

"Drama & God" is the Craigville reading--discussion summer series title, & tomorrow I'm the devil in GBS's "Don Juan in Hell," Act III of MAN AND SUPERMAN: A Comedy and a Philosophy (1903; 1st performed, 1905). This Thinksheet is an optional take-home at the end of the meeting.

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GBS & GOD, A STANDOFF

1 While as a **cynic** about biblical religion Bernard Shaw (he reduced "George" to "G.," then dropped it) repels me, as a fellow-**contrarian** he attracts me. (The subtitle of my FLOW OF FLESH, REACH OF SPIRIT is "Thinksheets of a Contrarian Christian.") So soon after his THE ADVENTURES OF THE BLACK GIRL IN HER SEARCH FOR GOD appeared (1930, as I remember it: my copy's long gone), I read it with both disgust & delight. Poor African blackgirl wandering in the jungle, worshipping an idol as she came upon it & then rejecting it for the next idol she came upon! For GBS the book was a tour-de-force romp through the religions: for her it was jungle darkness till she emerged out into the light (Enlightenment; as a Buddhist tract I read recently put it, with an Eastern tilt, "Enlighten up!").

2 That 1st GBS writing I read was given me by a sour epileptic Eng. teacher in secondary school--Grace Chittenden. A Shavian (an adjective--meaning "anticonventional"--which GBS was happy to have added, in preservation of his name, to the Eng. language), she loved to shock her stately Episcopal mother, widow of a Harvard Prof. of Eng. I was their gardener, & they both taught me Eng. literature (Grace the daughter at an earlier stage than Gertrude M., under whom I wrote, as my graduation thesis, a classical Christian paper titled "Jesus of Nazareth," & who gave me a 30-volume leather-bound set titled LIBRARY OF THE WORLD'S BEST LITERATURE, which I still have). Elegant speakers of Eng., these two Victorian ladies (of whom I've never previously written) for me represent the two Victorian sides of Shaw, the 2nd louder than the 1st: conformist "Bernard Shaw" & rebel-promoter (by his own distinction of the names) "GBS." It was GBS who wrote ...THE BLACK GIRL..., & how appropriate it was that it was Grace who gave it to me!

What follows is not a sketch of Shaw or his oeuvre but only some **notes** pertinent to the double occasion of this Thinksheet: the "Drama & God" series, & the "Don Juan in Hell" reading & discussion:

3 Born in 1856 (3 yrs. before Darwin's ORIGIN OF SPECIES) in Dublin to non-devout Protestant Anglo-Irish parents (father a drunk, mother an escapist into the arts), S. stretched out his years to 94, dying in 1950. The standard set (36 volumes!) of his writings is incomplete: 50 plays, many hundreds of columns as a critic (chiefly of music), novels, novellas, essays, letters (his favorite way of relating to women: he was a virgin till 20 & was celibate at 43 [in a long & happy celibate marriage])....Nobel Prize in Literature, 1925.

4 His **passions** were, in order, intellectual (esp. religion & science), moral (social-reform causes, such as women's rights [under Ibsen influence]), economic (Henry George, less Marx, more radical-secular Fabian Society).

5 From his love of playing **devil's advocate** (& often, according to clergy & the general public, getting stuck on the devil's side), he was both a bete noir in the public eye & a darling of the intellectual & artistic chattering classes. This he displays e.g. in THE DEVIL'S DISCIPLE (1897) and MAN AND SUPERMAN (above; but in which also we see his conservative Victorian side: "Our political experiment of democracy, the last refuge of cheap misgovernment" [Epistle Dedicatory, xxi]).

6 In Geo. Lucas' 1st "Star Wars," the old wise one blesses Luke Skywalker with "May the Force be with you." L. said he wanted to avoid misunderstanding (meaning giving offense), as "God" would. Was he playing off of S.' "Life Force" which S. used before H. Bergson's "élan vital" in CREATIVE EVOLUTION (1913; Fr 1907)? S.' **atheism**, however, was doubly qualified: (1) The universe/life exhibits design/purpose (JOHN BULL'S OTHER ISLAND [1907], xxv: "Though the Life Force supplies us with its own purpose, it has no other brains to work with than those it has painfully and imperfectly evolved in our heads"); (2) He was no superficial scoffer at religion but was life-long curious about it & all its expressions (MAN AND SUPER-

MAN, xxi: "I am a sort of collector of religions: and the curious thing is that I find I can believe in them all").

7 "Freethinking" was in the air, & he took avidly to it in his teens. His first publication (1875, age 19) was a letter to the editor opposing permitting Moody & Sankey's coming to Ireland for an evangelistic campaign!....In 1882 he heard **Henry George**, whose PROGRESS AND POVERTY (a tome arguing the "single tax" [on realty sales] as adequate for gov't. income) hit me when I was preaching to the Chicago (Nazi) Bund in 1941: those American Nazis had devised a Georgite form of fascism. Recently in a public meeting I asked Jn.Ken.Galbraith why he hadn't taken George more seriously, & he said "I've eight references to him in my latest book."

Well, S. said, in a biography, "George switched me over [from primary interest in science/religion] to economics" (underlining mine). He toyed with various forms of **socialism**, all non-messianic (so both Marxism [with its utopian labor theory of value] & Christian socialism turned him off). He helped form, & joined, the Fabian Society, which preached secular gradualism. But he was a social reformer in his heart & with his mouth, not with his hands: he wasn't political-action oriented. And he was politically naive: at various times he praised Mussolini, Hitler, Lenin (saying in 1931 "If Lenin fails, civilization fails"). (I'm reminded of André Malraux: Since the 19th c. killed God, the 20th will replace him.)

8 S.' love of paradox comported well with his gut belief in what he liked to call "**free vitality**" (v. institutions & conventional thinking/behavior)....His only socialist play was "Widows' Houses" (1890, his 1st drama), a comedy against capitalism. But there's social-reform bite in MRS. WARREN'S PROFESSION (1893, which Craigville's drama-reading/discussion series took on last summer).

9 S.' 1st 20th-c. play, MAN AND SUPERMAN, strands together his earlier concerns. Socialist dreaming is short-run & nonpolitical in the sense that it's undermotivating. Social change needs long-run energies generated by (1) imagination-driven awe & (2) the steady sense that something **more** is going on than change. S.' religion of free vitality (strengthened by his Darwin & Bergson learnings) provided that awe & those energies for him. In an essay on S., Eric Bentley well described the situation in S.' mind: "Having lost the old sense of an eternal realm 'out there' or 'up there,' [humanity] needs a sense, rooted in the modern feeling for history and development, of an eternal movement toward ever higher goals." (Reminds me of my teacher Henry Nelson Wieman: "God is the increase of appreciative awareness.")But when very old & wanting to die, he seems to have added something to his religion-mix: "I shall be glad to go home and get out of hell."

10 S.' actual political interest was largely tangential, though he messed a bit into British/Irish politics. He soon changed his mind on Hitler: "We ought to have declared war on Germany the moment Mr. Hitler's police stole Einstein's violin." (Personal note: E. replaced his violin when he came to Princeton. When my college choir sang there [1937], he came backstage [with his usual gray sweatshirt] & said "I wish I could play my fiddle as well as you young people sing.")

11 "Don Juan in Hell" (for tomorrow evening), Jn.Tanner's dream in MAN AND SUPERMAN illumines the whole play & subtly reveals the play's theme, viz. that some (not Tanner, who's conquered by a woman) are supermen (a play on Nietzsche's "Übermensch") in suppressing their own will in order to detect & follow the will of the universe (a.k.a., formerly, "God's will"; cp. Jesus' "Not my will but yours be done"). Ann Whitefield is pursuing Tanner (when he has the dream) with a view to marriage, to which he finally submits. (Ironical reversals: Tanner in hell is Don Juan, in legend a woman-pursuing man; & Ann is legend's Dona Ana, the man-pursued woman.)....In his "A Foreword to the Pop. Ed. of Man and Superman" (747, Bernard Shaw, COMPLETE PLAYS WITH PREFACES, Vol.III, Dodd, Mead/63), S. says "the vision of hell in the third act...is expressly intended to be a revelation of the modern religion of evolution," but natural selection is of limited explicative value: "it leaves untouched the whole sphere of will, purpose, design, intention, even consciousness." 748: "Don Juan in hell" "is a careful attempt to write a new Book of Genesis for the Bible of the Evolutionists."....Don Juan leaves hell for heaven; the devil consolidates his realm of idle pleasure-seeking & sentimental-romantic worship.