



Illusions of Love and the Illusion of Choice: Faulty Romantic Ideals and the Quest for Self-Knowledge in G.B Shaw's "Candida".

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Abstract

The theme of illusion—particularly the illusions of love and choice—in George Bernard Shaw's *Candida*, situating it within a broader critique of romantic idealism and self-deception. Far from being a conventional love triangle, the relationship between *Candida*, her husband Reverend James Morell, and the young poet Eugene Marchbanks functions as a dramatic device to expose the faulty romantic and moral constructs each male character imposes upon *Candida*. The central thesis contends that Shaw subverts the traditional narrative of romantic choice by emphasizing that *Candida*'s role is not that of a prize to be won, but rather a mirror in which each man confronts the limitations of his own self-image. Morell cloaks his sense of moral superiority in the language of religious and domestic sacrifice, believing he deserves *Candida*'s loyalty due to his social righteousness and emotional dependability. Marchbanks, in contrast, idolizes *Candida* as a sublime, almost ethereal figure trapped in a life beneath her, projecting an illusion of romantic idealism that erases her agency in favour of his own poetic salvation. In both cases, *Candida* is not seen as a complex subject but as a vessel for male fantasy and self-validation. Her climactic "choice" between the two men is less a genuine romantic decision and more an assertion of her own perceptiveness and self-knowledge—one that dismantles both Morell's moral arrogance and Marchbanks's adolescent idealism. The illusion of choice, therefore, lies not with *Candida* but with the men who believe themselves to be her rightful suitors based on flawed premises. The play ultimately critiques the traditional conceptions of romantic love, sacrifice, and heroism by reframing them as delusions that hinder authentic self-understanding. *Candida* emerges not simply as a woman caught between two lovers but as the only character capable of discerning reality from illusion. In doing so, Shaw articulates a progressive vision of female autonomy and emotional clarity, destabilizing the patriarchal assumption that love is earned through virtue or passion alone. The real drama lies not in the

rivalry itself but in the exposure of how romantic and moral identities are constructed, performed, and undone. Through its interrogation of idealism, sacrifice, and self-delusion, *Candida* becomes a sharp, witty study of how individuals seek self-knowledge by confronting the illusions they project onto others—and how those illusions must be shattered in order for truth, however uncomfortable, to emerge.

Keywords: Illusions of Love, Illusions of Choice, Self-Knowledge, Psychological Realism, Gender and Perception, Idealized Womanhood.

I. Introduction

George Bernard Shaw's *Candida* (1898) offers a profound critique of romantic idealism by dismantling the illusions surrounding love, choice, and gendered identity. Framed within the context of a seemingly conventional love triangle between the titular character *Candida*, her clergyman husband Reverend James Morell, and the poetic young Marchbanks, the play interrogates the foundational assumptions of romantic love and exposes the psychological and ideological constructs that underpin it. Shaw, as a Fabian and dramatist of ideas, uses *Candida* not to reaffirm the sentimental conventions of the romantic genre but to challenge the audience's perception of love, gender, and selfhood. The central thesis of *Candida* is that what appears to be a straightforward narrative of romantic rivalry is in fact an exploration of the illusion of love and the illusion of choice—mechanisms through which characters (and by extension, audiences) misunderstand themselves and each other. The illusion of love in *Candida* stems from the male characters' projection of their desires, insecurities, and ideals onto *Candida*, transforming her into a symbol rather than a person. Marchbanks idolizes her as a maternal, ethereal savior, while Morell regards her as a loyal domestic companion and moral anchor. Neither truly sees *Candida* as an autonomous woman with her own desires and agency. In romanticizing



her, both men perpetuate idealized womanhood, confining Candida within the binary of angelic nurturer versus dutiful wife. Shaw's brilliance lies in his ability to reveal how these idealizations are less about Candida and more about the men's need for self-affirmation. The supposed love they express becomes a mirror for their internal struggles, not a reflection of genuine mutual understanding. Closely tied to this is the illusion of choice. The climactic moment when Candida is asked to choose between her husband and her poetic admirer is often interpreted as the narrative's emotional fulcrum. Yet, Shaw subverts the conventional stakes of this choice. Candida's decision is not an endorsement of one man over another but a reflection of her awareness of their emotional needs and psychological immaturity. Her choice is not grounded in passion, but in self-knowledge, and in her understanding of how love operates not through grand gestures but through realistic, often mundane, moral responsibility. The illusion, therefore, is that either man truly has agency in the matter, or that romantic love is based on merit. Shaw reveals how emotional choices are often based on deeper psychological needs rather than romantic ideals. Shaw's deployment of psychological realism deepens the play's subversive message. Each character undergoes a subtle unmasking, and the play's emotional landscape is shaped not by dramatic actions but by carefully constructed dialogue that exposes the internal contradictions and delusions of the characters. This focus on the mind over melodrama allows Candida to transcend Victorian sentimentalism and interrogate the gender and perception paradigms that shaped contemporary relationships. Candida herself, in refusing to be idealized or manipulated, becomes a powerful figure of clarity and modern female autonomy. Her eventual revelation of her perspective and reasoning positions her as the only character not operating under delusion, granting her not just narrative power but philosophical authority. In sum, *Candida* is not a tale of romantic competition but a dramatic inquiry into how people fail to perceive each other accurately due to the distortions of idealism and gendered expectation. Shaw dismantles the romantic mythologies that drive literature and life, revealing instead a modern vision of love based on responsibility, mutual respect, and realism. Through the interplay of illusion of love, illusion of choice, self-knowledge, psychological realism, gender and perception, and the critique of idealized womanhood, Shaw reconfigures the romantic drama into a work of profound intellectual and emotional insight.

The Construction of Romantic Illusions in G.B. Shaw's *Candida*

In *Candida*, George Bernard Shaw masterfully constructs and deconstructs romantic illusions through the complex interplay of characters, expectations, and psychological realism. Shaw's central concern is not romantic love in its idealized form but the faulty perceptions and self-deceptions that shape it. The love triangle between Candida, her husband Reverend James Morell, and the young poet Eugene Marchbanks serves as a theatrical framework to explore how romantic ideals are not only projected onto others but also weaponized to preserve personal illusions and societal roles. The characters' understanding of love is heavily influenced by their illusions. Reverend Morell, a progressive clergyman and a public figure, imagines himself to be the moral and intellectual centre of his household. He believes he has "won" Candida through strength, stability, and social usefulness. His love is based on the illusion of his own indispensability and moral superiority. Morell's sense of security in love is revealed to be built upon an unexamined patriarchal assumption: that Candida, the wife, is naturally dependent on and grateful to him for protection and purpose. In contrast, Eugene Marchbanks, the sensitive young poet, constructs Candida as a tragic, imprisoned figure—an ethereal woman of delicate sensibilities, misunderstood and unappreciated by her utilitarian husband. His romanticism is both excessive and immature, suggesting that true love lies in rescuing the beloved from the banality of domestic life. Both men thus fail to see Candida as a person; instead, they see her as a symbol or extension of their own needs. Morell constructs her as the loyal and supportive wife who validates his role as a moral leader, while Marchbanks envisions her as a muse to his tortured genius. These opposing but equally romanticized illusions represent two sides of Victorian and Edwardian ideals of womanhood: the angel in the house and the unattainable muse. Through Candida's quiet wisdom and eventual assertion of agency, Shaw dismantles these projections. The pivotal moment in the play—when Candida is asked to "choose" between the two men—is a deliberate subversion of romantic drama conventions. Rather than selecting one man over the other, Candida reveals that neither understands the true burden she bears. She says she will choose "the weaker of the two," not out of passion or duty, but out of a deeper knowledge of emotional dependence and resilience. Her recognition that both men are emotionally immature exposes the illusion that love is about possession or rescue. Instead, Shaw constructs a more pragmatic, psychologically realistic vision of love—one based



on clear-sightedness, mutual understanding, and emotional labour. Ultimately, *Candida* critiques the romantic illusion as a form of self-deception, especially when filtered through masculine ideals and gendered expectations. Shaw replaces melodramatic love with intellectual intimacy and emotional truth. By constructing and then systematically dismantling romantic illusions, he paves the way for a feminist consciousness and a modern awareness of love's complex negotiations of power, perception, and self-knowledge.

The illusion of choice in G.B. Shaw's *Candida*

In *Candida*, George Bernard Shaw subverts the conventional structure of romantic drama by introducing what appears to be a love triangle between *Candida*, her husband Reverend James Morell, and the young poet Eugene Marchbanks. At the heart of this triangle lies a crucial question: whom will *Candida* choose? However, Shaw constructs this dilemma not to uphold the romantic fantasy of choice, but rather to dismantle it. The so-called "choice" is not a real decision between two lovers, but a dramatic strategy deployed to reveal the false premises underlying both men's perceptions of *Candida*. Morell represents the ideal of the morally upright, rational husband who believes his wife thrives in domestic self-sacrifice. Marchbanks, by contrast, idolizes her as a goddess-like figure imprisoned in a mundane existence, waiting to be rescued into poetic transcendence. Both of these visions are idealized projections—each rooted in romantic illusion rather than emotional truth. *Candida*, however, refuses to participate in either fantasy. Her final decision does not affirm the superiority of one man over the other, nor does it conform to the expectations of romantic closure. Instead, Shaw uses the moment of apparent resolution to deconstruct the audience's assumptions about love, agency, and gender roles. *Candida*'s declaration that she chooses "the weaker of the two" is not an endorsement of Marchbanks' sensitivity or Morell's morality, but a subtle recognition of Morell's capacity for vulnerability and emotional growth. In this moment, *Candida* is not choosing love in the sentimental sense, but emotional honesty over illusion. She understands that Morell, for all his posturing, needs her in a way that is grounded in reality rather than idealism. This shift reframes the entire narrative. What seemed like a plot driven by romantic rivalry is instead a psychological and ideological unmasking. Shaw's portrayal of *Candida* is radical precisely because she is not the passive object of male desire, but a fully realized subject who sees through the illusions that define the men around

her. Her "choice" is thus not a choice between men, but a rejection of the reductive roles they assign her. The illusion of choice becomes a mirror reflecting the deeper illusion: that romantic love can be reduced to possession, worship, or sacrifice. By exposing this, Shaw critiques not only his characters' delusions but also the audience's expectations. He challenges the traditional romantic narrative that positions women as trophies to be won and men as competitors in a moral or emotional contest. In doing so, *Candida* becomes a play not about love but about perception, self-knowledge, and the courage to discard comforting but false ideals. *Candida*'s final act is one of emancipation—not just from her suitors' fantasies, but from the entire framework of romantic idealism. It is a moment of profound clarity, where she asserts her own vision of truth, compassion, and mutual humanity.

G.B Shaw's Ethical Realism and the Quest for Self-Knowledge in *Candida*: Replacing Romantic Illusion with Ethical clarity.

In *Candida*, G.B. Shaw replaces the conventions of romantic drama with a deeper philosophical investigation rooted in what may be called ethical realism, a commitment to emotional honesty, moral clarity, and the rejection of sentimental illusion. At the heart of this transformation lies Shaw's effort to challenge and dismantle the comforting but often deceptive ideals that underpin popular conceptions of love, gender roles, and personal identity. The play's apparent love triangle—between Reverend James Morell, the confident and progressive clergyman; Eugene Marchbanks, the sensitive and romantic young poet; and *Candida*, the intelligent and quietly commanding wife—is not structured around a traditional competition for affection. Rather, it serves as a dramatic lens through which Shaw exposes the flawed ideals each man projects onto *Candida*. Morell assumes the role of protector, guided by the illusion of his own moral superiority and the belief that he knows what is best for *Candida*. Marchbanks, by contrast, idolizes *Candida* as a sacrificial goddess, trapped in a life of drudgery and yearning to be rescued by his poetic sensitivity. Both perspectives reflect romanticized and ultimately self-serving projections that obscure the reality of who *Candida* is. Shaw's drama refuses to grant the audience the satisfaction of a romantic resolution, insisting instead on philosophical self-examination. *Candida*'s eventual "choice" between the two men is not a choice between lovers at all, but a rejection of the illusion that love is about possession or rescue. Her decision to remain with Morell is not a validation of



traditional marriage, nor is it a romantic victory; it is an assertion of emotional autonomy and pragmatic wisdom, grounded in her understanding of the emotional weaknesses of both men. By stating that she chooses “the weaker of the two,” Candida exposes the power dynamics and hidden dependencies that have structured her relationships, while also revealing her capacity to see past illusion and into the ethical substance of character. In this way, Candida herself becomes the embodiment of Shaw’s ethical realism—her clarity, restraint, and moral intelligence counter the emotional indulgence of the male characters and invite the audience to rethink the criteria by which love and worth are judged. Shaw uses this reversal of expectations to confront the audience with their own cultural assumptions about gender and identity. The traditional romantic heroine, idealized and passive, is replaced by a woman who is neither saint nor seductress, but a self-possessed individual with a clear sense of agency. Similarly, the masculine ideals of heroic self-sacrifice (Morell) and passionate devotion (Marchbanks) are revealed to be forms of egotism in disguise. Shaw’s drama thus functions as a moral dialectic, in which the audience is subtly encouraged to question not just the characters’ choices but their own ideas of love, virtue, and the roles men and women are expected to play. Through this framework, Shaw advances a broader philosophical purpose: to replace romantic illusion with ethical insight, and to encourage a kind of self-knowledge that is rooted in the confrontation with uncomfortable truths rather than comforting fantasies. The psychological realism of *Candida* lies not in dramatic outbursts or tragic revelations, but in the quiet unraveling of idealism, in the exposure of the self through dialogue and emotional conflict. Shaw does not offer solutions so much as he compels his audience to rethink the very questions they take for granted. In doing so, he aligns his theatrical practice with a modern ethical vision: drama as a space not for escape or affirmation, but for introspective challenge and intellectual awakening. *Candida*, then, is not a play about romance at all—it is a play about seeing clearly, about choosing not who to love, but how to love truthfully, and about discovering in that choice the first steps toward ethical maturity. Self-Knowledge in *Candida*.

Marchbank’s and the Mirror of Idealism and *Candida*’s Moral Intelligence

George Bernard Shaw’s *Candida* is, at its core, a play about the journey toward self-knowledge—both for its titular heroine and for the men who surround her. Shaw constructs a dramatic

framework in which characters confront the disparity between who they believe they are and who they truly are, using the romantic triangle not as a vehicle for melodrama, but as a crucible for psychological and moral revelation. Reverend Morell, the confident Christian Socialist preacher, believes himself to be a model of moral strength, intellectual clarity, and marital harmony. Yet, when confronted with the challenge posed by Eugene Marchbanks, he is forced to recognize his emotional dependence on *Candida* and the fragility of his idealized self-image. Similarly, Marchbanks sees himself as the poetic liberator of *Candida*, imagining her spiritual suffering and projecting his own romantic fantasies onto her. But as the drama unfolds, he comes to realize that his love is not grounded in truth, but in illusion—that he has loved an idea, not a woman. It is *Candida*, however, who demonstrates the clearest path to self-knowledge. She sees through the performative masculinity of Morell and the overwrought idealism of Marchbanks, recognizing the projections each places upon her. Her climactic decision—to remain with Morell not out of duty or romance, but because he is the “weaker of the two”—is not a submission to traditional roles but an affirmation of her own insight, maturity, and autonomy. *Candida*’s calm detachment and ironic wisdom reflect a woman who knows herself and understands the nature of the people around her. In this way, Shaw reorients the narrative of choice and love toward a philosophical meditation on identity. True power in *Candida* lies not in physical strength or passionate declarations, but in the quiet strength of self-knowledge—the ability to see oneself and others without illusion. Through this thematic focus, Shaw critiques societal expectations, gender roles, and emotional naivety, ultimately suggesting that authentic relationships and moral clarity can only emerge from the hard-won clarity of self-understanding.

Idealized Womanhood in *Candida*

In *Candida*, George Bernard Shaw critically examines and deconstructs the notion of idealized womanhood as perpetuated by both Victorian domestic ideology and romantic literary tradition. The character of *Candida* is positioned at the center of two competing male fantasies, each of which constructs her as an ideal rather than recognizing her as a complex individual. Reverend Morell, her husband, imagines her as the perfect helpmate—gracious, nurturing, and morally superior—an embodiment of the “angel in the house” trope that dominated nineteenth-century conceptions of womanhood. She is to him the silent pillar of domestic and emotional support, whose primary role



is to stabilize his public and private identity. In contrast, Eugene Marchbanks envisions her as a divine and ethereal figure, a woman whose intelligence, beauty, and suffering make her a kind of tragic muse, imprisoned by the mediocrity of everyday life. Both men thus fail to perceive the real woman before them, choosing instead to impose upon her their own fantasies of what she ought to be. Shaw uses these conflicting projections to highlight the dangers of idealization, showing how even praise and adoration can become tools of control. *Candida*'s ultimate rejection of both idealizations—when she asserts her right to choose based on her own reasoning and emotional truth—marks a subversive moment that challenges the prevailing codes of ideal femininity. She neither sacrifices herself for her husband's ego nor submits to the poet's vision of spiritual transcendence. Instead, she reclaims her subjectivity by declaring that she chooses the man who is "weaker," suggesting that she will not be worshipped nor taken for granted, but will engage in a partnership defined by mutual recognition rather than illusion. Shaw thus critiques the myth of the ideal woman as both unattainable and damaging, arguing that true love and respect require the dismantling of fantasy in favor of honest human engagement. In *Candida*, idealized womanhood is not celebrated but exposed as a social and psychological fiction—one that disempowers women by denying them the right to define themselves.

II. Conclusion

From Idealized Womanhood to Moral Authority: *Candida*'s Enduring Relevance in Gender and Power Discourses.

In *Candida*, G.B. Shaw dismantles the sentimental and romantic ideals of love, sacrifice, and gender roles by staging them as illusions rather than enduring truths. Through the central love triangle, Shaw exposes how both Morell and Marchbanks project idealized fantasies onto *Candida*, reducing her to an object of moral and emotional superiority rather than recognizing her agency and complexity. *Candida*'s ultimate decision does not affirm romantic convention but challenges it, revealing that true self-knowledge lies in seeing beyond illusion to the realities of human need, emotional labor, and psychological depth. Shaw's ethical realism forces the audience to question their assumptions about love, power, and gendered expectations, inviting a deeper understanding of personal authenticity over idealistic performance. In critiquing romantic ideals, *Candida* emerges not as a celebration of love, but as a call to confront its illusions with clarity and ethical courage. In *Candida*, G.B. Shaw also states the

traditional image of the passive, idealized woman by presenting *Candida* not as an object of desire or a prize to be won, but as a figure of clarity, self-awareness, and ethical agency. Far from being caught between two competing male egos, *Candida* sees through the illusions each man constructs—Morell's moral superiority and Marchbanks' poetic idealism—and ultimately reclaims her autonomy by making a choice based not on romance, but on responsibility, emotional honesty, and mature insight. Her decision is not an act of submission, but of self-possession. Through her, Shaw challenges the audience to move beyond sentimental notions of love and femininity, revealing instead a woman who calmly deconstructs the fantasies projected onto her and asserts her own vision of truth. *Candida* emerges not as the idealized angel of the house, but as a modern heroine who exposes illusion and exercises moral authority, embodying the heart of Shaw's ethical realism.

G.B. Shaw's *Candida* endures as a compelling exploration of love, power, and identity, not merely within the Victorian context but as a timeless critique of the illusions that shape human relationships. Shaw deconstructs the idealized woman, the noble clergyman, and the romantic poet—not to destroy the concept of love, but to strip it of sentimental falsity and moral posturing. In doing so, he invites audiences to embrace a more honest, self-aware, and ethical understanding of human connection. *Candida*'s refusal to be reduced to an object of desire or admiration, and her ultimate assertion of emotional insight and moral clarity, prefigures modern conversations about female agency and the performative aspects of gender roles. Morell and Marchbanks, for all their philosophical rhetoric, are shown to be trapped in flawed visions of masculinity, revealing how power often masquerades as virtue or suffering. Shaw's psychological realism thus resonates deeply with contemporary questions about emotional labor, performative vulnerability, and the politics of romantic choice. By challenging the audience to interrogate their assumptions about love and identity, *Candida* remains strikingly relevant—offering a critique not only of romantic illusion but of the societal structures that perpetuate them. Shaw's insistence on self-knowledge and ethical clarity continues to speak to a world still grappling with the complexities of intimacy, autonomy, and the true nature of human worth.

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