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The Romance of Oppression: Racism and Sexism in *Gone with the Wind*

At the age of ten, I read my first “adult” novel, Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone with the Wind*. I was captivated from the moment I opened the cracked “leatherette” cover and read the fateful words, “Scarlett O’Hara was not beautiful, but men seldom realized it when caught by her charms as the Tarleton twins were” (Mitchell 1). I spent every spare moment of the next week lost in the world of plantation belles and dashing rogues, convinced that not only was Rhett Butler the greatest man in the history of the world, but that Scarlett O’Hara *had* to be my maternal great-grandmother (she had the same last name, after all). For the next year, the book was seldom out of my possession, as I devoured Scarlett’s adventures again and again. For good or ill, *Gone with the Wind* (known to its admirers as *GWTW*) ignited my lifelong passion for both historical fiction and genuine history.

It is no surprise that this book was my first foray into grown-up literature; in our household, this work was considered to be the greatest masterpiece since the Bible. No one in my family was ever a Southerner, a slaveholder, or a Confederate soldier, but nevertheless, Mitchell’s book was regarded as history, not fiction, and I, with the lack of discernment common to the ten-year-old reader, took it at face value. Not surprisingly, I was instantly captivated by the romance, adventure, humor, and sheer scope of this 1,000-plus page opus, and it immediately became my favorite book, as well as providing

me with the sum total of my knowledge of the Civil War. Unfortunately, that knowledge was necessarily rather one-sided.

There is no doubt that when Margaret Mitchell set out to write her one and only book, she was not writing it as a history primer for ten-year-old girls. Indeed, Mitchell, a notoriously retiring woman, never intended her novel to see the light of day. She was the granddaughter of Civil War survivors, and she grew up hearing stories about the war, Reconstruction, and the monsters known as Yankees. When she was confined to her Atlanta apartment with an injured ankle, she began writing out of sheer boredom, crafting the story of “Pansy” O’Hara, a Southern belle who survives the war and loses the man she loves (Flamini 96). For several years, the manuscript consisted of a suitcase and the contents of several manila envelopes stuffed under Mitchell’s bed. No sooner had Mitchell finally given into her friends’ urging and passed the manuscript on to Harold Latham at Macmillan Publishers than she regretted her impulse and telegraphed the editor, “Send manuscript back. I have changed my mind” (Flamini 100). However, fortunately for the world of literature, it was too late. Latham, like more than 26 million readers who have purchased the book since its publication in 1936, had fallen under Scarlett’s spell.

Upon its publication in 1936, *Gone with the Wind* became an immediate blockbuster, selling 176,000 copies the first month alone (Flamini 12). That may not sound impressive, but this was the height of the Great Depression, and three dollars, the purchase price of the book, was a week’s grocery money to many people. By the end of its first year, the novel had sold over a million copies. In 1939, it was made into possibly the most successful motion picture of all time, winning ten Academy Awards and

indelibly establishing Mitchell's vision in the minds of moviegoers all over the world (331).

In the years since its initial publication, *Gone with the Wind* has never been out of print, and it probably never will be. Perhaps more than any other work, it codified the myth of the Old South as a land of gracious aristocrats, delicate ladies, and happy dependents. Thanks to the universal appeal of this one book, somewhere in the world today, a ten-year-old girl is almost certainly learning all about the land of Dixie through exposure to Mitchell's florid prose.

Since *Gone with the Wind* is so universally loved, one might ask, is there a problem with people reading it? At the age of ten, I naturally would have answered that question with a resounding "No!" Even ten years ago, I might not have perceived the trap that may lurk beneath Scarlett's ruffled petticoats. Today, however, I am not so sure that my favorite book is a "good" book. Like Godiva chocolates, it may be delicious but dangerous.

The first possible pitfall is apparent to any modern reader of the book. Margaret Mitchell was, at least in modern terms, a racist, and *Gone with the Wind* reflects this unfortunate belief. In Mitchell's defense, her attitudes are not surprising. She was born in the Deep South in 1900 and grew up in a world where Jim Crow was still king. Almost everyone she knew would have had a firm opinion as to the proper "place" of blacks in their society. Even black people themselves tended to walk softly and keep their heads down, if they wanted to live happily in the South of that time. Mitchell loved and respected black people, but only if they conformed to her expectations and the social mores of her world. Mammy would have been welcome in her home; Malcolm X would

no doubt have been turned away with the aid of a shotgun.

I too am a racist, or at least I was raised to be one, and again, this is not surprising. I grew up in a Midwestern town of some 5,000 people, all of them of Irish, English, German, or Scandinavian descent, and none of them were any darker than ivory. Literally the only black person I knew anything about was Martin Luther King, Jr., and “they” shot him when he “got the coloreds all worked up.” I grew up in a world where the slavery described in *Gone with the Wind* was viewed as a positive, not a negative, because at least in slave times, “they” had the chance to learn a trade and were not out selling drugs, prostituting their sisters, and setting fire to Watts. Furthermore, those blacks who were captured and brought to America from Africa were the fortunate ones, because they escaped being eaten by their cannibal neighbors (according to *my* family, the proud tradition of barbeque was invented by cannibals in order to spice up their diet of enemy warriors and white missionaries), and they had the chance to learn about Jesus, who also advocated meekness for servants.

Coming from this environment, why would I think anything about a world where “servants for life” ate the chitterlings while the white people ate the ribs (Mitchell 64); where a man could buy his valet’s wife from a friend, discussing the sale over a cool drink, and then “as a joke” tell this same valet that instead of buying his wife, the master had actually sold him (26); a world where a woman could slap a terrified fourteen-year-old girl and threaten to “sell her south” if she refused to run an errand in a city being shelled by an army (254)? Even the kindest, most generous character in the book refuses to move to the North if it means that her son will have to attend school with “pickaninnies in his class” (505). After all, these same servants were being cared for and

protected by their wise white masters, because they were far too stupid to care for themselves. Every line of Mitchell's prose reinforces this subtle message.

Thanks to my exposure to the liberal world of academia, I now know, at least intellectually, that Mitchell's attitude is wrong. At the same time, a nagging doubt remains. After all, Mitchell lived in that world, and I did not. She knew both ex-slaveholders and ex-slaves. In every utterance she ever made about the novel, she consistently claimed that she based these characters on real people. So the more I read, the more I wondered. Did the slaveholding South resemble *Gone with the Wind*, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, or something between the two? How can I know what slavery was truly like unless I search for information that tells both sides of the story? Assuming that everything Mitchell said about slavery was true, was it such a terrible institution after all? Assuming that everything she said was false, how can I believe anything she wrote? Must I "divorce" myself from my literary love in order to prove that I have outgrown the racism of Mitchell and my family? How can I "know" the truth of this era? Can I distinguish between truth, fiction, and perhaps most difficult, the perception of truth often crafted by historical novelists?

The second problem with Mitchell's work is both more insidious and more personal. Scarlett O'Hara is a survivor, a woman who refuses to let herself be confined by the social mores of her time when her livelihood is at stake. As Rhett Butler observes, "You didn't plump yourself down on your male relatives and sob for the old days. You got out and hustled..." (Mitchell 525). When the war destroys her family's fortunes, Scarlett works in the cotton fields, something that no "lady" would do (312). She actually shoots a Yankee soldier who tries to steal from her family (301). She runs both a store

and a lumberyard in Atlanta after the war (426, 439). Worst of all, she publicly demonstrates that she can add mathematical figures in her head (440)! Yes, at first glance, Scarlett seems to be a proto-feminist, a woman to make me and all feminists proud. However, like so many other aspects of this novel, appearances can be deceiving.

I am a feminist. I believe that women should achieve their goals through the application of brains, character, and hard work, not through the use of heels, implants, and sex tricks from the pages of *Cosmo*. Unfortunately, when I examine Scarlett O'Hara under a feminist microscope, I see a woman who uses her femininity (and her sex appeal) as a weapon. From the novel's opening scene, it is obvious that Scarlett views men as nothing more than props to her ego—with the single exception of Ashley Wilkes, the man she fancies that she loves (Mitchell 16). What is worse, she does not care who she hurts in her pursuit of satisfaction. She takes one beau away from her sister Carreen, even as she woos another from the side of her sister Suellen (71). When she is rebuffed by Ashley, she promptly persuades Charles Hamilton to marry her in order to soothe her wounded pride, even though he too is engaged to another girl (87). After Charles' death, she spends most of the war flirting with every man she sees, most notably Rhett Butler, the handsome blockade runner who brings her expensive clothes, candy, and other gifts (163, 167, 184, 186). Even as she accepts his attentions, however, Scarlett has no use for Rhett and is quite open about it:

“He isn't brave,” said Scarlett perversely, pouring a half a pitcher of syrup over her waffles. “He just does it [blockade running] for money. He told me so. He doesn't care anything about the Confederacy and he says we're going to get licked. But he dances divinely.” (Mitchell 134)

In the early chapters of the book, Scarlett's heedlessness and self-centered flirtatiousness can be viewed as harmless and even rather amusing. After all, she is only sixteen years old as the book opens, and any teenager, especially one with an anorexic's seventeen-inch waist and a narcissistic obsession with her own reflection, can be forgiven a certain frivolous attitude.

However, as the story progresses, Scarlett's character becomes ever more disturbing. Even after Ashley is married, she refuses to take no for an answer and continues to pursue him (Mitchell 189). When Melanie (Ashley's wife and Scarlett's sister-in-law through her marriage to Charles Hamilton) suffers through a difficult pregnancy, Scarlett fantasies that she may die in childbirth, leaving open Scarlett's path to Ashley (236). Once the war is over and Ashley returns to Tara, Scarlett tries to seduce him even as his wife and child are guests beneath her roof (364-66). Where Scarlett's desires are concerned, there seems to be no such thing as honor, morality, or propriety.

Even Scarlett's obsession with Ashley might be forgiven; after all, love makes fools of us all. However, her use of her sexuality goes far beyond her attempts to work her wiles on Ashley. Mitchell tries to justify Scarlett's actions as the result of her strong survival instincts, but they are still ugly. For example, when Tara is threatened by the evil Jonas Wilkerson, Scarlett decides that her only choice is to go to Atlanta and persuade Rhett Butler to take her, either as his wife or his mistress (Mitchell 371-73). Scarlett loathes Rhett, and he has nothing but scorn for "vile creatures" who sell their bodies to men (171). But she is convinced that she is so irresistible that any man would be lucky to have her, and she shrugs off the moral implications of her act.

Once Scarlett reaches Atlanta, matters do not go as planned. Rhett discovers that

she is lying to him about her “affection,” and he rebuffs her (Mitchell 398). However, Scarlett is not easily discouraged. No sooner does she leave Rhett than she encounters Frank Kennedy, the man who has been her sister Suellen’s suitor for more than four years. Once Frank reveals that he is financially comfortable, he is doomed:

As Scarlett thought of Suellen’s secure future and the precarious one of herself and Tara, anger flamed in her at the unfairness of life...Suellen should not have Frank and his store and his mill...She was going to have them herself...Rhett had failed her but the Lord had provided Frank...That he was Suellen’s fiancé caused her no qualm of conscience. After the complete moral collapse which had sent her to Atlanta and to Rhett, the appropriation of her sister’s betrothed seemed a minor matter and one not to be bothered with at this time. (Mitchell 408, 409)

So Scarlett lies to Frank, telling him that Suellen intends to marry someone else, and then charming him into marrying her (Mitchell 411, 421). Although she was unable to prostitute herself to Rhett, she succeeds in doing so with Frank, and the fact that she destroys her sister’s life does not even cause her a flicker of remorse. Later, after Frank is killed in a Klan raid, she marries Rhett, even though she does not love him, either, largely for the financial security he offers (581). However, even as she is physically faithful to him, she never stops yearning for Ashley, and her obsession ruins both Ashley’s relationship with his family (659-60) and Scarlett’s marriage to Rhett (718).

Perhaps, just perhaps, I could forgive Scarlett for her exploitation of the men in her life. From her earliest days, Scarlett has been taught that she and her peers must understand “the necessity of being helpless, clinging, doe-eyed creatures” (Mitchell 55).

She is the product of a repressive, patriarchal society, a land where

The man owned the property, and the woman managed it. The man took credit for the management, and the woman praised his cleverness. The man roared like a bull when a splinter was in his finger, and the woman muffled the moans of childbirth, lest she disturb him...Men were rude and outspoken, women were always kind, gracious, and forgiving. (Mitchell 40)

Therefore, Scarlett's interactions with men could be viewed as simply "getting a bit of her own back." They expect her to be a spoilt, self-centered brat; she obliges them and gets what she wants into the bargain. Perhaps I can admire Scarlett's survival instincts and her ability to change herself from lazy Southern belle to successful businesswoman. But, no. Even leaving aside Scarlett's exploitation of her sexual wiles, no rationalization can explain away other unappealing facets of her character.

Scarlett is a hypocrite. She lives with Ashley's wife Melanie, accepting her hospitality for almost three years, despising her all the while (Mitchell 107). She pretends to care about the fate of the Confederacy and its soldiers, when all she really wants to do is go to the charity ball (117). Even her religion is nothing more than bargaining process with the Almighty (35).

Scarlett is a sneak. She eavesdrops on the other girls at the Wilkes' party (Mitchell 85), and she steals Ashley's letters to Melanie in order to read them and find out if Ashley is professing lover's sentiments to his wife, which in Scarlett's mind would mean that he was being unfaithful to Scarlett, the woman he "truly" loves (143).

Worst of all, Scarlett is a bully. In one of the novel's most famous scene, she slaps

Prissy, the black maid, when the girl admits that she knows nothing about “birthin’” Melanie’s baby (Mitchell 249). At Tara, she shouts at the servants and slaps Suellen when her sister, still weak from typhoid fever and unable to come to grips with the new social order, refuses to work in the fields (337). Scarlett even admits to herself that she enjoys bullying others, that “there was some pleasure in shouting at people and knowing they were afraid” (296). However, all of Scarlett’s other actions pale in her treatment of the convicts she leases to run her sawmill. She lets her overseer, Johnnie Gallegher, starve and abuse them. Even when she discovers what he’s been doing, she lets it continue rather than to lose the profits the mill is making (544-45). Whether in love or business, there is little that is admirable about Scarlett O’Hara.

So how do I reconcile my love of this novel with its apparent flaws? How do I understand Mitchell, her characters, and her world and still honor my own convictions? Perhaps more important, how do I judge other works of historical fiction, weighing their historical accuracy against the author’s own opinions, beliefs, and experiences as well as my knowledge and understanding?

In the case of *GWTW*, my task will be complicated by the messages I have received all my life. In addition, I have a vested interest in understanding Mitchell’s messages. When attempting to judge Mitchell’s racism and sexism, I must remember that I am a beneficiary of one type of prejudice and a victim of the other. Therefore, I must be constantly aware that I cannot give too little weight to the concern of racism or too much weight to the appearance of sexism.

In order to evaluate this work, I will need to take it apart, analyze it, and put it back together again, using everything I have learned about the ways of learning,

especially in the areas of history, art, and culture. Historical, cultural, and feminist literary criticism will also be helpful. All of these approaches will require extensive research. I must, as best I can, understand Mitchell's motivations when she wrote her work, as well as learning about the real world of the South before, during, and after the Civil War, as well as during the 1920s and 30s, when the book was being crafted in that upstairs Atlanta apartment. Because I cannot transport myself back to those times, I need to seek out as many "voices" from these eras as possible, voices that may debunk or reinforce my preconceptions, as well as ideas that may do neither. Finally, I will need to decide if this novel matters, and if so, how do I reconcile its flaws with its virtues? If I were to teach this novel, how do I introduce students to Mitchell's world and make them understand the forces that shaped her work? At the same time, how do I discuss the issues of race and oppression in a constructive way, neither apologizing for Mitchell nor simply dismissing her as a bigot? How could I help students recognize the ways in which Mitchell uses history to craft her plot, while at the same time demonstrating where true history ends and myth-making begins?

In addition, by examining Scarlett's struggles as a woman, I hope to more fully understand my own challenges. While Southern belles no longer languish in hoopskirts, I believe the messages women receive from society are not that different from those Scarlett heard everyday. Beauty still matters more than brains; manipulating men is still the best way for a woman to get what she wants. As an independent woman, how do I walk that fine line between being treated as a doormat and being perceived as a bitch. Should I try to walk that line at all? Should I, like Scarlett, simply discard the proprieties and forge my own road? If I do, will I, like Scarlett, eventually regret that decision?

Like the reconstruction of the South, this is a monumental task. In the end, perhaps I will realize that my affection for *Gone with the Wind* is misplaced and be able to dismiss this book as a pop culture phenomenon, one with no literary, historical, or social merit. On the other hand, maybe my research will enable me to understand what Mitchell was trying to say and honor her “truths,” while not abandoning my own. However, my final answer will not be found tonight. As Scarlett herself so often observed, “I’ll think of it all tomorrow...After all, tomorrow is another day” (Mitchell 719).

Researching Sexism and Racism in *Gone With the Wind*

When analyzing the plot and themes of *Gone with the Wind*, it is impossible to ignore how racism and sexism are woven through the tale like dark threads in a tapestry. The minority and female characters, from Scarlett O'Hara to her maid, Prissy, live in a world where only the needs, actions, and beliefs of white males count. Those characters who are not white males must find ways to struggle against their oppression, if they recognize it at all. As these characters face oppression, it becomes clear to the careful reader that despite the difference in their experiences and social standing, Scarlett O'Hara and her "darkies" have more in common than is apparent at first glance. They are fighting the same battle against the same enemy.

By examining the actions and beliefs of Mitchell's characters, Mitchell's own beliefs also come into sharper focus. Characters such as Mammy, Uncle Peter, and Dilcey are "good" Negroes, the kind of blacks who populated the antebellum South described in the family legends Mitchell grew up hearing. These characters, no matter what challenges they face, are secure in their identities. In contrast, characters such as Prissy and the "free niggers" are scorned both by Mitchell and their fictional peers as "creatures of little worth" (Mitchell 40). These characters no longer fit into the established social order, and they are therefore unworthy. Moreover, as Scarlett's journey continues, she, like the detested free Negroes, rebels against the established order and thereby loses nearly everything she loves. Although Mitchell presents the vanished world of the antebellum South as an Eden, as is always the case, Paradise carries a price. For both Scarlett and the slaves, the price is conformity. Once they abandon their proper place, they are no longer "good." Their willfulness is the snake in their Eden, and like the serpent, it will lead to

their downfall.

There is no practical way to separate Scarlett's world from the institution of slavery. However, it is important to acknowledge that slavery was not an invention of the southern half of the United States. The "peculiar institution" predates the Confederacy by at least 3,000 years. Virtually every "advanced" culture, from the Phoenicians and Egyptians to the Greeks and Romans, included slavery as part of its social order (Davis 38).

Slavery advocates often pointed to the Bible as the source of their justification for the practice, and insofar as one would wish to base an entire culture on a few verses of Scripture, they were correct. Slavery is specifically referenced in the Bible more than once, and it is not condemned. In the Old Testament, permission to own slaves is explicit:

As for the male and female slaves whom you may have, it is from the nations around you that you may acquire male and female slaves... You may keep them as a possession for your children after you, for them to inherit as property. (Lev. 25 45-46)

From this and other verses in the Bible, including the famous "curse of Ham," an Old Testament story which tells how Noah's dark-skinned son was condemned to slavery (Genesis 9 25), slaveholders felt that their enslavement of Africans and their descendants were morally justified. Indeed, many if not most slaveholders believed that they were providing blacks with the structure, discipline, and care that God commanded they show to this "inferior" race (Faust 31).

It is also important to recognize that many slave owners did feel that their "people" were part of their family. As social historian Drew Gilpin Faust explains: "The

plantation embodied the hierarchical structures of southern paternalism...for the master was the designated head of what he frequently characterized as his “family” white and black” (32).

Of course, “family” members can be terribly cruel to each other, and there is no doubt that slavery witnessed many acts of brutality and sadism, which will be examined in due course. At the same time, there is also evidence that not every slave was beaten, starved, and abused. Slavery was not a uniform state of being, and despite the many documented cases of unhappy slaves, there were at least a few who felt they would be better off under slavery, where they were at least guaranteed a living:

Petition of Lucy Andrews, 1859

...The humble Petition of Lucy Andrews, a free Person of color, would respectfully represent unto your Honorable body ...That she sees, and knows, to her own sorrow and regret, that Slaves are far more happy, and enjoy themselves far better, than she does...whilst she...cannot enjoy herself, situated as she is now, and prefers Slavery, to freedom, in her present condition. (qtd. in Rose 391)

Andrews petitioned to be sold into slavery, and her request was granted. One can only hope that she found the security she craved.

Andrews’ arguments in the petition echo those of Mitchell’s slave characters when they contrast their lives with those of the “white trash” in the neighborhood: “By contrast with his [Tom Slattery’s] miserable existence, they were well-fed, well-clothed and looked after in sickness and old age” (Mitchell 34).

In the world of *GWTW*, slavery is simply part of the landscape. It is no more

wrong to have slaves than it is to have dairy animals. Indeed, in this world, the slaves are as happy as the livestock, perhaps even happier:

The depiction of plantation Georgia in *Gone with the Wind* is romantic, uncritical, eulogistic. Slavery is a benevolent institution, only poor white and Yankee overseers are ever immoral or ambitious, life is beautiful, Eden is retold. (Rubin 94)

Throughout *GWTW*, Mitchell shows only the most benign face of slavery. She begins with the story of Jeems, the groom to the two Tarleton boys. “Jeems was their body servant, and like the dogs, accompanied them everywhere. He had been their childhood playmate and had been given to the twins for their own on their tenth birthday” (Mitchell 6).

To the modern ear, the phrase “given to the twins for their own on their tenth birthday” sounds monstrous. However, Jeems seems to be quite happy with his “masters,” as well as on terms of some equality with them. This is reinforced a few pages on, when the boys talk about going to the home of a poorer neighbor for dinner. Brent tells him not to “put on any airs in front of the Wynder darkies and hint that we all the time have fried chicken and ham, while they don’t have nothing but possum and rabbit” (Mitchell 14). The interesting clue is Brent’s use of the word “we.” Jeems apparently eats as well as his white masters, and all three boys seem to take this fact for granted. It is apparent that Jeems has grown up in the Tarleton household as somewhat of a favorite—if not precisely a member of the family, then certainly as a favored dependant. His fate is far from that of the slave frequently referenced in history, an individual who is cold, ill-fed, and mistreated.

While Jeems is a fictional character, it would be wrong to assume that Mitchell simply created his circumstances from whole cloth. In the 1930s, a Federal Writers' project paid interviewers to talk to ex-slaves, and many of them had tales similar to that of Bill Simms, who was a slave in Missouri: "I had a good master. Most of the masters were good to their slaves. When a slave got too old to work they would give him a small cabin in the plantation and have other slaves to wait on him" (qtd. in Yetman 275). Simms goes on to note that the "retired" slave would also be provided with food and clothing until the day he died (275).

Jeems is presented as the contemporary of his teenage masters, with equal privileges and few responsibilities. Throughout the novel, Mitchell creates several black characters who, even as they live in slavery, seem as willing as their white masters to accept the status quo. Perhaps the best example of this type of character is Mammy, Scarlett's surrogate mother. Despite the fact that she is legally inferior, Mammy apparently believes in the myth of the Southern aristocrat and is willing to spend her life upholding the very caste system that binds her:

Mammy was black, but her code of conduct and her sense of pride were as high or higher than those of her owners...Whom Mammy loved, she chastised. And, as her love for Scarlett and her pride in her were enormous, the chastening process was practically continuous. (Mitchell 15)

Mammy is a slave, but throughout the novel, she tells Scarlett what to do, and by and large, Scarlett does it. Mammy is constantly worried that Scarlett will not restrain her "unladylike" impulses long enough to get a good husband (Mitchell 40). Therefore, she

policies her behavior until after Scarlett is married. However, once Scarlett returns home at the end of the war, Mammy once again takes on the role of guardian, a role made all the more poignant by the fact that Ellen O'Hara, Scarlett's mother, has died of typhoid fever (278). Later, when Scarlett hits on the desperate maneuver of going to Atlanta and bartering herself to Rhett Butler to secure enough money to pay the taxes on Tara, Mammy, who seems to suspect what is in Scarlett's mind, insists on going with her as a chaperone: "Ah is gwine wid you an' dat new dress. Yas, Ma'm, eve'y step of de way" (376). Still later, when Scarlett does marry Rhett, Mammy is outraged, and she does not hesitate to speak her mind:

You ain't nothing' but a mule in hawse harness. You kin polish a mule's feets an' shine his hide an' put brass all over his harness...but he a mule jes' the same. An' dat Butler man, he come of good stock...but he a mule in hawse harness, jes' lak you. (Mitchell 587)

Through it all, Mammy does her best for her "chile," and in the end, when Scarlett's world has collapsed with Rhett's desertion, Mammy is the only person she can think of. "And Mammy would be there [at Tara]. Suddenly she wanted Mammy desperately, as she had wanted her when she was a little girl" (Mitchell 718).

Of course, the figure of Mammy is an archetype in Southern fiction, but like all archetypes, it is based on some historical fact. Some scholars argue that Mammy never truly existed, that she is a figment of white imaginations: "From the perspective of southerners, Mammy was the ideal black woman. She was also the ideal domestic ...But Mammy only existed in the imaginations of elite whites" (Edwards 174).

However, there is independent evidence that suggests that Mammy, while she

did not live on every plantation, did inhabit some of them. The mammy or granny *was* an important woman on many plantations, and she was frequently treated with deference. After all, many a plantation owner was raised almost entirely by his “mammy.” Many Southern white women, especially those belonging to the planter class, did not breastfeed their own children. There was no need; there was always a lactating slave woman who could take over the job, giving the mistress an uninterrupted night’s sleep, as well as dealing with the dirty diapers, crying, and other inconveniences produced by infants (Rose 305). As these children grew, their contact with their parents was often limited to a few hours each day. Given these facts, it is no surprise that the black mammy became such a figure of influence, often serving as advisor to the masters, someone so trusted that the master and mistress might even take her side against a white overseer (White 49).

Mammy was not the only slave who is presented as an integral part of a white family. Uncle Peter, the coachman who raised both Charles Hamilton (Scarlett’s first husband) and his sister Melanie (the woman who marries Scarlett’s beloved Ashley), is regarded at least as highly as Mammy. Charles tells Scarlett all about Peter. “He went through all the Mexican campaign with Father, nursed him when he was wounded---in fact, he saved his life...he’s the smartest old darky I’ve ever met and about the most devoted” (Mitchell 97).

Like Mammy, Peter stays loyal to “his” people, even after the war. At one point, Peter is incensed when he is insulted by a Yankee woman who calls him a “nigger” and an “old pet” (Mitchell 464). Scarlett points out to him that he does owe the Yankees *some* gratitude:

“Yet they set you free,” she said aloud.

“No, Ma’m! Dey din’ sot me free. Ah wouldn’ let no sech trash sot me free,” said Peter indignantly. “Ah still belongs ter Miss Pitty an’ w’en Ah dies she gwine lay me in de Hamilton buhyin’ groun’ whar Ah belongs.”
(466)

Peter’s attitude toward freedom, as well as that of Mammy and other Tara slaves, is one of the greatest puzzles surrounding the issue of slavery. As previously noted, there are hundreds of narratives from slaves who passionately desired to be free, from Frederick Douglas to Sojourner Truth. At the same time, there were some slaves who felt, as Peter and Mammy did, that freedom was no great gift. It would be logical if ex-slaves told their former masters that they did not desire to be free, to save themselves from possible retribution. But there is a later record of similar sentiments from people who were no longer under duress. Again, the narratives of ex-slaves in the 1930s provide a startling insight into this belief. Ex-slave Charles Davenport told the interviewer:

Like all de fool niggers o’ dat time I was right smart bit by de freedom bug...I was fool enough to believe all dat kind o’ stuff. But to tell de honest truth, most o’ us didn’t know ourselves no better off. Freedom meant us could leave where us’d been born and bred, but it mean, too, dat us had to scratch for ourselves. (qtd. in Yetman 74)

Former slave Anthony Dawson echoed Davenport’s sentiments, noting that “De nigger during slavery was like de sheep. He couldn’t take care of hissself but his Master looked out for him, and he didn’t have to use his brains. De master’s protection was like de wooly coat” (qtd. in Yetman 97). Given the achievements of black Americans today, this statement seems ridiculous, but many slaves were brainwashed to believe that they

could not survive without the kindly care provided by a white master, and in some cases, the mere existence of the Emancipation Proclamation did little to overcome the conditioned thoughts of a lifetime.

While Mammy and Uncle Peter were “old retainers,” slaves who had been with their families their whole lives, there is another significant character in *GWTW* who also gives her allegiance to her “white folks.” This is Dilcey, the wife of Gerald’s O’Hara’s butler. Early in the novel, Gerald buys Dilcey from a nearby plantation so she and her husband can live on the same land. “Bought her I did, and the price has ruined me. Bought her and her little wench, Prissy. John Wilkes was for almost giving them away, but never will I have it said that Gerald O’Hara used friendship in a trade” (Mitchell 21).

This is almost the only time in the novel that Mitchell mentions the buying and selling of slaves, and, true to her perceptions, it is a benign process. Gerald buys both Dilcey and her daughter in order to keep Dilcey from grieving. Again in accordance with Mitchell’s beliefs, Dilcey is “properly” grateful: “Mist’ Gerald, I is sorry to ’sturb you, but I wanted to come here and thank you agin for buying me and my chile...I thanks you. I’m gwine do my bes’ for you and show you I ain’t forgettin’” (43).

True to her word, Dilcey does not forget her kind treatment. After the war, when most of the slaves have left Tara, Dilcey stays and helps Scarlett in the fields, the only one of the remaining blacks who does so, and she admits to Scarlett that the reason she stays is because “Mist’ Gerald and Miss Ellen been good to me, Mist’ Gerald buy my Prissy so I wouldn’ grieve and I doan forget it” (Mitchell 313). While Dilcey’s gratitude is real, Mitchell leaves unanswered the question of why any woman should be grateful that her child was bought and sold like livestock. Of course, in the story of Dilcey,

Mitchell both softens and trivializes the plight of the many slaves who were sold away from their families despite their pleas, as ex-slave Delia Garlic related to an interviewer in the 1930s:

Babies was snatched from dere mother's bres' an' sold to speculators.
 Chilluns was separated from sisters an' brothers an' never saw each other
 ag'in...I could tell you 'bout it all day, but even den you couldn't guess de
 awfulness of it. (qtd. in Crew and Goodman 34)

Despite the happy ending to Dilcey's story, her experience is where the façade of "happy darkies" created by Mitchell begins to show its first cracks. Some slaves, like Dilcey, were lucky in their buyers; some slaveholders did genuinely care about families and did their best to keep these families together (Rose 167). However, that was simply the luck of the draw. If a buyer did not want a whole family, he was within his rights to buy just one member and walk away. That was the danger faced by every slave, and no amount of kind treatment or *noblesse oblige* on the part of slave owners can gloss over the fact that tens of thousands of blacks were torn from their families, never to see them again.

Throughout the first third of *GWTW*, blacks are still in slavery, and most are presented as happy, hard-working, loyal, and loving. However, there is one black character who does not fit the mold, and for that reason, she becomes one of Mitchell's more memorable creations. Her name is Prissy.

Prissy is introduced early in the book. She is Dilcey's twelve-year-old daughter, purchased along with her mother from the Wilkes' plantation. Gerald O'Hara, ever trying to present himself as a tough, profit-minded slaveholder, pretends that he bought Prissy

because she is “a likely little wench” (Mitchell 21). Of course, no one ever asks Prissy if she wants to move to Tara, or indeed if she wishes to become Scarlett’s personal maid, as her mother suggests (42). Instead, from her first appearance in the book, Prissy does not seem to have the same subservient, eager-to-please-the-white-man attitude that the rest of the slaves present. Instead, she appears to be watching the whites as carefully as a hunter watches its prey, looking for an advantage. Scarlett immediately notices that Prissy “had sharp, knowing eyes that missed nothing, and a studiedly stupid look on her face” (43).

To the modern reader, Prissy’s attitude seems more “real” than the fawning of the other house servants. Indeed, many slave narratives describe how blacks did their best to seem stupid around white people, all the time carefully gathering knowledge to use in making their lives under the taskmasters a little easier (Davis 191). This is Prissy’s game, and it soon pays off. When Scarlett goes to Atlanta during the war, Prissy is sent along to take care of Scarlett’s baby, even though she is too young and “feckless” to be a good nurse (Mitchell 98). Because the needs of the Confederacy have doubled the demands on Tara’s productivity, all the more experienced servants are too busy to travel, and Prissy is promoted by default. She soon takes advantage of the situation, convincing Scarlett that there is no reason for Scarlett to worry about delivering Melanie Wilkes’ expected baby:

Miss Scarlett, effen we kain git de doctoh w’en Miss Melly’s time come, doan you bodder. Ah kin manage. Ah knows all ’bout birthin’. Ain’t mah ma a midwife? Ain’ she raisin’ me ter be a midwife, too? Jes’ you leave it ter me. (Mitchell 223)

Much to her own chagrin, Scarlett does leave it all to Prissy, and when Melanie goes into labor, Scarlett is horrified to discover that Prissy’s expert knowledge is nothing

more than the boasting of a girl who wants to feel important: “Miss Scarlett, Ah doan know nothing’ ’bout bringing’ babies. Maw wouldn’ nebber lemme ’round folkes what was havin’ dem” (Mitchell 249).

This revelation leads Scarlett to break a lifetime of training in how to “handle” slaves. She slaps Prissy as hard as she can and threatens to sell her South (Mitchell 249-50). Throughout this scene, Mitchell’s sympathy is obviously with Scarlett, left to deal with Melanie’s delivery without help. She does not seem to stop and consider that Prissy, a young girl away from her family for the first time, a slave who has been taught that her only safety lies in being of value to the white folks, may have lied simply to obtain what security she can in a hostile world.

The character of Prissy is often viewed as comic relief. Indeed, Butterfly McQueen, the actress who played Prissy in the movie version of *GWTW*, grew to hate the character so much that she eventually gave up acting rather than spend her life playing variations of the comic, bumbling, stupid black maid (Flamini 185). Prissy, however, is more than a comic footnote. She represents the slaves who had to constantly scheme to stay one step ahead of the white masters, sometimes succeeding and sometimes failing spectacularly.

After the end of the war, Scarlett and the other characters face the social upheaval of Reconstruction, and Scarlett’s (and, by extension, Mitchell’s) perception of blacks begins to change. The first hint of this change in attitude occurs while Scarlett is still isolated at Tara and by implication sheltered from the full “horrors” of the Reconstruction era, including not only rapacious white Carpetbaggers and Scallawags, but marauding blacks as well. “She had gathered, also, that some of the free negroes were getting quite

insolent. This last she could hardly believe, for she had never seen an insolent negro in her life” (Mitchell 356).

Soon, however, Scarlett begins to realize that the social structure and class system she has taken for granted is crumbling all around her, as evidenced by the machinations of Jonas Wilkerson, her father’s former overseer, who intends to buy Tara at a sheriff’s sale. “Perhaps they’d even bring negroes here to dine and sleep. Will had told her Jonas made a great to-do about being equal with the negroes...” (Mitchell 370).

It is partly this fear of the “final insult to Tara” that sends Scarlett to Atlanta to try to entice Rhett (and his money). Once there, however, she begins to learn firsthand of the new social order, one that puts her in an uncomfortable position, as the former slaves who once would have been obligated to help her simply laugh at her as she struggles through the muddy streets:

How dared they laugh, the black apes! How dared they grin at her, Scarlett O’Hara of Tara! She’d like to have them all whipped until the blood ran down their backs. What devils the Yankees were to set them free, free to jeer at white people! (Mitchell 404)

Jeering blacks, however, are not what Scarlett and those around her truly fear. The further Mitchell ventures into the Reconstruction portion of the novel, the closer she gets to expressing through her characters the real fears of southerners—the specter of miscegenation. Mitchell makes it clear that this “fate worse than death” was the real tragedy of Reconstruction. “The negroes were on top and behind them were the Yankee bayonets. She could be killed, she could be raped and, very probably, nothing would ever be done about it” (447).

Whites of this era *were* terrified that their women would be raped by free blacks. Black people, male and female, had always been viewed as “lusty animals” who could not control their desires unless forced to do so (White 29). With the breakdown in social and legal barriers after the Civil War, it seemed that rape by blacks would be inevitable: “Many common white southerners considered all African Americans to be “scoundrels” who were unable to control their sexual desires. As they saw it, black men were prone to rape white women...” (Edwards 160).

Given the depth of southern beliefs about black men and rape, it is perhaps inevitable that Mitchell would imperil her heroine in this way. Scarlett is attacked while driving through Shantytown, a collection of huts where free blacks and poor whites live together:

The negro was beside her, so close that she could smell the rank odor of him as he tried to drag her over the buggy side. With her one free hand she fought madly, clawing at his face, and then she felt his big hand at her throat and, with a ripping noise, her basque [bodice] was torn open from neck to waist. Then the black hand fumbled between her breasts, and terror and revulsion such as she had never known came over her and she screamed like an insane woman. (Mitchell 547)

Scarlett is saved only through the actions of Big Sam, her father’s former field boss and one of the “good niggers” of the story (Mitchell 547). Once Sam has rescued her, however, the insult to white womanhood must still be avenged, and the men of the community, including Ashley Wilkes and Scarlett’s current husband, Frank Kennedy, stage a Klan raid on Shantytown and kill the black who attempted to rape Scarlett, along

with his white partner (558). Mitchell presents the Klansmen as heroes, explaining to her readers that they existed to protect white womanhood from the horrors of rape: “It was the large number of outrages on women...that drove Southern men to cold and trembling fury and caused the Ku Klux Klan to spring up overnight” (453).

From this passage, it is plain to see that Mitchell, even writing from the distance of almost 70 years later, truly believed the propaganda that she learned early in life, that blacks were only “after one thing.” The sympathetic treatment of the Klan, more than any other element in the novel, makes Mitchell’s true feelings clear. In Mitchell’s mind and by extension in the minds of her characters, there were two types of blacks—the loyal and docile kind, and the brutish and savage kind. The latter had to be kept in their place, for the sake of civilization. This was certainly not a unique perspective, as author Ben Railton explains:

The prevailing interpretation of Reconstruction was more or less exactly the same as the description that is found in *Gone with the Wind*: race relations were fine until the Yankees came down, freed the slaves, and then offered them equality of all kinds (particularly sexual) with whites ...That is, of course, an over-simplification of that view of history, but not by much, and it does accurately capture the mindset behind the view. (50)

Mitchell, therefore, did not invent this aspect of Southern history. However, by perpetuating it, Railton believes that Mitchell did both black Americans and her largely white a readership a grave disservice. “In describing Reconstruction as she did in *Gone with the Wind*, then, Mitchell may have been merely following an established historical tradition, but it was a tradition of hatred and exclusion” (53).

Despite extensive scholarship on every aspect of her life and work, no one knows exactly what Margaret Mitchell thought about miscegenation. However, some scholars believe that one of her earliest stories, a lost novella called *Ropa Carmagin*, reflects Mitchell's secret obsession with black men. This novella, which was only read by a few of Mitchell's closest friends, supposedly tells the story of a young plantation heiress named Europa Carmagin who, like Scarlett O'Hara, loses everything in the Civil War. However, this heroine falls in love with a handsome mulatto and then dies tragically at the hands of her mad relatives (Pyron 216, 217). Of course, Europa is also the name of a heroine of classic mythology, a maiden carried off and ravished by Zeus in the guise of a black bull (Hamilton 87). It is not too great a flight of fancy to wonder about the symbolism behind that name. At least one Mitchell biographer has theorized that the story may be in some respects autobiographical and that Mitchell's portrayal of blacks in *GWTW* as lust-filled animals may be more wish fulfillment than fear (218).

Even assuming that the analysis of *Ropa Carmigan* is accurate, it is slim evidence upon which to base Mitchell's attitudes about black-white romance. It is perhaps more significant that in her correspondence about *GWTW*, Mitchell never directly discusses the Shantytown attempted rape, nor does she ever suggest that any white woman could find a black man attractive. The miscegenation portrayed in the novel is between black women and white men, and Mitchell, while allowing her characters to decry its existence, mainly skirts the question of sex between the races, noting only that the arrival of the Yankee army brings a notable increase in the number of mixed-race babies in Atlanta (Mitchell 463). As is frequently the case, Mitchell glosses over whatever aspects of Southern society she might find unpleasant, and almost without exception in *GWTW*, the

perpetrators of vile acts are Yankees, poor whites, or free Negroes, all of whom make convenient scapegoats.

Despite the social and legal changes brought about by the war, Scarlett's attitudes towards blacks do not change. Her family's former slaves are still "her people," to be worked, directed, protected, and even loaned out as if they were no more important than a shovel or a shawl (Mitchell 618). Those blacks who are not part of the "family" are as dangerous as wild animals. They are stupid and ungrateful "trashy free issue niggers" who need to be put in their place with a vengeance. For Scarlett and her circle, slavery never ends; it simply wears a different face.

This, then, is the racial legacy of *GWTW*, not the portrait of loyal, happy blacks working in partnership with their white "families," but a picture of a land where black humans are not human at all. They are nothing but animals, and they must either be domesticated or destroyed. That is the message Margaret Mitchell passes on to each new generation of readers.

At first glance, it would appear that Scarlett O'Hara fares far better in the Old South than do the black characters in Mitchell's work. However, Scarlett is trapped within her own kind of slavery, easier perhaps than that of Mammy or Dilcey, but in its own way, just as painful, demeaning, and limiting as that of any house servant at Tara. As suffragette Elizabeth Cady Stanton observed at a women's rights convention in 1850, "A married woman has no legal existence; she has no more absolute rights than a slave on a Southern plantation" (qtd. in Ward 45)

Regarding Scarlett and her world, author Charles Beye explains:

There remains the central truth of the book, which is that all of life for

women and slaves alike was a vast prison in which these unfortunates were enslaved to free white males. This feminist interpretation may seem too fashionable for the mid-thirties, yet there is no question that Mitchell wrote from the perspective of a woman...fully aware of the condition of women at the time. (367)

While the term *feminist* as modern women understand it was not often used, women of Scarlett's era had at least begun to question whether their place in the world must be defined by the whims of a man. More than one hundred years before Margaret Mitchell's birth, the English writer Mary Wollstonecraft might have been describing Scarlett O'Hara when she wrote: "I shall not go back to the remote annals of antiquity to trace the history of women; it is sufficient to allow that she has always been either a slave or a despot" (71).

As we shall see, throughout the novel Scarlett swings between these two roles like a pendulum whipped by a stormy wind, and neither role brings her the happiness she craves.

As the story opens, Scarlett O'Hara is the sixteen-year-old daughter of a wealthy planter in Clayton County, Georgia (Mitchell 2). She is a self-absorbed coquette with a seventeen-inch waist and skin that has seldom been touched by the sun, interested only in how many "beaux" she can attract (3). Her only concerns are clothes, parties, and flirtations. Despite a smattering of education, she has been raised for one purpose—to catch a husband, preferably a wealthy and well-connected one (40). Despite her lack of formal education, Scarlett is shrewd, so she excels in the one area where she is allowed to shine. She is the "belle of five counties" (41). Like most girls from middle and upper-

class families at the time, she is a piece of merchandise in the market for a husband, not so obviously as a slave on the auction block, but nonetheless, part of a tradition. Scarlett and her peers are obliged to fulfill the expectations laid on a girl of marriageable age. Even if the purpose behind all those parties and flirtations is carefully hidden, it still amounts to little more than a bargain between a girl, her suitor, and their families:

The choice of a husband was crucial to their future. It was also critical to the future of the belle's whole family, because marriage solidified social and economic networks. While allowing daughters some latitude in choosing their husbands, parents depended on highly structured social rituals to nudge them in the right direction. (Edwards 20)

There is never even a hint of an alternate future for Scarlett. She must marry, marry well, and marry within a fairly narrow social network. Girls who do not marry “got to be an old maid like India Wilkes and everyone said ‘poor thing’ in that smug hateful way” (Mitchell 120). Therefore, Scarlett's only “freedom” comes in her prerogative to flirt with and tease as many young men as possible before she settles down and gives up fun for life as a matron. “Flirting was the socially acceptable way for a young woman to reveal her social grace and her availability to prospective suitors” (Green 12).

Even in her position of power, however, Scarlett was hedged in by both physical and social barriers. Perhaps the most visible constraint is her seventeen-inch waist, won only at the cost of tight lacing and the ever-present possibility of swooning. Every woman of any social pretension wore a corset; those who did not were obviously lower-class women who actually had to be able to bend down, reach, or stretch in the performance of housework (Edwards 17). The corset, however, was an instrument of

torture only slightly less painful than the shackles of slavery. Even then, doctors knew that tight corsets could produce everything from broken ribs to a prolapsed uterus (Green 12). Many women literally collapsed from the pressure exerted on their bodies, but if that was the price they had to pay for beauty, so be it. After all, in Scarlett's world, the competition was brutal, and the prize—an eligible mate—was all that mattered.

The seventeen-inch waist is set off by an immense (and heavy) crinoline skirt, which was also designed to send a message to possible suitors:

In one of its aspects it [the crinoline] symbolized female fertility, as an expansion of the apparent size of the hips always seems to do...In another sense the crinoline was a symbol of the supposed inapproachability of women...But of course the enormously expanded skirt was a hollow sham: it was itself an instrument of seduction. (Laver 184)

While husband-hunting, Scarlett is also forced before every party to stuff herself with food she does not want, so as to appear “refined” (Mitchell 54). She is also not allowed out without a bonnet, mitts, and a shawl, since the appearance of freckles would mark her as “poor white trash” like the despised Mrs. Slattery (53). However, these physical restrictions are nothing compared to the list of behavioral “don'ts” Scarlett must keep in mind whenever she is in the presence of an eligible gentleman. Scarlett herself, though raised on these rules from infancy, senses that there is something wrong with always being forced to play a part:

I wish to Heaven I was married...I'm tired of everlastingly being unnatural and never doing anything I want to do. I'm tired of acting like I don't eat more than a bird, and walking when I want to run and saying I

feel faint after a waltz, when I could dance for two days and not get tired. I'm tired of saying, 'How wonderful you are!' to fool men who haven't got one-half the sense I've got, and I'm tired of pretending I don't know anything, so men can tell me things and feel important while they're doing it. (Mitchell 54)

Despite her private rebellion, Scarlett falls in line with the expectations her mother and Mammy have taught her, for she has a vested interest in conforming. She is in love with Ashley Wilkes, the well-bred heir to a neighboring plantation. Scarlett is willing to do whatever it takes to "land" Ashley, even if it means the complete rejection of her own personality (Mitchell 55). Sadly, Scarlett does not stop to consider that it might be very uncomfortable to live a lie for her entire married life.

Scarlett's dilemma was a real one. While most nineteenth-century women lived in a world where they were unequal to men, this attitude was taken to extremes in the antebellum South. This was in direct contrast to attitudes in the North, where women were beginning to ask why they could not enjoy full equality under the law. In 1848, the Seneca Falls Women's Rights Convention, held in the state of New York, made history by passing a formal resolution asserting that American women should have the right to vote, to hold property, and to pursue independent careers, not simply serve as wives, mothers, and baby-tenders (Ward 40-41). While not every Northern woman immediately joined ranks with reformers Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, many were at least willing to consider the idea that women might have a larger role to play in society. In contrast, most Southern women were still prisoners of a patriarchal society that was little different than it had been in the Middle Ages. Southern men wanted no talk of

women's rights, any more than they wanted to entertain the idea of rights for slaves. As long as a woman was "nervous, fickle, capricious, delicate, diffident, and dependent, man will worship and adore her" (Yalom 203-04). More important, those nervous, fickle women would not be demanding equal rights under the law, and a society built for the convenience of white men would stay that way.

Scarlett does her best to fit the mold of the passive belle, at least at first. However, when Ashley jilts her for Melanie, his shy, plain cousin, Scarlett's real personality breaks loose: "Why don't you say it, you coward! You're afraid to marry me! You'd rather live with that stupid little fool who can't open her mouth except to say 'Yes' or 'No' and raise a passel of mealy-mouthed brats just like her!" (Mitchell 82).

Ashley flees, and Scarlett is left with heartbreak and rage. To make matters worse, her tirade is overheard by Rhett Butler, a "visitor from Charleston" (Mitchell 68). Rhett, in contrast to most of the men Scarlett knows, is not horrified by this glimpse of her true personality. Indeed, he applauds her for being "no lady" and "a girl of rare spirit" (83). In other words, once Scarlett lets her true feelings show, once she no longer hides her desires beneath a mountain of petticoats and false manners, she is no longer a true lady. At that moment, she becomes far more appealing to a man like Rhett, who, thanks to his life as a riverboat gambler and duelist, has also cast off the shackles of polite society.

Scarlett will meet Rhett Butler again, but for now, she revenges herself on Ashley and Melanie by marrying the first man who asks her, who just happens to be Melanie's timid brother, Charles:

If I married him right away, it would show Ashley that I didn't care a

rap—that I was only flirting with him...And it would hurt Melanie, because she loves Charles so much...And they'd all be sorry when I came back here to visit in a fine carriage and with lots of pretty clothes and a home of my own. And they would never, never laugh at me. (Mitchell 87)

So Scarlett marries a man she does not love, but perhaps fortunately for her, the marriage does not last. Charles Hamilton dies, and at the age of sixteen, Scarlett is a pregnant widow (Mitchell 89). Her life as a belle is over, and she is ill-equipped to play any other role

As a teenage belle, Scarlett has played her role to perfection. It is true that such behavior won her few friends: “No girl in the County, with the possible exception of the empty-headed Cathleen Calvert, really liked Scarlett” (Mitchell 59). However, by marrying Charles and then being widowed by the war, Scarlett loses the only identity she has ever known. She is forced to re-invent herself as a widow, and she loathes the prospect: “A widow had to wear hideous black dresses without even a touch of braid to enliven them...Widows could never chatter vivaciously or laugh aloud...And, most dreadful of all, they could in no way indicate an interest in the company of gentlemen” (Mitchell 93).

Mitchell understood the social death imposed by Victorian mourning. At one point in the novel, Rhett Butler compares it to the Hindu custom of suttee (Mitchell 125). His hyperbole was not far from the truth. Author Judith Flanders enumerates all the restrictions placed on widows in 19th century America and Europe, noting that they were almost completely housebound, and when they did leave their home, they had to be dressed and veiled so as to ensure that no one accidentally “insulted“ their grief with a

friendly greeting (381).

Fortunately for Scarlett, she soon finds an excuse to break her mourning. She has moved to Atlanta to live with Charles' sister (and Ashley's wife) Melanie, and the informality of war time manners, coupled with the brazen encouragement of the socially rebellious Rhett Butler "had pried open the prison of her widowhood and set her free to queen it over the unmarried girls when her days as a belle should have been long past" (Mitchell 169). Later, Scarlett will pay dearly for her flouting of the conventions, as her peers increasingly see her as a woman without the "proper" attitudes of modesty, delicacy, and ladylike temperament (461-62).

While Scarlett uses her freedom from parental supervision and the uncertainty of wartime to resume her social life, she does not grow or mature in any significant way. She is still a spoiled belle, "vain of her looks and her popularity" (Mitchell 149). She nurses wounded soldiers in the Atlanta hospital but only because she cannot think of a socially acceptable excuse not to do so (205). Unlike Melanie and the rest of her social circle, Scarlett does not let the hardships and heartache of the war touch her deeply. Instead, she seems to view the war as little more than a personal inconvenience: "The war didn't seem to be a holy affair, but a nuisance that killed men senselessly and cost money and made luxuries hard to get" (117). Until the fall of Atlanta, all the war means to Scarlett is that it keeps her from having all the coffee, candy, and hairpins she wants (163)

Diaries and letters of the time show that most Confederate women did not feel as Scarlett does. They understood the terrible sacrifices that were necessary for victory, and they responded by managing plantations, nursing the wounded, even becoming spies or

on occasion disguising themselves as soldiers and fighting alongside the men against the hated Yankees (Faust 89, 90). However, even as they recognized the necessity of taking on “men’s” jobs, many regretted the loss of their former sheltered lives. Emma Crutcher, a young woman trying to manage a Georgia plantation during the war, wrote movingly to her soldier husband, Will, about her feelings of loneliness and inadequacy:

“I wish I had you to rely on now for somehow...I feel wearied of acting for myself and deciding for myself. It is sometimes very pleasant to stand alone, but we women all get tired of it. I have been entirely independent since you went away, for the first time in my life...And your little wife is tired, and wants to give up the reins.” (qtd. in Faust 121)

Scarlett, on the other hand, has no desire to “give up the reins,” at least not as long as holding the reins means that she can have her own way in everything. Once the war ends, however, she quickly decides that independence equals misery. The freedom to do as she pleases is outweighed by the burdens she must shoulder without male guidance:

“There had always been someone to do things for her, to look after her, shelter and protect and spoil her...There had always been friends, neighbors, the competent hands of willing slaves. And now in this greatest hour of need, there was no one” (Mitchell 248).

Once her parents are dead and her family is ruined, Scarlett is finally forced to grow up. She realizes, with great bitterness, that the life she was raised to lead is no longer possible (Mitchell 297). Much like Mammy and Uncle Peter, Scarlett does not embrace her emancipation; circumstances force it upon her. As author Anne Jones observes, “The dependence forced on her by her gender role is replaced by the opportunity to use her sharp intelligence” (108). However, as Jones further recognizes,

Scarlett is never fully comfortable with her newfound “masculine” tendencies.

Throughout the rest of the novel, she “has gone so far in the direction of self-reliance, for her sex and her period, she has cut off the fulfillment of her dependency needs” (110).

However, once she realizes that she can only depend on herself, Scarlett sets to work with a will, managing Tara by herself and trapping timid Frank Kennedy into marriage in order to secure enough money to pay the taxes on Tara and keep Scallawag Jonas Wilkerson from buying it (Mitchell 368-70). Once she and Frank are married, she quickly takes over management of his general store, forcing him to collect on debts owed him by their genteel and impoverished neighbors (456). Worst of all, Scarlett borrows money from Rhett Butler and uses it to buy and run a sawmill (439), even making money by selling lumber to the Yankees. At this point, Scarlett begins to move beyond the pale. Even her staunchest advocates cannot forgive her for so totally forgetting both her gender and her social class. Scarlett is indignant at her neighbors’ censure, sarcastically inquiring at one point whether they would rather she had starved than start a successful business (469). In response, Rhett Butler, a man who knows all about being cast out from Southern society, explains:

“The inference is that you should have starved genteelly and with pride... You can either make money in your present unladylike manner and meet cold shoulders everywhere you go, or you can be poor and genteel and have lots of friends.” (470)

This then is the crux of Scarlett’s dilemma. She is trapped between two wildly opposing obligations—be a starving belle, thereby behaving “appropriately,” or become a successful woman who no longer has any right to the title of lady. Scarlett longs to win

the approval of her peers; she wants to be a model Southern lady, as her mother was (Mitchell 467). However, her determination to make a better life for herself means she cannot sit back, fold her hands, and play the lady. She must fight for what she wants, and like the freed slaves, she uses whatever weapons she must in order to deal with a world where white men are still the rulers, even if they now wear blue uniforms instead of planter's linen outfits.

Scarlett adopts the same type of behavior with the Yankee conquerors that Southern Negroes used as a defense in the days of master and slave, using flattery and sweet talk to disguise her hatred:

She does what she, as a woman, had always done to win the war against the males...she proceeds to charm them...Different battles, different games, but the same objective. It is the stunning portrait of a human being entrapped...The narrator does not tell us what the house slaves at Tara think and feel, but the reader may extrapolate from Scarlett's behavior after the war with the Yankee rulers in Atlanta. She turns from field hand to house slave, hating them, but sweet-talking them. (Beye 369, 370)

Scarlett chooses to continue her career and to scandalize her peers by her association with Yankees, but she soon faces more than simple social ostracism. When her "unfeminine" business dealings expose her to attack, and the men of the local Klan are obligated to defend her, tragedy ensues when both Tommy Wellburn and Frank Kennedy are killed during the Klan raid (563-65). At that point, Scarlett's dangerously unrestrained behavior casts her out of the close-knit circle of Southern loyalists.

As Scarlett's story continues, it seems that she is a failure at everything except

making money. Throughout the book, she has never been a woman who won friends easily, largely because she is so self-centered that most people are turned off by her manner. Furthermore, Scarlett does not even seem to realize what people truly think of her. As her neighbor Grandma Fontaine tells her, “Oh, you’re smart enough about dollars and cents. That’s a man’s way of being smart. But you aren’t smart at all like a woman. You aren’t a speck smart about folks” (Mitchell 498).

The truth of Grandma Fontaine’s statement is borne out by Scarlett’s interaction with others, especially her relationships with men. Of course, as a young, belle, she had literally dozens of marriage proposals, but even at the height of her popularity, she could never capture Ashley Wilkes, the one man she truly desires (Mitchell 82). As previously noted, she marries Charles Hamilton only to spite Ashley and his gossiping family, and she marries Frank Kennedy out of dire financial need. Even as she is married and widowed twice, she never gives up on her goal of winning Ashley’s love, and many of her actions throughout the novel, from staying with Melanie during the siege of Atlanta to eventually giving Ashley a job, are impelled by her need to make Ashley love her, or at least to admit his love. However, even as Ashley pushes her away, another man is trying to win her. His name, of course, is Rhett Butler.

Mitchell presents Rhett as the ideal partner for Scarlett, largely because he also turns his back on Southern society. When Scarlett first meets Rhett, he is already a social outcast for refusing to marry a young lady of good family whom he “compromised,” compounding his sin by killing her brother in a duel (Mitchell 68-69). He is only present at the Wilkes barbeque because he was doing business with Frank Kennedy, and Southern hospitality demands that he not be left behind. He inadvertently witnesses the

scene between Scarlett and Ashley in the library, and his interest is piqued (83).

Later, in Atlanta, Rhett reappears in Scarlett's life, and he promptly sets about disentangling her from the web of social conventions by persuading her to dance with him when she is still in mourning for her dead husband (Mitchell 131). He later brings her an expensive bonnet from Paris in order to convince her to put aside her mourning clothes (168). Scarlett, while enjoying his attentions, seems oblivious to what readers quickly understand—Rhett is in love with Scarlett and hopes to make her forget Ashley, who is now married and fighting far away in Virginia. However, Rhett never tells Scarlett he loves her, because he fears that by doing so, he will give her power over him, and as he observes towards the end of the novel, “You're so brutal to those who love you, Scarlett. You take their love and hold it over their heads like a whip” (713)

No matter what Rhett does, Scarlett eludes him until after Frank Kennedy's death. By this time, Rhett has already waited more than four years for Scarlett, and he refuses to wait any longer. He kisses her passionately, informing her:

I want to make you faint. I will make you faint. You've had this coming to you for years. None of the fools you've known have kissed you like this—have they? Not your precious Charles or Frank or your stupid Ashley...Gentlemen all—what do they know about women? What did they know about you? I know you. (Mitchell 580)

Perhaps against her own better judgment, Scarlett finally agrees to marry Rhett, and at first, matters seem to go well. He gives her both the financial and emotional security she craves (Mitchell 592-93), and she gives birth to a daughter, Bonnie Blue Butler, whom he adores (617). But perhaps inevitably, the relationship falls apart, largely

because Scarlett cannot forget Ashley, and Rhett realizes that he possesses Scarlett's body but not her heart. Only at the end, when Melanie dies and Scarlett discovers that Ashley will only lean on her and can provide no emotional support, does Scarlett experience a revelation about her relationships:

It was not Ashley—oh, never Ashley! There was no more warmth in him than a marsh light, no more security than in quicksand. It was Rhett—Rhett who had strong arms to hold her, a broad chest to pillow her tired head, jeering laughter to pull her affairs into proper perspective. (Mitchell 78)

Scarlett finally experiences a moment of self-realization, but it is too late. Broken by the tragic death of Bonnie in an accident, weary of Scarlett's obsession with Ashley, Rhett rejects her and announces that he is going to leave Atlanta and try to find some peace in the old world that he, like Scarlett, had never valued until he lost all else (Mitchell 717). Scarlett frantically attempts to revive his love for her, but in response to her desperate plea, he says only, "My dear, I don't give a damn" (718).

In the end, Scarlett is alone. Melanie is dead, as is Scarlett's love for Ashley, and Rhett has walked away. Only Tara remains, and like a wounded animal, Scarlett plans to flee back to her home, there to gather her strength and attempt to recapture Rhett, the only man who has ever met her strength with strength (Mitchell 719). However, there is no guarantee that Rhett will ever return. Scarlett may actually have to face life as a single woman. "Scarlett begins life as a southern belle, flirtatious and charming...At the beginning she is loved by every young man at the Wilkes's barbeque, and at the end she is an independent woman, hated by everyone in Atlanta" (Beye 374). To the

contemporary reader, this might not sound like such a dreadful fate, but as previously noted, Scarlett fails in all the area where women are supposed to excel—as a wife, a mother, and a friend. Against these monumental failures, her ability to turn a profit apparently counts for very little.

Scarlett's story reveals the strengths and weaknesses of the quintessential Southern belle, as well as the benefits and pitfalls of living in that society. Like her slaves, Scarlett enjoys security as long as she obeys the rules, but she has no chance to think or grow as a human being. Both the slaves and Scarlett are “freed” by the war, but freedom does not always bring happiness. Just as many of the freed blacks clung to the old ways they understand, so Scarlett discovers that her freedom brings her little joy, because she does not know how to use it. If she cannot relate to her husbands and friends from her position of superiority as a belle, she cannot relate to them at all.

Perhaps Scarlett's fate is inevitable, but it is certainly not enviable. In leaving her heroine alone on the staircase of her grand mansion, it is possible that Mitchell was pronouncing a moral on Scarlett's choices. After all, unlike, Scarlett, Mitchell ended her life as the beloved wife of a strong, protective husband. Despite her own independent career, it is possible that the southern belle in Margaret Mitchell never really died. Just as she apparently believed that the only good negroes were servile negroes, perhaps she also believed that the only good women were those who were subordinate to the benevolent patriarchs who populated Mitchell's ideal world. If so, *Gone with the Wind* is not just a popular book, it is a dangerous one, with a message that blacks and women would do well to defy.

The Road Ahead: Reacting to Racism and Sexism in *Gone with the Wind*

Through a thorough and detailed analysis of the themes, plot, and characters in *Gone with the Wind*, it is impossible to ignore the fact that Margaret Mitchell's novel, while richly entertaining and possessed of genuine merit, also possesses enormous flaws, especially in its treatment of blacks and women. In some ways, this is unsurprising to the educated reader, because the book is largely a product of its time and its author's culture. In 1928, when Mitchell first began working on the novel, women had only had the vote for eight years. In addition, Jim Crow laws, statutes designed to bar black Americans from equal access to education, the law, and even public places, were still in full effect throughout much of the South. This region produced Mitchell and molded her beliefs, just as we are all molded by our particular environment. It is also unrealistic to expect any author, no matter how talented, to be able to write according to the social conventions of two generations ahead or indeed to even predict what those conventions might be. Therefore, Mitchell's characters, like all fictional creations, can act only according to their author's understanding.

Many other books written in this era doubtless contained the same prejudices and stereotypes. However, most of these works have been consigned to the back shelves of history, where their outmoded ideas can do little harm. *GWTW*, on the other hand, is still a popular classic, and it will no doubt touch the lives of millions of readers in the future. Therefore, as an individual and an educator, it is imperative for me to find a way to deal with Mitchell's prejudices while still enjoying the work. I must cope with the personal prejudices her work has reinforced in me, as well as help students find a useful context for her attitudes and beliefs.

Thankfully, the world we know is not the world Scarlett knew. At least here in America, slavery is officially dead. Today, black Americans can (in theory) live anywhere they want, attend any school, choose any career, and marry anyone they please. It is a far cry from Scarlett's world of "house niggers" and field hands, or even Mitchell's world, where blacks sat at the back of the bus and kept their heads down. However, even as we take pride in our diverse, multiracial, multiethnic culture, migrant workers are still picking crops for pennies a day. Largely white crowds are picketing in the streets, demanding that "aliens" be ejected from U.S. soil. Instead of Africans dying in the holds of slave ships, we have Mexicans dying in the back of eighteen-wheel trucks as they are smuggled across the border. Based on these incidents, I think that non-whites have a reason to believe that perhaps we have not come as far as we should. On a purely personal level, I know that I am still on the journey to full racial equality.

As previously explained, I grew up in a racist home located in a racist town. However, this racism occurred in a vacuum, so to speak, since there were no minorities living in my home town or attending my school. For that reason, I never really had to think about race, mine or anyone else's. The fact that I was white was not even used as an identifier, since it would have done nothing to set me apart. With the exception of Sammy Davis, Jr., everyone in the world looked like me.

Today, obviously, that is no longer true. Even my hometown has received an influx of minority residents, and the city I live in is home to many cultures. I work in a field where I interact with black, Latino, and Asian clients and co-workers. I can no longer stay in my ivory-white tower. At the same time, not only have my circumstances changed, but black Americans are also living in a brave new world.

If there was ever proof that blacks have come a long way from slavery, or even a long way from the world of Margaret Mitchell, the election of Barack Obama as our 44th president would certainly seem to prove that racism in America is a non-issue. I actually broke with four generations of Nazi traditions and voted for Senator Obama.

At the same time, it is important for me not to congratulate myself or my peers on the final achievement of equality. Yes, Senator Obama is our president-elect, but his election has triggered a resurgence of the Klan and even talk of secession in some southern states (Jonsson n.p.). Yes, I work with black people every day, and I don't call them names or refuse to shake their hands. At the same time, in many ways, I am still uncomfortable in their presence. Like Senator Obama's white grandmother, I am still nervous if I'm walking down an unfamiliar street and see a black man coming towards me. Unlike Mitchell and her contemporaries, I do not fear that he will be overcome with lust for my lily-white body and drag me off into the bushes to violate me. At the same time, I cannot ignore my perhaps irrational or *possibly* quite realistic fear that black men are much more likely than whites to rob me, beat me, or kill me. This is my heritage of intolerance, and I must be aware of these feelings and deal with them, not ignore them or gloss over them with a panacea of white liberal attitudes. I also need to understand that despite the improvement in their status, many blacks still resent and are frustrated by the limitations they face every day. I cannot simply say, "Well, they've got Oprah and Obama; the fight is over." The fight is *not* over, and as a white person, I need to be sensitive to both obvious grievances and subtle acts of discrimination. At the same time, I should not allow myself to be driven by white guilt. In other words, I should not give a black student a passing grade when I know he has not done the work. Oppression cannot

be eliminated through overcompensation.

As an instructor, I also have to be able to look at black literature and black characters with a certain amount of intellectual detachment. When addressing racism in literature, it would be easy for an instructor to dismiss Mitchell as the product of a white Southern upbringing with deep Confederate roots. That is an accurate summing up of her persona, and as we have seen, it certainly flavored her work. However, such a facile explanation will not help me when I am leading students in a discussion of several other authors who chronicled the black experience, because some of these authors, writers who are themselves African American, echo some of Mitchell's stereotypes about black Americans.

Perhaps the most obvious example of this phenomenon is Zora Neale Hurston, one of the most important black authors of the early 20th century. A contemporary of Mitchell, Hurston wrote *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, a novel hailed by many critics as an authentic and influential example of the black voice in literature. Yet Hurston's black characters display many of the worst characteristics of Mitchell's "darkies." From their sexual proclivities to their attitude towards work, Hurston's characters are as "shiftless" as Prissy or the "bad niggers" in Shantytown (Hurston 131, 135). Given her undoubted gifts, why does Hurston portray her male characters as violent, promiscuous gamblers and her heroine as someone completely ruled (and endangered) by her sexuality? Of course, it could be argued that Hurston, writing during the Jim Crow era, felt she had to present such characters in order to attract white readers of the time, but if that is so, then it is even more difficult to explain away the work of Alice Walker, who wrote *The Color Purple* nearly sixty years after Hurston's work was published. Again,

these black characters, created by a black author, display many of the most negative stereotypes usually associated with African Americans. Shug, one of the main female characters, is a sexually voracious club singer (Walker 125-27). Sofia, another major character, has fistfights with both her husband and the police (39, 91). The male characters are even worse; they do nothing but beat their women and have sex with anyone they can find. Even Celie, the book's heroine, behaves more like Mammy than a proud, independent black woman. By 1982, the year of the book's publication, surely readers both white and black were ready for positive black characters. Why then does Walker recreate the same old stereotypes?

In order to help students understand why black authors created such negative portraits of their own people, I will need to help them understand the forces that influenced Hurston and Walker, including the idea that these authors may have been infected with unconscious prejudice from the works they read, just as I was when I read *GWTW*. In addition, by understanding the impact of cultural influences, I will hopefully be able to show students how Hurston and Walker may have exaggerated their characters as an ironic statement of how their people have been perceived by whites, with or without corroborating evidence. It is also possible they may indeed be chronicling the lives of black people as they saw them, and this record may be, at least in part, a protest over the forces of poverty and prejudice that have warped the characters of so many black Americans. No matter how I approach these works, my experience in thinking deeply about race, culture, and literature will serve me well in the classroom. In addition, my experiences with this project will hopefully enable me to give students the tools they need to critically examine the issue of race in works of fiction. However, despite my

scholarship and my best intentions, nothing can give me a genuine *personal* understanding of the divide between black and white. Any racial enlightenment I do achieve is an intellectual exercise at best. I cannot put myself into a black skin.

On the other hand, the limitations I face when dealing with racial issues do not apply when it comes to examining the sexism prevalent in such popular novels as *Gone with the Wind*. As a woman in America, even in the 21st century, I still face the specter of sexism in my daily life. At first glance, it might seem that a middle-aged grad student in Iowa has little in common with a fictional teenaged Southern belle, but Scarlett and I are sisters under the skin, facing the same problems of identity and opportunity in a man's world.

Just as it is true that our society has made strides towards racial equality, it is also a fact that women, in the words of a popular advertisement of the 1970s, "have come a long way, baby." However, as a woman, I also know that our perceived triumphs are sometimes greater than our actual gains, especially when we examine societal attitudes toward women and their place in this culture.

Certainly women have made advances in legal terms. Unlike Scarlett, I can vote. Unlike many women of the 1860s, I can buy property, have a bank account in my own name, and work at any job within my abilities, assuming of course that I can manage to get hired for said job. I cannot be married against my will, forced to bear a child, or obligated to endure physical abuse. (Of course, I speak only of my rights as a woman in America; many of my sisters in other countries do not enjoy these legal protections.) However, under all of the trappings of equality, there is still a strong message being sent to me and every woman in our society, a message that Scarlett knew very well: our value

lies not in our brains, but in our bodies and how they are presented to the world, as well as our success in that most conventional of arenas, the marriage market. It is all very well and good that I am about to (hopefully) complete a graduate degree while working two jobs and coping with lupus, but I have not “landed” a man, possibly because I am not conventionally attractive or more likely because I am just too stubborn to play the game, and I have no faith in the institution of marriage. Therefore, in the eyes of many, I am and will remain a failure.

The messages sent to women about the importance of looks are clear, urgent, and repeated again and again throughout our media. One has only to look through any news kiosk to see the messages proclaimed on the cover of every woman’s magazine. From *Ladies Home Journal* to *Cosmo*, the advice is uniform: get thin, get pretty, get sexy, and get a man. Women who are lucky enough to have a man must exert effort to keep him. They dare not get too “wrapped up” in a career; if they do, they may lose the man to a woman who takes the time to cater to him. Women who do not have children should bear one or two as soon as possible; after all, our biological clocks are ticking, and if we miss out on the chance to be impregnated, we will almost certainly suffer irreparable psychological damage. Any woman who has passed the age of thirty and has not yet found a man must plan a campaign which will help her triumph over her “competition,” the other unfortunates who are also trying to snag the last available presentable male. Most of all, women must never give up on their looks. We must diet, exercise, moisturize, nip, tuck, and dye our way to an appearance of youth, because once we “let ourselves go,” it is all over.

How is this different than Scarlett’s training at the hands of her mother and

Mammy? The result is the same, and the basic message has not changed. Only beauty matters, because only beauty can give a woman the one accessory she desperately needs: a husband.

Of course, it could be argued that the advice in mass market magazines is only for those women who have nothing better to do, those who do not have the education or self-awareness to strive for higher goals. However, if that is true, then it is difficult to explain the advice given by author Lori Gottlieb in the March 2008 issue of *The Atlantic*, which is hardly a fashion rag. In her article “Marry Him!” Gottlieb espouses the mainstream media’s party line for independent women:

Ask any soul-baring 40-year-old heterosexual woman what she most longs for in life, and she probably won’t tell you it’s a better career or a smaller waistline or a bigger apartment...she’ll say that what she really wants is a husband (and by extension, a child). (78)

Gottlieb goes on to explain in great detail why modern women are too particular about marriage, therefore continually sabotaging their “only chance” at true happiness. She maintains that any woman over the age of thirty needs to marry the first acceptable man she can find, whether she is “in love” with him or not. She claims that “once you take the plunge and do it, you’ll probably be relatively content” (79). (That is certainly a ringing endorsement for tying oneself up in the holy bonds of matrimony!) Ignoring both the divorce rate and the psychological damage caused by bad marriages, Gottlieb insists that modern women need to hold their noses and dive in, or else the pool will dry up and they will be left alone. Throughout the article, she also sends the subliminal message that any woman who says she doesn’t want to be married is either lying or delusional.

I *am* a 40-something, soul-baring, heterosexual woman, and I do not wish to marry. I am not lying when I say that, and I do not think I am delusional. Yet, like the “old maids” of Scarlett’s time, I know that many of my friends and family, when I am not in the room to hear them, “say ‘poor thing’ in that smug hateful way” (Mitchell 120). No matter what else I achieve in life, there will always be those who feel simultaneously sorry for and superior to me because I have never had a husband. In both business and social situations, I must regularly deal with people who assume that there must be something wrong with me because unlike the animals in Noah’s ark, I do not go forward two by two. Some family members have even wondered if I am an unacknowledged lesbian, and I have been assured that if that is the case, it is perfectly all right for me to come out of the closet and bring my secret female lover to holiday gatherings. Apparently it is better to be a “deviant” (in the eyes of my staunchly Baptist relatives) than to be a singular freak.

I am also “supposed” to want children. However, like Scarlett, I find children messy, expensive, inconvenient, and exasperating. Unlike Scarlett, I can say what I think, at least in the confines of this paper. However, if I say this in public, I am once again looked on with pity and suspicion. Anytime I want to start an argument in any social situation, I have only to loudly announce, “I hate children!” and the battle is joined. Even today, the assumption in our society is that all “real women” have maternal instincts. Those of us who do not are doubtless in need of therapy.

As a woman, I also face challenges in the workplace. Again, women have made progress, especially in my lifetime. However, few people would argue that the playing field is level. The expectations placed on a woman are still different than those for a man,

and these expectations are again often linked to perceived physical and sexual value. One has only to look at the most recent presidential campaign to see the truth of my statement. Hillary Clinton, a highly accomplished individual by any measurement, had to face a barrage of jokes and media analysis about her “unfeminine” desire for power, as well as subtle and not-so-subtle digs about her appearance. Like Scarlett when she began to run her own business, Hillary was constantly told that her ambitions and manner were not sufficiently feminine. On the other hand, Governor Sarah Palin had the opposite problem. Her looks and charm initially won her fans, but as the campaign progressed, she had to deal with a raft of gender-based prejudices and preconceptions, from her role as a mother to the role of her wardrobe. No one asked Joe Biden how much *his* suits cost. Both women had to constantly battle the message that they were not the “right kind” of women, whatever that means. Their identity was permanently tied to their gender.

I face many of the same problems. There are jobs that I may not get because I am a woman, or at least because I am not size two blonde woman in a pair of imported heels. If I do not use sexual politics, I may not get a promotion. If I do use such wiles, there will always be the perception that whatever I achieved, I only got it because I was willing to provide sexual favors for a more powerful man. Not only is the playing field still not level, it is laced with landmines.

Obviously, I have to decide how to react to these problems and challenges. I can try to change the minds of those who do not want to change; I can stridently protest their assumptions; I can ignore them. I have largely chosen the third alternative. At the same time, I realize that this approach will not work for every woman. I am by nature a largely solitary creature, so I can deal more comfortably than some with the reality that I do not

fit in neatly at most social gatherings. I am also fortunate that I do not desire a career in the public arena, where the lack of the “normal” accouterments of husband and family would be crushing. I have also overcome my youthful yearning to be a super model, so it no longer matters if I can match Scarlett’s 17-inch waist. However, no matter how I cope, I deeply resent the fact that I must be singular in order to be myself. Being perceived as abnormal is a high price to pay for personal authenticity.

These are the personal obstacles I face when dealing with sexism. On a professional level, I face different challenges when teaching students about this topic. Like racism, sexism is a sensitive issue. There are male students who do not want to acknowledge its existence, and female students who feel that the battle is over, and feminists are nothing more than bitter women who never got a man. There are even some female students who feel that feminist attitudes are against God’s laws and that women should not only be happy to be under the rule of a man, it is necessary for their salvation. I must find a way to defend my own beliefs without denigrating theirs. Finally, I face the challenge of any literature teacher; I must find ways to make students understand the historical and cultural context of what they read. Without this framework, it is impossible to fully appreciate good literature.

In some ways, Scarlett O’Hara is certainly a more positive role model for feminists than many famous female literary characters. She is the mistress of her own destiny; she faces every obstacle with the tough-minded courage that the men in her life both admire and deplore. However, as previously noted, she too pays a high price for her authenticity. If I taught this novel, I would like to help students explore and understand the paradox faced by Scarlett and other female characters, the reality that sometimes, a

woman must choose between “happiness” and self-respect. I would certainly try to put Scarlett’s choices into historical context, perhaps by examining how social conventions and gender roles are often changed by disasters such as wars. I would also introduce other “strong-minded” women, such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Virginia Woolf, and Simone de Beauvoir, in order to more fully understand feminist thought, as well as start a discussion as to whether Scarlett O’Hara could indeed be called a feminist or if her attitudes and actions were simply the product of dire necessity. I might also ask students to consider whether Scarlett’s actions during and after the war would shock us so if she were a man. For example, when Scarlett shoots the Yankee soldier in her home, it seems far more violent than if her father had done so. When she works in Atlanta, it is not the fact that she is running a mill that is so terrible instead, it is the fact that a “lady” of good family did not engage in commerce, especially using the type of sharp dealing Scarlett enjoys. I might ask students to consider whether women today are bound by similar social conventions. For example, men in business who know what they want and how to get it are assertive leaders. Women with the same qualities are often nothing more than bitches. In addition, I would suggest that men may be hemmed in by as many social strictures as women. For example, men still cannot cry, any more than they can wear a dress without being exposed to ridicule and hostility. Is it possible that women today are actually freer than their male counterparts?

Finally, to take the focus away from the purely feminist perspective, I would ask the class to consider times when they may have had to make a choice between acting in a conventional, socially acceptable, manner, and acting according to their own convictions. I might also ask students to write the next chapter in Scarlett’s life. What should she do

and why? Hopefully, such an exercise would help them understand this character and perhaps also help them focus on their own choices in life.

Gone with the Wind certainly deserves a place in the classroom, especially as a tool to help students examine their own choices. Male or female, black or white, Yankee or Southerner, those of us who live in America today are still facing issues that the Civil War did not solve, just as we are still dealing with aspects of the male-female dynamic which will never be solved. Mitchell's work, properly contextualized and appreciated for its good points as well as its shortcomings, can offer valuable insights into our past, present, and future, even if hoopskirts and mammies have left the scene forever.

When I first started this project, I wondered if in the end I would find it necessary to put *Gone with the Wind* on the shelf with *Little Black Sambo*. Now, however, I can accept that I love this story, even though the lessons Mitchell taught might not be appropriate for this era. At the same time, the universality of Scarlett's struggles against the world still ring true, and as a woman, I understand just what a climb she faced in order to find herself. Like all those who love this book, I am still on the road to Tara, and there is still a great journey ahead.

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