SCARLETT O’HARA: THE SOUTHERN LADY AS NEW WOMAN

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IF GONE WITH THE WIND HAS BECOME SOMETHING OF AN AMERICAN classic, it has done so as much by its popular appeal as by any aesthetic merit. The components of its record-breaking success include all the classic ingredients of popular romance wrapped in the irresistible trappings of historical adventure and glamour—the hurtling saga of sectional catastrophe and rebirth, the nostalgia for a lost civilization, the green Irish eyes of a captivating and unruly Miss, and the languorous, steel-sprung dynamism of her Rhett Butler. But, if the novel fails to transcend its indebtedness to popular culture and to a sentimental female tradition, it nonetheless betrays a complexity that distinguishes it from the standard mass-market historical melodrama.¹

The extraordinary overnight success of Gone With The Wind testifies to the immediacy with which it engaged the American imagination. Critical acclaim, which likened it to Vanity Fair and War and Peace, as well as popular sales, rapidly established the saga of Scarlett O’Hara as a significant addition to the national culture.² Scarlett and her world entered the

¹ The problem of genre merits particular attention with respect to Gone With The Wind, but transcends the scope of this essay. As a novel, Gone With The Wind falls somewhere between the great bourgeois novels and recent mass-market melodramas or gothics, and blends features of all. Less programmatic, at once historically more accurate and psychologically more complex than the classic melodrama, it nonetheless approaches the melodrama in that its “universal moral order validates current social attitudes. And, like the social melodrama, it basically affirms a connection between traditional middle-class domestic morality and ‘the operative principles of the cosmos.’” See John G. Cawelti, Adventure, Mystery, and Romance (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1976), on these questions of genre. Gone With The Wind also owes much to the tradition of the historical novel analyzed by Georg Lukacs, The Historical Novel (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963).

mainstream of American life, thereby incorporating the Old South, its beauties and its travails, firmly into the prevailing myth of the American past. In this respect, Gone With The Wind celebrated, even as it contributed to, the restoration of the South to the nation and the nation to the South.

Like so many spontaneous cultural manifestations, the appearance of Gone With The Wind had been carefully engineered. In the 1930s the American public was showing a taste for historical fiction and southern fiction. When Harold Latham acquired the manuscript for Macmillan in 1935, he was on a trip through the South looking for southern material—looking, in fact, for Gone With The Wind, had he only known it existed. So Mitchell’s novel fit into the demand of a popular sensibility that, as Warren Susman has argued, had taken a conservative turn. The American people, in Susman’s view,

entered an era of depression and war somehow aware of a culture in crisis, already at the outset in search of a satisfactory American Way of Life, fascinated by the idea of culture itself, with a sense of some need for a kind of commitment in a world somehow between eras.

The first World War looms as the critical experience of cultural transformation. There was an element of strain and unreality in the prosperity and “liberation” of the twenties—a glossing over of problems unresolved. This link between the war and the two postwar decades provided the context for the drafting and reception of Gone With The Wind. Its compelling dynamism derived as much from its implicit engagement with the America of the 1920s as from its outward concern with the Civil War and Reconstruction. Never just another historical romance of magnolias and moonlight, Gone With The Wind grappled with the nature of the New South, with twentieth-century problems of social change and tension, and with the dilemmas of female identity in the modern world.

The story of Scarlett O’Hara, which opens and closes the novel and organizes the intervening flood of historical cataclysm, drew countless readers through the collapse of one civilization and the birth of another. Scarlett engaged a special identification from her readers by simultaneously mobilizing and obscuring the tensions of female being and passion that plagued Mitchell and her contemporaries. The appeal of Gone With

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The Wind has proved so broad and enduring as to defy any single explanation. Surely every female reader will always cherish her own Scarlett. And the novel’s attraction for men can be traced to Rhett’s special qualities, in particular that tough and ferocious romanticism so reminiscent of Hemingway’s heroes or Humphrey Bogart’s roles. Yet any possible explanation of the novel’s appeal should take account of Mitchell’s special ability to render Scarlett’s experience at once immediate and distant. Holding a careful line between mystification and autobiographical realism, Mitchell casts Scarlett’s tale neither as a gothic fantasy nor a portrait of the modern woman. Instead, Mitchell chooses to wed Scarlett to the death and rebirth of the South, but she also uses that historical specificity to veil altogether contemporary concerns. Gone With The Wind, in short, rests on a series of displacements that both bind the reader with an illusion of psychological immediacy and mask the immediacy of social issues. Mitchell’s decision to weigh equally Scarlett and the agony of social upheaval, the individual and historical process, forces us to consider both strands of the novel together, however complex the reading.

Like any text, Gone With The Wind must be taken on its own terms, as a discrete entity with rules, logic, and meaning of its own. Yet, also like any text, it must be read in full historical and cultural context. We gain nothing from insisting on a radical purity that severs the text entirely from its production and reception, from the motivations—open and buried—of its author or from the predispositions of its readers. The full complexity of Margaret Mitchell’s personal relation to her novel exceeds the scope of this essay, but no reading of the novel should dismiss the relation as insignificant. Mitchell, who had not assumed her own adult female identity without detours, wrote a single novel that, whatever its scope and range of compelling characters, focused upon a female adolescent’s passage to womanhood. And her account of Scarlett’s passage raises all the questions of female identity, role, and sexuality that figured in American consciousness during the first three decades of the twentieth century.5

If Mitchell did not write the bildungsroman of a twentieth-century southern female adolescence and young womanhood, she nonetheless understood female being as historically specific.6 By displacing Scarlett’s career historically while simultaneously confronting her with contemporar-


ary dilemmas, she relies upon history and social conventions to complete the silences she leaves in her exploration of female identity, just as she relies upon them to contain, in however contradictory a fashion, the painful and confusing desires of the female self. Indeed, by emphasizing history and social order, which she merges with the idea of civilization, she obscures the measure of her personal rebellion against prescribed female roles. In *Gone With The Wind*, she offers a rationalization of middle-class American values, especially white middle-class social domination. Yet the rationalization depends on establishing a historical pedigree for a national ruling class in a period of advanced capitalism and perceived social change. This rationalization, moreover, is laced with veiled challenges to the prevailing gender system, even as it proclaims that gender system as the cornerstone of social order. At its core lies a psychological exploration of the place of women within the ruling class and of the tensions between their subjective desires and their assigned objective role.

Mitchell invests Scarlett with the conscious and unconscious conflicts that inform the transition from explosive and tense girlhood to socially-determined womanhood under conditions in which that transition is open to reinterpretation. By casting the dilemmas of her own generation in the context of the Civil War, Mitchell prohibited an autobiographical reading of her text. She intended to distance herself from the most pressing emotional conflicts, to protect herself as well as her privacy from curious readers. The one-to-one relationship between Mitchell and Scarlett, even if it could be established, matters little, and is certainly less important than the kind of female identity that attracted so many female readers. The point, after all, is less to understand the personal case history of Margaret Mitchell than to understand its mediation through a fictional character that responded to the fantasies of so many American women. Only in this sense does the 1920s substratum that underlies the Civil War foreground become significant. But, in this sense, it matters that the roots of *Gone With The Wind* lie in the imagination and experience of a woman who came to maturity with, as she frequently insisted, the generation of flappers.

Born in 1900, Margaret Mitchell lived most of her life in the Atlanta of the New South. The preliminary biographical materials available and her own *Gone With The Wind* Letters portray a young woman torn by the claims of family traditions, conventional behavior, an independent career, and a strong streak of social and sexual rebellion. Her correspondence exudes contradictions in her self-perception—or, better, her preferred self-presentation—which can only be captured by that generally misused term, ambivalence. Her epistolary style reminds one of nothing so much as her own descriptions of Scarlett: “She knew how to smile so that her dimples leaped, how to walk pigeon-toed so her wide hoop skirts swayed
entrancingly, how to look up into a man’s face and then drop her eyes and bat the lids rapidly so that she seemed a-tremble with gentle emotion. Most of all she learned how to conceal from men a sharp intelligence beneath a face as sweet and bland as a baby’s” (59).7 Or, “At sixteen, thanks to Mammy and Ellen, she looked sweet, charming and giddy, but she was, in reality, self-willed, vain and obstinate. She had the easily stirred passions of her Irish father and nothing except the thinnest veneer of her mother’s unselfish and forebearing nature”(59). Although Scarlett has nothing but contempt for the simpering girls who live out the prescriptions of southern ladyhood, she nevertheless adopts the conventions when she wants to attract men.

Although Gone With The Wind cannot be reduced to a simple reading of Scarlett O’Hara as Margaret Mitchell, bits of Mitchell’s attitudes can be found scattered among various characters, and Scarlett herself does contain attributes which Mitchell possessed. Mitchell’s psychological complexities emerge from the structure of the novel as a whole, from the interactions among characters and their allotted rewards or punishments. Mitchell’s own ambivalence becomes clearest in the gaps that separate the affects with which she invests a character—the sympathy or admiration she makes the character invite—and the destiny she assigns to the character. The historical setting further permits Mitchell both to distance her readers from the psychological drama and to bind them to it. For she uses history as a specific series of events—a drama in its own right—and as a common, nostalgic memory of a lost agrarian world.

Hers was the last generation to grow up with minimal exposure to the new cultures of radio and film. Her experience of vicariously living the histories of grandparents, parents, and communities through the telling and retelling of tales must have been common throughout the country. “I was about ten years old,” she wrote, “before I learned that the war hadn’t ended shortly before I was born.”8 In the South, the stories of fathers and the lullabies of mothers ensured a widespread and living engagement with the events of the Civil War and Reconstruction; similarly, elsewhere, historical events and interpretations probably became intertwined with the personal identities of many Americans. But, given the emergence of a national industrial and indeed corporate economy, that familial and local identity was becoming more a private and less a public matter. In this


8 Harwell, ed., Letters, 3.
respect Mitchell wrote for a generation that increasingly recognized regional identities as distinct, yet in some sense interchangeable, strands in a national history. Even the special legacy of southerners was becoming ever less a source of divisiveness and defensiveness under the influence of the proponents of the New South Creed. The arrival of Woodrow Wilson in the White House opened a new stage in the vindication of southern concerns: with him came the racial segregation of public buildings and his personal endorsement of D. W. Griffith’s racist film, Birth of a Nation.

As social commentary, Gone With The Wind moves between a historical treatment of the 1860s and general statements about civilization as a universal category. But the oscillation between the particular and the general invites contemporary identification. To the extent that the readers’ identification bridges the past and present, the statements about society proffered by the novel function as commentaries on contemporary problems. Mitchell’s psychological realism, however complex, ensures the appeal of her work far more than does her faithful depiction of social types. It is the combination of contemporary psychological power and historical verisimilitude that commands attention. For Mitchell’s accuracy and realism of detail can be compatible with a number of conflicting, broad patterns. To put it differently, the precision in detail does not necessarily tell us anything about the argument, commitments, or world view which the detail is marshalled to serve. What did Mitchell hope to accomplish in telling the tale of Scarlett O’Hara, and in writing a novel of the Civil War and Reconstruction?

The historical setting of Gone With The Wind cannot be reduced to a simple displacement of Mitchell’s era, for that era, the 1920s, required special historical foundations. For Mitchell, the New South, of which she was trying to make sense as a setting for female life, needed to be understood in the mainstream of American life. The middle-class values which were being challenged by the ferment of the 1920s had to be anchored in a national culture, not limited to sectional idiosyncrasies. In Gone With The Wind Mitchell reread southern history through a prism of conservative progressivism. If she indeed effected a certain displacement from the 1920s to the earlier period, she did so not to jettison it entirely, nor to


reduce it to a simple case study of the present, but literally to reconstruct it. She sought to fashion a history appropriate to the national concerns and destiny of the New South.

*Gone With The Wind* as a whole transforms a particular regional past into a generalized national past. In this respect, it contributes to integrating southern history into national history even as it reestablishes the South, with all its idiosyncracies, as an only slightly special case of an inclusive national destiny. Mitchell’s antebellum South manifests features characteristic of the nation as a whole. Even prior to the war, the cavalier tradition is shown as infused with the blood of Irish immigrants. As W. J. Cash does in *The Mind of the South*, Mitchell emphasizes the assimilation of the various gradations of the white elite—specifically excluding poor “white trash”—into a rural precursor of the industrial middle class.11

Throughout the novel, Mitchell explicitly underscores her interest in the rise of Atlanta and the emergence of a business culture in the South. She returns regularly to the excitement and importance of Atlanta as a raw, growing, bustling city, the outgrowth of the railroads. She directly points to the similarities between Atlanta and Scarlett: “Atlanta was of [Scarlett’s] own generation, crude with the crudities of youth and as headstrong and impetuous as herself. . . .” The two were roughly the same age and grew up together. During Scarlett’s first seventeen years, Atlanta developed from a stake in the ground into a “thriving small city of ten thousand that was the center of attention for the whole state. The older quieter cities were wont to look upon the bustling new town with the sensations of a hen which has hatched a duckling.” The maternal reference should be noted. In the eyes of the staid Georgia towns, Atlanta had little to recommend it save some railroads “and a bunch of mighty pushy people . . . Scarlett always liked Atlanta for the very same reasons that made Savannah, Augusta, and Macon condemn it. Like herself, the town was a mixture of the old and the new in Georgia, in which the old often came off second best in its conflicts with the self-willed and vigorous new’’(141–43).

Atlanta, not the “old days,” emerges as the victor in *Gone With The Wind*. Tara, which initially figures as a dynamic, frontier plantation—the locus of vitality—ends as a place of retreat. In the early pages of the novel, Gerald O’Hara confidently points to the land as the only reliable source of wealth. Even during the war, Scarlett recalls and echoes his view. But by the war’s end, Scarlett must turn to the city to raise the money to pay the taxes on Tara. And the section of the novel devoted to

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Reconstruction takes place in the city. When, at the conclusion, Scarlett thinks of returning to Tara, she thinks only of a temporary refuge. With only the slightest exaggeration, it could appear as the typical house in the country to which busy city-dwellers repair for rest and refreshment. In this sense, it blends imaginatively with those New England farm houses that had also once encompassed productive labor. In Mitchell’s rendition, the Civil War becomes a national turning point in the transition from rural to urban civilization. And this reading permits her to incorporate the South into a shared national drama.

This vision of Atlanta as symbol of a general urban vitality conflates the destiny of the city with the defense of middle-class values. Mitchell reserves her endorsement for an enterprising, indigenous, southern bourgeoisie—for those who can adapt to the times without sacrificing the essence of their values. Her merciless depiction of the Yankees as rapacious, dishonest, political parasites identifies them as predators, not true capitalists. Yankees are those who manipulate and stir up Negroes and poor whites. She reserves her rage for those who came South to milk the victim. She never denies the possibility of honest Yankee businessmen, comparable to their southern counterparts. But she does intend to make the country as a whole understand “what the South endured in the days of Civil War and Reconstruction.”

Atlanta stands for the dynamism of the New South. At the core of the novel lies Mitchell’s fascination with the way in which a new world emerges from the ashes of the old. Time and again, she returns to the problem of a dying civilization in confrontation with one being born. How, she asks, does one make money from the collapse of a society? Who makes the money? How does one survive, adapt, and prosper in the wake of a major social upheaval? Historically, economically, and socially, Atlanta provides the lynchpin of Gone With The Wind. By the novel’s close, all of the major characters have tied their destinies to that of the city. Similarly, the character of Scarlett provides the novel’s identificatory core. For against the collapse of the Old South and the birth of the New, the novel chronicles Scarlett’s coming of age—her painful assumption of the burdens of southern womanhood. The historical cataclysm, however, transforms Scarlett’s saga from the account of establishing a personal identity as a woman into an investigation of how to become—or whether to become—a lady.

The terms “woman” and “lady” evoke mature female identity, but in different forms. “Woman” suggests at once a more inclusive and more private female nature, whereas “lady” evokes the public representation

12 Harwell, ed., Letters, 57.
of that nature. To be a lady is to have a public presence, to accept a public responsibility. But the essence of that presence and that responsibility consists in recognizing and maintaining a sexual division of labor that relegates any proper woman to the private sphere. No lady would admit that she, and not her husband, ran the plantation. No lady would admit to being hungry in public. No lady would admit to sexual desire or pleasure.

In Mitchell’s account, the Civil War and Reconstruction forced the issue of how one remains a lady under new historical conditions. Changing times permit and even require new modes of behavior. At the same time, no society would survive did not its female members internalize certain standards and responsibilities. In Gone With The Wind the special case of appropriate female behavior and values in the collapse of a civilization is overdetermined by the private drama of a girl who grows to womanhood under tumultuous conditions. Mitchell provides ample evidence that Scarlett would have had trouble with or without the war. But without the war, social structures and norms would have provided a corset for her unruly impulses. It is Mammy who embodies those shattered structures and norms, and who struggles in vain to tighten the laces of the corset.

"What a young miss could do and what she could not do were as different as black and white in Mammy’s mind; there was no middle ground of deportment between. Suellen and Carreen were clay in her powerful hands and harkened respectfully to most of her warnings. But it had always been a struggle to teach Scarlett that most of her natural impulses were unladylike. Mammy’s victories over Scarlett were hard-won and represented a guile unknown to the white mind’’(76–77).

Scarlett stands apart in Gone With The Wind, not merely because she is the central character, but because for her alone among the female characters do the years of the war and its aftermath render problematical the question of appropriate gender role—the definition of being, the aspiration to become, a lady. Any understanding of Scarlett’s personality must take account of the other characters who, by responding to the pressures of the times, relate to her and provide both the context and the measuring stick for her responses. Mitchell once claimed that her novel had been written entirely ‘‘through Scarlett’s eyes. What she understood was written down; what she did not understand—and there were many things beyond her comprehension, they were left to the reader’s imagination.’’ 13 Mitchell’s claim will not withstand even a cursory reading of her text. Possibly, she believed that she had written from Scarlett’s point of view.

13 Ibid., 41.
But if so, she confused her own identification with Scarlett and had trouble differentiating her function as presenter of Scarlett’s vision from her function as commentator on Scarlett. In any event, whatever the source of Mitchell’s ambivalence about sexuality, gender identity, and gender role, it reaches schizophrenic proportions. Her relationship with Scarlett, her own creature, exemplifies her dilemma of identification and judgment.

Scarlett O’Hara is not beautiful. Neither is she a lady, although in her idiosyncratic way, she sentimentally aspires to be one, providing that it does not cost too much. Her adored mother Ellen had been a lady; Melanie Hamilton Wilkes is a lady; Aunt Pittypat Hamilton, Mrs. Merrwether, Mrs. Meade, India Wilkes, and the other Atlanta worthies pride themselves on being ladies. Her sisters, Suellen and Carreen, suffering like Scarlett from Ellen’s saintly distance, are pale shadows of ladies. Belle Watling, to be sure, is not a lady, but the classic whore with a heart of gold, a shrewd and successful business woman in her own right, has a far deeper sense than Scarlett of the essential qualities that informed true ladyhood. But however splendid her personal qualities, the code cannot admit her as a lady. Scarlett, for her part, has no time for irrelevant niceties, and no understanding of the deeper meanings. Raw like the burgeoning city of Atlanta, determined and grasping like her Irish immigrant forebearers, Scarlett has never been nice and, with the advent of the war, commits herself wholeheartedly to surviving. Scarlett’s survival tactics include marriage without love hastily entered into for spiteful reasons, manslaughter, the theft of her sister’s fiancé, flagrant disregard of proper female behavior to the point of risking the lives of her own menfolk, and the mindless sacrifice of her husband’s life. The same arsenal houses such lesser sins as dancing while in mourning, offering herself for cold cash to pay the taxes on Tara, parading around town while pregnant, flaunting a disconcerting talent for business, and otherwise violating all accepted conventions that defined the southern lady. In Scarlett’s judgment, the Yankees, in all other respects so despicable, were right “on this matter. It took money to be a lady” (610). The times, the grim days of the war and Reconstruction, demanded harsh strategems of those who would survive them. Survival assured, the times would permit the resumption of ladylike graces. Let others retain, at the risk of destruction, the inner sense of being ladies, or assume the mask, whatever their inner feelings of despair. She was different. And “she knew she would never feel like a lady again until her table was weighted with silver and crystal and smoking with rich food, until her own horses and carriages stood in her stables, until black hands and not white took the cotton from Tara” (609).

Mitchell makes scant effort to redeem Scarlett from the stark self-interest and greed of her chronicled behavior. On the contrary, from the
opening pages of the novel in which upland Georgia basks in the glow of antebellum serenity, she establishes the fundamental contours of Scarlett’s grasping personality. The self-conscious manipulation with which Scarlett pursues her prey foreshadows precisely the resources she will muster in her pursuit of financial security during Reconstruction. Her marriage to Rhett Butler and the ensuing hold on material security do not suffice to transform her into a real lady. But then Scarlett lacks any vital understanding of what it is to be one.

Through Scarlett, Mitchell exposes the hypocrisy of being a lady or a gentleman. Time and again, she shows Scarlett chafing under the constraints of correct behavior and utterance. No one, in Scarlett’s view, could believe the phrases that govern polite interchange. Repeatedly, she mentally dismisses Melanie as “mealy-mouthed.” Yet Mitchell also shows Scarlett raging because Rhett cannot be counted on to be a gentleman. In the scene of the charity bazaar in Atlanta, Scarlett worries that Rhett cannot be trusted to observe the gentleman’s code and keep his mouth shut. A few pages later, during the same scene, Scarlett flares up at the hypocrisy of required ladylike conduct. Finally, in the name of the Cause, Rhett bids for Scarlett as his partner to lead the opening reel. Scarlett, aching to dance, furious at the imprisonment of her mourning, joins him, feet tapping “like castenets,” green eyes flashing. This one scene captures all the contradictions of Mitchell’s attitudes. For the codes against which Scarlett rebels also provide her protection: she festers at their demands, but fears a world that will not provide her the respect the codes are designed to ensure. If she does not always wish to meet the requirements of being a lady, she should not wish to be treated as one.

Mitchell thus remains ambivalent about Scarlett’s difficulties. She regularly calls attention to Scarlett’s natural vibrancy. “There was no one to tell Scarlett that her own personality, frighteningly vital though it was, was more attractive than any masquerade she might adopt. Had she been told, she would have been pleased but unbelieving. And the civilization of which she was a part would have been unbelieving too, for at no time before or since, had so low a premium been placed on female naturalness”(80). Here, Mitchell seems to hold civilization responsible for repressing healthy and attractive female vitality, but her novel as a whole offers a more complex reading of the relation between female vitality and civilization. Vitality serves as a code word for sexuality, and Mitchell harbored conflicting attitudes towards the proper relation between sexuality, gender identity, and gender role.

Her confusion on this matter endows the novel with a complexity that transcends Scarlett’s stereotypical features. For indisputably, if in an occasionally perverse way, Scarlett invites identification. The dynamics
of that identification turn upon Scarlett’s proximity to young bourgeois women of the twenties and thirties. Her career raises questions of appropriate female behavior in a changing world. Her internal life reverberates with overtones of the early twentieth-century crisis in the bourgeois family and the received notions of fitting female behavior. Much of the force of the novel as an affirmation of acceptable, middle-class social attitudes depends upon Scarlett’s psychological plausibility. Scarlett herself is caught in a war between the socially ordained role into which she is expected to fit and her own natural impulses. The war in Scarlett, as perhaps in Mitchell herself, is fierce, for she lacks that solid bridge between the two—a strong identity as a woman—which might permit her to weather the storms of social change. But the acceptance of herself as a woman, Mitchell implies, would have required a resilient identification with another woman, presumably her mother, that would have nurtured her initiation into female sexuality and generativity.

As Scarlett herself comes to understand at the close of the novel, the only women she has ever loved and respected are her mother and Melanie. Tellingly, Scarlett omits Mammy from this company despite compelling claims. As Rhett (who along with Ashley represents the voice of objective judgment) categorically affirms, both Ellen and Melanie were genuinely great ladies. Scarlett’s tragedy lies in her inability to understand the meaning of being a lady. Scarlett is correct in her criticisms of the hypocrisies of the pseudo-ladies, although even here, she underestimates their strengths. Surviving the war and its aftermath calls for more than forms of gentility. Scarlett fails to realize that the prevailing etiquette represents a social effort to codify, institutionalize, and reproduce the deeper qualities of the lady and the fabric of an entire society. Having never grasped the depth and meaning of the informing spirit, she confuses it with its forms. So deeply does she miss the point, that until the moment of Melanie’s death she remains unaware that Melanie believes in the words she uses and the standards she observes, and that those words and standards derive from strength rather than weakness. Only at Melanie’s deathbed does she recognize that Melanie too would have killed the Yankee who threatened them—or would have died in the attempt.

Ellen and Melanie are presented as attractive and admirable, albeit highly self-disciplined and possibly repressed. The interpretation adopted depends upon one’s angle of vision and the relative weight accorded to

Scarlett’s perceptions, as against an independent reading that derives from the actions and words of the characters themselves. Thus, Scarlett reveres Ellen even though the reader has ample evidence that Ellen may have failed decisively as a mother. Ellen’s most direct address to Scarlett comes in the form of a letter, written as soon as Ellen receives word of Scarlett’s shameless dancing at the Atlanta charity bazaar. That letter, with its cold feelings, could have been written by any one of the Atlanta worthies. Melanie, on the same occasion, insists on believing the best of Scarlett and defends her. Yet Scarlett persists in seeing Melanie as pale, fragile, and lacking in womanly warmth and charm—in a word, asexual. The reader, however, having seen Melanie’s plain face flare into beauty with the passion of her love for Ashley, has every reason to appreciate her special strength. Both Melanie and Ellen lack that raw undisciplined sexuality that pulsates in Scarlett herself, but Mitchell makes less than clear whether she regards sexuality as a male or female trait. Time and again, she links Scarlett’s exuberance to her paternal inheritance. She establishes Scarlett’s early preference for the activities of boys over those of girls. She proclaims Scarlett’s repugnance for and failure at motherhood. Although she leaves no doubt about Scarlett’s attractiveness to men, she links Scarlett’s success as a belle to her unseemly ambition. Mitchell remains preoccupied with those features of being a lady that survive social upheaval. If the role of lady is constructed and carries serious responsibilities, how much of that role can be taken to persist through change? Or, to put it differently, does being a lady possess an essence that remains constant as manners change? The sections of the novel that describe Scarlett’s early forays into the world of business betray what could be interpreted as a strong feminist approval of the self-reliance, business skills, and survival abilities of the heroine. By Mitch- ell’s day, the South had a tradition of resilient women who, with or without their menfolk, had seen their families through the difficult postbellum decades and had reestablished family fortunes. Scarlett’s economic success need not have contravened her standing as a lady. Scarlett runs into trouble not for adapting to new times, nor for displaying a vigorous individualism, but for transgressing those boundaries at which individualism becomes greed and adaptation a threat to any viable social order. For Mitchell, those limits seem to have come with the employment of convicts, the systematic betrayal of business’s own standards of probity, and female intrusion—however inadvertent—into the political domain. But if Mitchell shows Scarlett’s irresponsible actions as bearing heavy consequences, she does not show Scarlett experiencing pain or guilt as a result of them. The social dimensions of superego sanctions are delineated, but Scarlett has not internalized them. Her own responses remain determined by whether she gets what she wants: at the center of Scarlett, the apparent
woman, lingers a demanding and frightened child. In presenting Scarlett as emotionally immature and willful, Mitchell validates the legitimacy of social constraints on female lives. In presenting Scarlett as so personally immune to the normal emotional responsibilities for her socially inappropriate behavior, Mitchell questions the psychological foundations for socially prescribed roles. She remains, in short, deadlocked on the social possibilities for and the social legitimacy of the free expression of female nature.

Mitchell’s strategy highlights a gap between the desire and its object, between the act and its emotional resonance. The formal account of Scarlett’s actions and behavior is shadowed by unstated psychological considerations. The central flaw in Scarlett’s character, the source of her egoism, derives from the relationship with her mother that purportedly furnishes her standards of being a lady. All explicit references to Ellen in the novel, including Scarlett’s own, are positive. Yet all indirect evidence suggests that Scarlett never attained that psychological identification with her mother that would have provided the bedrock for becoming her mother’s successor. At the center of the novel, at the end of the devastating road back from the destruction of Atlanta, falls Ellen’s death. For Scarlett, that road “that was to end in Ellen’s arms” ended in a “blank wall,” in “a dead end.” Scarlett had believed that she was fleeing to “the protection of her mother’s love wrapped about her like an eiderdown quilt.” With Ellen dead, the hope of that love had vanished. From her despair and abandonment, Scarlett wrests the determination to survive. Somewhere “along the road to Tara, she had left her girlhood behind her.” The scene that marks her assumption of womanhood ends with her vow: “as God is my witness, I’m never going to be hungry again”(418). That night, she first dreams what is to become her recurrent nightmare, of being lost in the fog. On this occasion, Melanie comes to her bedside. Later in the novel, Rhett would comfort her, promising to feed and spoil her like a treasured child. But she still passes on to Bonnie, her daughter, a fear of the dark.

The first appearance of the dream underscores the psychological dimension of her fight against hunger. The scene in the fields of Tara conflates, in a manner that persists throughout the novel, the elements of ladyhood that derive from social structure and those that derive from intrapsychic identification—especially from the mother-daughter relationship. Scarlett’s willfulness, graspingness, and jealousy of other women, including her own sisters, have been present from the opening pages. Her admiration of and love for her mother have also been there. But her mother emerges as distant and preoccupied, as having never recovered from an early passion, as having little of her emotional substance to give to those she so dutifully cares for. Scarlett germinated the
need for love and nurture from her childhood. The crisis of her adulthood consolidates a persisting need. The social and historical circumstances of that crisis merely determine the form and intensity of her adult behavior. The underlying longing remains to be wrapped in the quilt of her mother’s love. The hunger she determines to appease harks back to a longstanding unconscious feeling of deprivation.

Richard King has recently argued, in *A Southern Renaissance*, that the southern family romance, which “placed the father-son relationship at its center,” left only the role of mother to the white woman who, as mistress of the plantation, was to care for the “wants and needs of her family both white and black.” In King’s view, this “queen of the home” was denied erotic appeal and, in “extreme form,” was “stripped of any emotional nurturing attributes at all. Eventually, she came to assume a quasi-Virgin Mary role. . . .” Interestingly, Mitchell does state that Scarlett perceives her mother as the Virgin Mary. But she also provides the reader with information that supports a more complex interpretation.15

Ellen Robillard O’Hara had, as an adolescent, experienced an intense passion for a young cousin whom her family prevented her from marrying. After his death, in a bar room brawl in New Orleans, the young Ellen cried all night and then dried her tears and closed her heart. Her marriage to Gerald O’Hara is presented simply as an alternative to entering a convent for the rest of her life. This renunciation of her own passionate self crippled Ellen’s ability to provide nurture to her own daughters and bequeathed, at least to Scarlett, contradictory attitudes toward men as objects of sexual and emotional desire. On the surface, Mitchell affirms Ellen’s goodness and Scarlett’s love for her. But Mitchell also shows that Scarlett managed to hide much of her impetuous, passionate self from Ellen, that in crucial ways Ellen did not know—perhaps did not want to know—Scarlett. Mitchell also informs us that Ellen had never told Scarlett that “desire and attainment were two different matters”(73). These clues and others invite the reader to criticize Ellen from Scarlett’s perspective, much in the manner that Lillian Smith would criticize her own mother. Yet they do not commit Mitchell to an open critique of the mother’s (her own mother’s) failure vis à vis the daughter.16

If Ellen’s death forces Scarlett to assume a womanhood for which she is not emotionally prepared, Melanie’s death, at the novel’s close, provides her with an opportunity to relive and rework that earlier loss. The parallels between Ellen and Melanie are deep and numerous. Most important, however, in psychological terms, is Melanie’s marriage to Ashley, whom Scarlett loves. Scarlett’s failure to understand the nature of Ashley and

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Melanie’s love for each other, her attempt to fathom the secrets of that love through reading Melanie’s letters from Ashley, her resentment of Melanie in the face of Melanie’s maternally unselfish love for her, all evoke the attitudes of a female Oedipal crisis, of an adolescent girl who loves her father and hates her mother. Melanie and Ashley permit Mitchell to explore that crisis because they are not Scarlett’s parents. Yet the emotional logic of the situation forces the reader to take it as evidence of Mitchell’s using Melanie as a double for Ellen. And whatever Scarlett’s conscious feelings, her relationship with Melanie permits her to come to terms with her ambivalent feelings about her mother. Only at Melanie’s deathbed does Scarlett begin to see clearly, to arrive at some measure of self-understanding. Only at Melanie’s death does she recognize the true object of longing in her recurring nightmare of cold and hunger. Throughout the novel we are told that Scarlett loves Ellen; as the novel progresses, we come to know that Melanie loves Scarlett. That love, as Rhett asserts, may indeed be Scarlett’s cross, but it may also be her salvation. For at the end, the loss of Rhett may have to be weighted against her recognizing Rhett as the object of her desire.17

Ellen had endowed Scarlett, the child, with a hunger for herself, a longing for maternal love. That longing colors Scarlett’s choice of men. Both consciously and unconsciously, Scarlett perceives Ashley Wilkes to be cut from the same cloth as Ellen. Aristocratic and self-controlled, he possesses self-knowledge and acts according to principles that she cannot fathom. Until the final scenes of the novel, Scarlett misunderstands and misevaluates Ashley: she understands neither his strength nor his weakness, least of all does she understand his love for Melanie, or that his love could coexist with an altogether different love for herself. In comparable fashion, Scarlett misperceives Rhett: only in the final pages of the novel does she recognize her love for him (although the reader has known of that love since the early sections of the novel on the war years in Atlanta), but by then she has (apparently) lost him. Scarlett’s woeful inability to fathom her own desires or those of the men in her life has its roots in her inability to arrive at a mature female identity—to become a woman. Or so Mitchell would seem to be suggesting. Scarlett fails to integrate her needs and her desires, her understanding of love—the longing of romantic

love—with her sexual feelings. There are persisting hints that Scarlett, the erstwhile tomboy, would, on some level, prefer to be a man. Mitchell never fully resolves these tensions. For although she allows Scarlett a clearer perception of herself and her desires, she deprives her of the objects of that desire. In the end, Scarlett has only herself. Even Tara will provide only a temporary retreat, not a full life.

Mitchell’s ambivalent attitudes towards female sexuality, gender identity, and gender role—desire, womanhood, and ladyhood—informed her own life, as well as the life of her heroine. The discrete components of this ambivalence include uncertainty as to whether sexuality is compatible with womanhood, mixed feelings about motherhood and its relationship to sexuality, and the possibility for wedding female individualism to ladyhood. The core of Scarlett’s dilemma remains whether she can transform her need for her mother into love for a man and children. And this basic psychodynamic pattern is faithful to an increasingly typical early twentieth-century pattern. Ellen could be read as a positive rendition of Philip Wylie’s “Momism.” Gerald O’Hara could qualify as the absent father. Scarlett herself could be recast as a 1920s flapper. Michelle mediates, rather than invites, these transpositions. But the compelling popularity of her novel may have turned on her readers’ effecting the identifications for themselves. Even the resonances that bind contemporary identifications to the historical plot do not clarify Mitchell’s own attitudes toward the appropriate meaning and responsibilities of womanhood and ladyhood, especially toward female destiny relative to that of men.

Historians such as Anne Firor Scott and A. Elizabeth Taylor have demonstrated the interdependence of the position of southern women and the southern social system as a whole, and have argued that southern women themselves criticized southern patriarchy. Mitchell understands these arguments, but on the surface, her own critique is more narrowly focused on men as men and is more indirect in its expression. For Mitchell does not so much criticize men as display their weaknesses and, too often, kill them off. At the same time, she endows men with the objective view of history and the nature of civilization. Despite the constant juxtaposition of Rhett and Ashley in Scarlett’s mind, Mitchell presents them as one in their grasp of historical process. Thus, even as individual men fall by the wayside, men as a group emerge as the custodians of objective knowledge. The problem is to identify Mitchell’s own ultimate attitude toward

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the claims of female independence. That problem is complicated by her play with transsexual identifications: "But Scarlett, child of Gerald, found the road to ladyhood hard" (58). Ellen's early passion suggests that sexuality cannot simply be classified as masculine. Mitchell nonetheless underscores Scarlett's inheritance from her unruly Irish father and portrays raw sexuality as masculine and inherently dominating—to whiteness, the famous scene in which a drunken Rhett carries Scarlett off to bed. Mitchell also considers the relations between sexuality and generativity problematical: Scarlett miscarries the baby conceived in her and Rhett's mutual passion; Ellen, reproducing without passion, lost all of her sons; Melanie dies in childbirth; Bonnie, beloved of both Scarlett and Rhett, dies perhaps as a result of her inherited Irish recklessness, perhaps as a result of her father's delight in her unladylike high spirits, perhaps as a result of the Oedipal confusions that inform Scarlett's own life, perhaps in testimony to Scarlett's and Rhett's failed communication—their inability to reproduce.

Any of these readings is compatible with one or another female critique of patriarchy and the toll it exacted from women. Any is compatible with a severe judgment on women who rebel against their ordained role. Mitchell, like Scott and Taylor, stresses the interdependence of female role and social system. If she, consciously or not, resented the constraints that the role of lady imposed on women, she remained attached to the class basis of the social system—to the class and race relations within which that role was essential. But Mitchell's strategy is complicated by her interest in social change and her commitment to establishing the Old South as a special case of a general national past. Her treatment of the Old South brilliantly blends a nostalgia for a lost social order, a more stable agrarian world, with a specific evocation of southern culture. She eschews any defense of slavery as a coherent social system in favor of evoking a harmonious agricultural order reminiscent of that evoked in I'll Take My Stand.20 Her early discussion of Tara, resting upon a detailed rendition of upland Georgia, establishes the specificity of time and place, but none of the description bears any relation to the slave system. Mitchell brings her readers to accept a particular world without including any of the social features that structure it. By this marvelous sleight of hand, she invites a national audience to accept the old South as a direct antecedent of its own American civilization. The lost antebellum civilization is validated for the South even as it is absorbed into the loss of an earlier American order.

Similarly, Mitchell recast southern slavery to conform to a national class system. Her attitudes toward blacks resemble those of Howard

Odum in their social Darwinism and in "the racist transformation of social 'facts' into natural givens." Yet, as Odum did in his later works, Mitchell also allows for the development of a black leadership under white guidance. Her attitudes remain contradictory, all the more because she draws upon black characters to provide psychologically revealing doubles of whites, but she is wedded to conservative class and racial attitudes. Her attitudes toward contemporary issues shape her depiction of slavery which, in her treatment, disappears as a coherent social system.21

Mitchell distinguishes between house and field slaves. In an authorial intervention, she explains that "the house negroes and yard negroes" despised "these lowly blacks." For the position of the house slaves rested upon merit and effort. "Just as Ellen had done, other plantation mistresses throughout the South had put the pickanninies through courses of training and elimination to select the best of them for the positions of greater responsibility. Those consigned to the fields were the ones least willing or able to learn, the least energetic, the least honest and trustworthy, the most vicious and brutish. And now this class, the lowest in the black social order, was making life a misery for the South"(654). Mitchell here echoes the prevailing capitalist ideology of work, schooling, and the promotion of merit, tempered by a harsh attitude toward crime.

Mitchell also describes even the good, deserving blacks as "monkeyfaced" and "child-like." The former fieldhands, whom the Yankees had so irresponsibly promoted to positions of responsibility, "conducted themselves as creatures of small intelligence might naturally be expected to do. Like monkeys or small children turned loose among treasured objects whose value is beyond their comprehension, they ran wild—either from perverse pleasure in destruction or simply because of their ignorance." Not naturally malicious, they were, "as a class, childlike in mentality . . ."(654). Mitchell thus combines racism as a justification for black subordination with a commitment to individual betterment through the work ethic. Blacks, she believes, can rise in the social ladder to the extent that they accept and profit from the tutelage of their white betters.

Mitchell cannot resist some nostalgic pronouncements on the ties binding the black and white family, but her star characters in this category—Mammy, Uncle Peter, Sam, and, with special reservations, Prissy—all relate to the white family as individuals rather than as members of families of their own. And the personal loyalties that transcend class and racial lines all have roots in the lost agrarian civilization. When the blacks remain true to those roots and reject their chance for independence they fare well, and even have the freedom to chastise their masters. The mo-

ment they cut loose from the restraining bonds, their inferiority becomes a crippling disadvantage. By thus substituting racism for slavery as the basis for domination, Mitchell endorses precisely the process that historically established the grounds for a reconciliation between the North and the South.

Mitchell’s harsh attitude towards blacks collectively does not prevent her from valuing individual blacks on the basis of their personal attributes. Mammy especially, but also Uncle Peter, Sam, and even Prissy are shown as genuine characters in their own right. Mitchell in fact uses them as psychological doubles for important white characters. Uncle Peter functions as a double for Ashley and, beyond him, for the white gentlemen of the antebellum South. Uncle Peter embodies all the manners, bearing, and respect for convention that purportedly characterized the antebellum aristocracy. From this perspective, Uncle Peter’s finicky timidity reflects on Ashley and alerts the reader to those weakness which Scarlett refuses to see, or at least to interpret correctly. Sam, in contrast, throws into relief the solidity and dependability that underlies Rhett’s unconventional and disturbing surface behavior. Prissy illuminates Scarlett’s own failure to achieve an internal sense of female generativity: “Laws, Mis Scarlett, I doan know nothing ‘bout birthin babies.” And, in this case, since Prissy has claimed to have precisely that knowledge, her failure underscores the gap between Scarlett’s external appearance as a grown woman and her internal identity as a needy child.

In this context, Mammy plays the most complex role of all. The life of the character almost escapes Mitchell’s control, and assuredly escapes Mitchell’s racist convictions. For Mammy, the compelling double for Ellen, comes close to providing Scarlett with everything that Ellen could not. Mammy’s knowledge of Scarlett and her acceptance of her could have provided the foundations for Scarlett’s gender identity. Mammy neither sees nor experiences any contradictions between understanding Scarlett and loving or forgiving her. Lacing Scarlett into her corset, forcing her to eat before a barbecue so she will not disgrace herself by eating at it, are to Mammy the unavoidable requirements of correct behavior. Scarlett’s recalcitrance elicits disciplinary action but not condemnation. Mammy could have molded Scarlett into a lady, precisely because Mammy would have felt no need to repudiate Scarlett the needy child and the sensual woman. Ellen, having repudiated those qualities in herself, could not afford to recognize them in Scarlett and, therefore, could not help her deal with them. Mammy, swishing proudly in her red petticoat, knows as much about sexuality as Belle Watling. Mammy also knows that you wear your red satin where it does not show. But if Mitchell could, consciously, allow Mammy to lay bear Ellen’s failures as a woman and as a mother, she
could not surmount her class and racial attitudes in order to allow Mammy’s knowing nurture to provide Scarlett’s maternal identification. Herein, perhaps, lies her most devastating, if unintended, condemnation of the values she sought to support.

*Gone With The Wind* originated in and spoke to a particular moment in American culture. Its very status as a novel, straddling the worlds of elite and mass culture, captured the dilemma of a bourgeois society that struggled to preserve its own values against internal rebellion and to engage the allegiance of a broad and heterogeneous popular base. Not unlike the new languages of radio, film, and advertising, it appeared to offer Americans an image of themselves at once specific enough to invite identification and general enough to encompass national diversity. Mitchell’s re-creation of the 1860s, so faithful in its historical detail, bound the destruction of an ordered world to the birth of modern America. Structurally equated as the two great opportunities for making a fortune, the building-up and breaking-up of civilizations emerge as cyclical recurrences in human affairs. That philosophical distance in no way detracts from the poignancy and drama of the carefully documented tale. Nor does it ever soar to encompass the full range of human destinies. Rather, it subsumes a purportedly traditional society under the aegis of bourgeois norms. And this fusion, in turn, promises the persistence of those norms in a world that is outstripping its original social base.

No one more compelling portrayed the relation between the past and the future of the nation and the South than Mitchell. But, for her, the binding up of wounds required a shared bourgeois ethic, and could ill afford the luxury of mourning a “feudal” past. Under the bourgeois rubric, the nation could be understood as the destiny of the South, and the South as a generalized, rural, national past. Perhaps it is a final, fitting irony that the magnetic core of Mitchell’s vision of a revitalized bourgeois order lay in the unconscious life of a most disorderly girl.*

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* For example, see Lary May, *Screening Out the Past* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1980).

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