
**THE PORTRAIT OF THE AMERICAN WOMAN IN MARGARET MITCHELL'S
NOVEL "GONE WITH THE WIND"**

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Abstract: This theme, The Portrait of the American Woman in Margaret Mitchell's Novel "Gone With The Wind" is broad, challenging, interesting and among many contradictory to one another's point of view, at different social grounds, periods of time simply or merely of the fact that a female writer of this tremendous saga read mostly by women represents multi dimensional themes. It is an interweave of tradition, history, war, social classes, Reconstruction, transition and more. All these and many other themes written with a masterful disciplined imagination put in the longest novel in history. A masterpiece of 1037 pages published in 1939 and subsequently in the greatest and longest motion picture on screen. Piling up records and building its own history and legends. The novel has sold in more than 25 million copies in at least 27 languages in thirty countries and in more than 185 editions according to the research conducted in 2004. These figures continue to increase, not to mention that the film is seen by more individuals than the total population of the USA. GWTW has grown and conflated into a phenomenon of American and later into a phenomenon of levels of basic appreciation after international popular culture. Thus criticism was attested at the levels of basic appreciation, often in the opposite poles of love and/or hate, the evaluation again in bipolar terms of praise and/or scorn. On the popular level the book was lauded and in the literary world it was defamed. Mitchell's novel "Gone With The Wind" was seen as important symbols of American culture forces. A serious biography in 1965 sparked reconsiderations simply by the assumption of Mitchell's importance as a writer. Other re-evaluations followed which asserted the literary quality of the work, notably in feminist terms. Attesting the qualities that critics wrote such as Michener who said: "The spiritual history of a region". Many other scholarly papers have been undertaken to attack it and completed to praise it. Because of the enormous popularity, readability, embodiment of the heroine woman character Scarlett O'Hara with many other women who saw themselves in those situations or experienced the same then or even nowadays. These multi themes to discuss about, issues primarily of women, the novel is defined as a woman's literary artistic achievement, seen through the eyes of a woman Scarlett herself and many other women characters. Is seen the distinction of the past and present of the old and new society. Mitchell herself says it is about courage and gumption to change as a necessity in order to survive war, reconstruction and transition. The search of survival by poor and nearly defeated young women who had no control or capacity to understand these tensions. Indeed this novel has become an icon of the US culture.

Keywords: experience, gumption, praise, icon and transition.

In the introduction of this work I have mentioned that most people grew up with "Gone With The Wind", all my and other peoples impressions were formed by the film rather than the novel. Since the movie concretized the events of the novel, still though the movie and the novel are not identical, few changes are deliberately made by the author herself in the novel to avoid tensions and misunderstandings. The director of the movie David O. Selznick transformed certain events to avoid political and racial contradictions, which I consider a very positive gesture and he made the events of the book simply problems, dilemmas of people in general, problems of everyday life, not to treat the issue of segregation or others. Not that the issue of the black race is utterly removed as Alexandra Ripley did in the sequence of Scarlett "Gone With The Wind" in 1991, the same issues are still actual as in the book but not to the same extent. Eliminating the Klux Klan as a main generator of racial problems was something to regard positively on the side of the director, and to make it more attractive he (the director) exaggerated the luxury part (Aristocracy Ideal of the South), that was unheard of that amount in that period of time.

Both novel and movie represented the best American saga a novel of 1037 pages and the longest movie a four hour movie put in screen that both grasp the attention of every generation, gender, race and nation since its first publication in 1936 its extraordinary readability and the movie "Although there have been more artistic triumphs" is seen by more individuals than the total population of the USA. James Michener has estimated Margaret Mitchell very highly and says she is considered a unique young woman who before the age of ten loved to tell stories, and who at the age of 26 began to write a long and powerful recollection of her home town. That it was destined to become a titanic tale of human passion loved around the world, was a mystery then and remains one now. It has sold in more than a million copies in at least 27 languages in thirty countries in more than 185 editions. It has been part

of scholar work. Margaret Mitchell's single masterpiece novel and screen have been perennial favorites to American teenagers, to the point that both are included in high school and college curriculums. Not that other group ages are excluded as readers since Margaret's style of language is understandable even for a five year old.

Margaret Mitchell lends new strength to the legend by telling it as if it has never been told before, and also by mixing a good share of realism with romance. She writes with a splendid recklessness, blundering into big scenes that a more experienced novelist would hesitate to handle for fear of being compared unfavorably with Dickens or Dostoyevsky: Miss Mitchell is afraid of no comparison and no emotion- she makes us weep at a deathbed (and really weep), exult at a sudden rescue and grit our teeth at the crimes of our relatives the damn yankees, was said by critics. Among critics was said that she never makes anyone uncomfortable, unless to feel the shame at the black page of our history which was Reconstruction. "Gone With The Wind" is a plantation legend. Other novelists by hundreds, have helped shape this legend, but each of them has presented only part of it. Mitchell repeats it as a whole, with all its episodes and all its characters and all its stage settings- the big white houses- columned house, sleeping under its trees among the cotton fields. And steps our main portrait of the American Woman, the seventeenth inch waist heroine "Scarlett" coming through the magnolia- colored moonlight with the dark black race singing under the hill, from these well described manners into war and its aftermath into Reconstruction is brought to us the devoted woman going through the turmoil of the time.

Is it Autobiography, is it history, is it tradition, is it war, reconstruction, is it psychology, is it manners, is it religion, is it race? And many other questions your curiosity along the novel, and yes, it is about all of the above-mentioned ones. Many critics have struggled to place it in some kind of framework. When compared with Tolstoy's "War and Peace", understandably the two most commonly suggested genre classifications are: historical novel and family chronicle. The term "historical novel" refers to the monumental historical event described in each work. Margaret Mitchell deals with the war between States (1861-1865) in *Gone With The Wind*. She prefaces the historical event with a description of private life – the bucolic, elegant existence of Sothern aristocracy prior to the war- and then follow the years of battle with lengthy discussion of Reconstruction (1865-1873) concentrating on the difficulties in the public and private sectors as peace is restored. And so, Mitchell completely adheres to this, Tolstoy a model by describing a historical event, in its forebodings and repercussions. In this sense both pieces of work meet the requirements of a historical novel.

The term "family chronicle" also serves as an appropriate designation for *GWTW* and for: *War and Peace*". Each writer delineates the fate of particular families how they fare in the private realm, as the upheaval of major historical crises disfigures the public sphere. They present three significant families the O'Hara's, the Hamilton's and the Wilkes and traces the rise and fall of their destinies while the Old South is gone adding additional unattached figures like Rhett Butler the rebellious son of an a highly respected, aristocratic, Charlestonian family, who has been disowned by his father for behavior unworthy of a Southern gentlemen. (this act describes as well the part of manners).

In the public realm *GWTW* presents a great historical event and in the private sector they describe families who are exposed to a historical calamity, then the synthesis of the two perspectives is still a third genre, where the response of family members to a historical event is plotted and assessed on a positive or negative scale.

In *Gone With The Wind* the characteristics are easy to detect. Generally speaking, Mitchell's characters live, mature and change under the watchful eye of the reader. However, the author gives a significant educational development to only two of her four primary figures – Scarlett O'Hara and Rhett Butler and Ashley and Melanie Wilkes, on the other hand are equivalent to Tolstoy's static figures, since Tolstoy's Characters were considered static figures since they influence the destinies of Scarlett and Rhett, while they themselves go unchanged. Again, through these four figures we see The Old South and New South. Melanie still remain the same sweet lady she had been when she accepted Ashley's proposal in the beginning of the novel. Ashley never evolved beyond the role of a Sothern Hamlet, doomed forever to reflect upon a time and a way of life that are "Gone With the Wind". So, they strongly want to retain the Old South, while Scarlett and Rhett against the background of these two figures especially Scarlett undergo a dramatic development which can be measured in a systematic way. Rhett changes from a suave sarcastic, aristocratic gentleman who has rejected his past buried deep in Southern tradition, only to return gradually to his roots, first by entering the war during the waning moments (on the Southern side), and subsequently, by seeking to raise his daughter within the parameters of traditional Southern life. Even Bonnies tragic death towards the novel's end does not halt his return to conformity. He leaves Scarlett ostensibly to renew his familial bonds in Charleston. Thus, Rhett's pattern of education follows to a large degree the archetype of the prodigal son, who rebels, pursues a life of debauchery and ultimately returns to the original fond.

Since Mitchell obviously devotes more attention to Scarlett's development than to any other character in *GWTW*, her path of education is clearly more complex. She is best described by Dawson Gaillard in her interesting article

GWTW as Bildungsroman, she best describes Scarlett's maturation process by associating her forms of dress with her steady progression to a higher level of self-knowledge and awareness: "These scenes- Scarlett in a party dress, Scarlett in a new bonnet and a widow's dress, and Scarlett in rags hearing that she is loved because she is courageously ruthless are significant measuring points in the dramatization of Scarlett's maturation from a petulant girl to a reflective adult. Like the South in which she lives, Scarlett endures a violent disruption of the pattern of life that she has enjoyed. And along with endurance, knowledge of herself comes to Scarlett. Because of the disruption she learns the harsher realities of life and of her own nature".

Although the level of Scarlett's education is less spiritual than that of the other characters of historical novels in this case the comparison is made to Tolstoy- an characters heroes; she nevertheless like all Tolstoyan figures has embarked on a quest for self-identity and the results of her of her passage are ambivalent in character. In one sense Scarlett manages to break away from a life of self-effacement required of all Southern girls of her generation. Such a path is characteristic of the two doses women in her life Ellen and Melanie. As a consequence of her deviation, Scarlett becomes a successful businesswoman – a position unheard of for females of her generation. In another sense, Scarlett's aggressive business- like nature, drives Rhett away, especially after his renewed acceptance of traditional Sothern life which views woman as shrinking violets. The piece of Scarlett's independence and full development, according to Gaillard is the loss of her man.

GWTW represents a hybrid of three literary genres – the historical novel, the family chronical and the Bildungsgrosman?

The letter best of all captures the true essence of the novels- an evaluation of people as they change in response to historical necessity. Farr's definition (another critic) of GWTW's theme as a story that "glorified a conquered but resisting never -really surrendering people" not only bears considerable merit for Mitchell's novel but, also demonstrates the collective determination of an underway group of Southerners to wage a hopeless battle in defense of their way of life.

Mitchell's anti-historical position is also not difficult to elucidate. Directing her attack against historians who have seen the civil war exclusively from the union point of view, Mitchell effectively outlines the Confederate position and cruelty of the argument by emphasizing the crudity and cruelty of troops, who needlessly pilfer Sothern cemeteries and terrorize Southern women. How contrary this picture appears to the traditional textbook accounts of federal troops as liberators of the apprised and worthy representatives of the lawful national government! In short, Mitchell and Tolstoy perspective both contribute a long-awaited dissident voice to the canonical historical interpretation of these vital historical events. Their efforts achieve a necessary balance after decades of bias and slanted viewpoints.

On the individual plane GWTW offers a second common theme. This pertains to the discussion of individual survival in the wake of a public trauma and social chaos.

In Scarlett O'Hara, Mitchell also creates a character that is simulated by the survival struggle. Mitchell wrote to Granberry in (1936). She reveals her original intensions for the Scarlett figure:

"She (Scarlett) just seemed to me to be a normal person thrown into abnormal circumstances doing the best she could, doing what seemed to her the practical thing. The normal human being, in a jam thinks primarily of saving his own hide, and she valued her hide in a thoroughly normal way".

In contrast with other characters, Scarlett who views her struggle with adversity as a challenge, the other characters cannot meet the survival test with determination. Such figures are doomed to die. Melanie does not survive because she is too passive and meek to cope with the immoral side of life; adversity is free to trample them because they are too weak to oppose the forces of evil. Although, each is imbued with an admirable inner strength, this is not sufficient for survival. It must be transformed into an external strength that confronts life's evil with a powerful will.

Margaret Mitchell about her novel has said:

"If the novel has a theme, the theme is that of survival. What makes some people able to come through catastrophes and others, apparently, just as able, strong and brave, go under? It happens in every upheaval. Some people their way through triumphantly that are lacking in those who go under? I only know that the survivors used to call that quality: "gumption". So, I wrote about the people who had gumption and the people who didn't."

In the sphere of characterization GWTW becomes more specific than those of genre or thematic. Apparently, Mitchell prizes her respective city as highly as a symbol of traditional culture that she decides to elevate that in stature by equating the city with the heroine of their respective work.

The parallel of Scarlett and Atlanta on the other hand is more than just a metaphor. It is explicitly stated, as Mitchel explains in a summary of GWTW she had wished to create an obvious juxtaposition which the reader cannot miss:

She (Mitchell), thought she would write a story of a girl who was somewhat like Atlanta- part of the Old South, part of the New South. How she rose with Atlanta and fell with it, and how she rose again. What Atlanta did to her, what she did to Atlanta.....

She Identifies with Atlanta. Scarlett and Atlanta growing up together! Mitchell describes:

“But Atlanta was of her own generation, crude with crudities of youth and as headstrong and impetuous as herself....”

In a space of time but little longer than Scarlett’s seventeen years. Atlanta had grown from a single stake driven in the ground into a thriving small city of ten thousand that was the center of attention for the whole state.....⁴

Scarlett had always liked Atlanta for the very same reasons that made Savannah, Augusta and Macon condemn it. Like herself, the town was a mixture of the Old and New in Georgia, in which the old often came off second, best in its conflicts with the self-willed and vigorous new. Moreover, there was something personal, exciting about a town that was born- or at least christened- the same year she was christened.”

During the year that GWTW was published there were published also about 40 other historical novels and since we began to compare it with Tolstoy’s “War and Peace” another element should be mentioned. What is GWTW toward other historical novels, why more than ever GWTW is in many reader’s hands no matter what age, place, country, gender even though considered a woman’s book consumes mostly by women, it is because it consists of the following:

While other historical novels for example, “War and Peace”, which is the last topic of comparison involves structure and stylistics. A number of contrasts may be greater than similarities. For example, while in the structure of his novel Tolstoy interweaves three categories- peace, war and philosophical commentary, Mitchell creates a novel of only a single dimension- the world of Scarlett O’Hara. It evolves in a linear pattern from peace to war to reconstruction, and it’s free of Tolstoy’s or other writer’s complex “linkages”. Moreover, unlike Tolstoy the author of GWTW never takes the reader to the war front, it only becomes known through letters, rumors and eyewitness accounts that are related in Scarlett’s presence, while the other war novels bring the reader at a detailed depiction of battle scenes again and again while Mitchell moves in a straight line toward reconstruction.

The interweaving of characters fate and exhaustive interaction of the major figures is another closer analysis describing the “linkages”; the pattern of others is relating one character with all the others. Mitchell creates similar “linkages” among her four primary figures, of the old and new south. By employing this Tolstoian device of “linkage” Mitchell finds infinite possibilities for exhaustive character interaction, thereby increasing the scope and panorama of her novel. While other historical novels write about wars, they do not strive for total historical accuracy, Mitchell as is well documented goes to great length to recreate the Civil War Era authentically in all its details. She pays strict attention to the types of weapons used, researches the weather conditions of certain battles and studies the medical treatment rendered the sick and wounded during the war. Summarizing her thoughts on the need for impeccable historical accuracy. She also notes: “However lousy the book may be as far as style, subject, plot, characters, it is as accurate historically as I can get it”. She didn’t want to get caught on anything that a Confederate Vet could nail her on. Surprisingly, there is little textbook history in the novel. The readers fill in the background of military from the author’s deft references to the facts of Civil War. But an illusion of exact and detailed history is produced by her exact and detailed descriptions of day- to day life in the period of the Civil War and Reconstruction.

Michener says: “The abiding merit of this novel is not that it gives us the portrait of a headstrong woman, but that it was depicted with remarkable felicity and spiritual history of the region”

“The spiritual history of the region GWTW was considered by Mildred Seydell, a veteran Atlanta newspaper woman even in 1936 wrote of the younger woman’s book the week it was published: “I don’t know whether *Gone With the Wind* is a true picture of the South of those days that I have gotten when I was a child listening to ageing, graying relations and friends of their youth. If it does not fit the history of the Civil War as revisionists since her time have seen it, Margaret Mitchell’s view does fit the view that was the Southern view for many years and itself has validity as history. To put it another way, it is the great desideratum of the United Daughters of the Confederacy, an unbiased history of war from the Southern point of view”⁵

GWTW is a fearless portrayal, romantic yet not sentimental, of a lost tradition and a way of life. The novel is considered a document. A document indeed if studied closely her biography, a document of her family, Margaret is

⁴ Mitchell, Margaret *Gone With The Wind* novel, 1936

⁵ Pyron, Darden, Asbury. *Recasting; Gone With the Wind in American culture*, 1983 (p.1-224)

Scarlett? raises the question to every reader. Experiences of close and distant family members helped the author interweave them with her tremendous skillful letters write the legend of this period of time. Bringing in an examination of a woman, using the woman device to storm through the turmoil of the time. Showing what is necessary to possess, and that is the need to change , to bend, to adopt to the new and break the old. How did they survive? Survived with hysteria being hysterical or with hysterical personalities carrying the burden of social forces that molded these women all the way to the extent of lying as a mechanism of defense, but justified as a tool for survival over the tensions of the Old Traditional South into the New South. Tensions that woman had no control or knowledge of it. Mirroring women in transition, in need of change, a new way of living and yearning for the old traditional one, that was hard to retain and pass to the new generation.

Everything traditional that was taught and impressed to their memories to respect and follow was Gone With The Wind.

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