw says that the changing attitude of men like thinking about their selfish desires of freedom and independence is not going to help and this is the reason why women had to start being the driving force behind men. The primary motive of human existence is the creation of a superman and every man and woman has to work towards it. In recent times the concept of Life Force has been modified and now women look for men who can provide them financial security but the underlying reason remains the same. She never picks a man who cannot fulfill her needs or cannot provide her security. Shaw believed in Nietzsche’s idea that mankind is evolving through a process of natural selection and it is the woman who plays primary role in this. Woman is the Life Force who through a process of natural selection entices a man to marry her so that she can fulfill the purpose of nature and thus love is only a part of a greater reality and necessity.

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