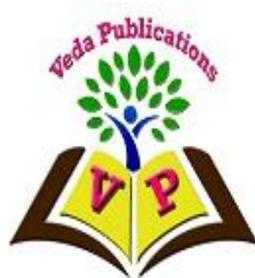


**THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF MARGARET MITCHELL'S *GONE WITH THE WIND***

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DOI: [10.333329/joell.7.1.62](https://doi.org/10.333329/joell.7.1.62)**ABSTRACT**

Gone with the Wind written by Margaret Mitchell illustrates the aftermath effects of the Civil War. The protagonist is Scarlett O'Hara, who victoriously survives the war. She is a gorgeous girl in the area. She is in love with Ashley Wilkes. She loses temper when she comes to know that he is going to marry his cousin Melanie Hamilton. As a vendetta she decides to marry Melanie's brother. The effect of war is severe. Men go to the battle thinking that it will only last a few weeks but continue for a longer period of time. Scarlett who is living in Atlanta witnesses the ravages that war brings. She also gets reacquainted with Rhett Butler, whom she had first met at the Wilkes barbecue. Though a widow, she still strives to get the attention of the married Ashley and dreams of his return. They lose the civil war and she is compelled to return to Tara and experiences the hardship of keeping her family together and Tara, the plantation from being sold. She is hardened and bitter with the circumstances which she faces. There is a drastic transformation in her. She is ready to do anything, including marrying her sister's fiancée, to ensure that she will never again be poor and hungry. After becoming a widow for the second time, she finally marries the dashing Rhett but they soon find themselves at cross-purposes, their relationship seemingly doomed right from the beginning. The novel deals with many themes among them the prominent ones are Outlive War or Survival, Indomitable Love, The Changed Gender Roles, Society and Class Structure, The Transformation of Old South and its Culture, Willpower, The Significance of Native Land and Sardonicism-Irony. This paper emphasizes on different themes of *Gone with the Wind*.

keywords: *Survival, Indomitable Love, The Changed Gender Roles, Society and Class Structure.*





Margaret Mitchell was an American novelist, and journalist. She wrote only one novel, *Gone with the Wind*, which was published during the American Civil War. She won many awards for her novel. She won the National Book Award for the most distinguished novel of 1936 and the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1937.

Margaret Mitchell wrote *Gone with the Wind* to add colour to her monotonous life. She was only 25 years old when she happened to write one of the most popular fictions in the literary history. Mitchell was a journalist for the Atlanta Journal Sunday Magazine. She went on leave to recover from "a series of injuries," including a recurring ankle injury. The ankle took time to heal then she decided to occupy herself by writing.

This is the story of Old South during the beginning of the Civil War through the period of reconstruction which actually focuses on the beautiful protagonist Scarlett O'Hara. The narration is all about before the beginning of the war life and aftermath of it at the O'Hara plantation. The young Scarlett is undoubtedly the most beautiful girl in the area. She is always seen as the belle of the ball. She looks forward to a barbecue at the nearby Wilkes plantation as she will get an opportunity to see the man she loves, Ashley Wilkes. She loses temper when she comes to know that he is going to marry his cousin Melanie Hamilton. It was quite disgusting for her and she takes a hasty decision to marry Melanie's brother. On the other side of life is pathetic because the effect of war is rather severe. Men go to the battle thinking that it will only last for a few weeks but it continues for a longer period of time.

Scarlett living in Atlanta experiences the disaster that war brings. She also gets reacquainted with Rhett Butler, whom she had first met at the Wilkes barbecue. Though a widow, she still craves for the married Ashley and dreams of his return. The Old South loses civil war. She is compelled to return to Tara and faces the hardship of keeping her family together and Tara, the plantation from being sold. The struggle of life has hardened her and she grows bitter. She is ready to do anything; including marrying her sister's fiancée, to ensure that she will never

again be poor and hungry. After becoming a widow for the second time, she finally marries the dashing Rhett but they soon find themselves at cross-purposes, their relationship seemingly doomed right from the beginning.

Though the plot of the novel seems to be simple provincial life, it deals with many themes. Among them the prominent ones are Outlive War or Survival, Love, The Changed Gender Roles, Society and Class Structure, The Transformation of Old South and its Culture, Willpower, The Significance of Native Land and Sardonicism-Irony. These are the themes which the reader encounters with as well as pushes them to read further. These themes are so distinct in nature that they compel the reader to rethink and interpret it in varying forms.

OUTLIVE WAR

Outlive War can be seen as the very first theme of the novel. Even Mitchell mentioned that the main theme of the novel is outlived war or survival, when *Gone with the wind* was published. "What makes some people able to come through catastrophes and others, apparently unable to overcome? It happens in every upheaval. Some people survive, others don't. What qualities are in those who fought their way through triumphantly that are lacking will go under ...? She said, I only know that the survivors used to call that quality gumption. So I wrote about the people who had gumption and people who didn't." Scarlett and Rhett can outlive war because they learnt to adapt to the changes which are brought about by the war and reconstruction. While the Old Southern society sees the war as a source of destruction which is tearing their world apart, Rhett witnesses it as an opportunity to become prosperous. "There is just as much money to be made in the wreck of civilization as in the up building of one." He becomes a blockade-runner. He takes advantages of the shortages caused by the war. By the end of the war, he is one of the few prosperous people left in Atlanta. Scarlett takes the opportunity to make money out of the hardships of the war when she goes into the lumber trade after the Yankees have burnt Atlanta. The people are beginning to rebuild



their lives after war. She finds that as the best opportunity to mint money.

Melanie and Ashley are the worst sufferers. They are unable to outlive war because they fail to adapt the situation. They live with their family honour and tradition and the Old Southern way of life. Ashley spends much time dreaming about the gracious old days of plantation life after the war. He tries his luck as a farmer in order to survive, but he makes a poor farmer at Tara. Will Benteen says, "He wasn't cut for farming." Scarlett installs him as manager in one of her mills. He proves a failure even at farming. Ashley can predict his future. In the end it is proved time and again what will happen will be what has happened whenever a civilization breaks up. The people who have brains and courage can overcome and the ones who haven't are winnowed out. Whereas he is pretty sure that he belongs to the latter sort.

Ashley is unable to withstand war whereas Melanie is far more adaptable than Ashley. She faces reality with maturity. She gives moral support to Scarlett in every crisis that the war and reconstruction bring. She finally impresses Scarlett with her strength and courage. She is physically frail and timid in manner. She is unable to make her way through the harsh conditions of the new society. She involves in charity activities after the war. Melanie looks back when compared to Scarlett and Rhett, who look forward. She works for such causes as the graves of the war, dead, widows and orphans of Confederate soldiers.

INDOMITABLE LOVE

The other theme of *Gone with the Wind* is "Love". Several characters learn many important lessons in terms of love in *Gone with the Wind*. Scarlett fails to understand what real love is until the end of the novel. Throughout the novel, she is in love with the gentlemanly Ashley, who is very different from her and unattainable because he has married Melanie. Scarlett's feelings for Ashley drive the plot. All the help which she renders for Melanie and the Wilkes family is for the sake of Ashley. The worst and tragic result of her fixation on Ashley is that she fails to

appreciate the love and support that Rhett Butler lavishes upon her over the years.

She also fails to identify how similar she and Rhett are. She has a blind prejudice that Rhett is "not a gentleman." She also hates the fact that Rhett reads her mind and every action. She misinterprets that it immunizes him to bully and manipulate her. The reader is likely to become frustrated by the fact that only Scarlett fails to see that Ashley is not suitable for her and that Rhett is a perfect match. Finally, Scarlett realizes that she has only loved an imaginary version of Ashley and that she loves Rhett, but it is too late. Rhett's love for her has worn out and was not ready to accept her any more.

Rhett in contrast sees from the beginning how similar he and Scarlett are, and falls in love with her. He doesn't admit his feelings, however, because, as he later tells her, "you are so brutal to those who love you, Scarlett. You take their love and hold it over their heads like a whip." Ashley labours under a similarly destructive delusion to Scarlett. He does not leave Melanie because he is too honourable, but he lacks the courage to break off his relationship with Scarlett. He keeps on encouraging and admitting that he too loves her. As Rhett points out, such behaviour is neither honourable nor respectful to either of them. Rhett believes that Ashley is not interested in Scarlett as an individual, but that he only wants her body. This interpretation is confirmed by Ashley's inability to see Scarlett as she is. When she becomes impatient over Ashley's failure to make enough profit at her mill, Ashley is determined to believe that it is Rhett who has poisoned her mind. In actuality she has enough brutality of her own. Melanie too loves Scarlett but does not see the darker side of her character. Only Rhett observes her clearly and loves her remarkable achievements, but Scarlett is too self-absorbed to notice his real love.

Ashley doesn't realize how much he loves and relies upon Melanie until she is on her deathbed. Scarlett has a similar realization about Melanie, who has hitherto been the focus of her jealous hatred. Ultimately the lesson of all these cases is that people should appreciate and love those close to them before they are taken away from them.



THE CHANGED GENDER ROLES

The role of men and women in society, the pre-war south is a place of strict gender division. Women were trained to attract rich men, provide children and run home. Scarlett at this time thinks of little other than flirting and trying to appear to be a lady, when her true nature is ruthless, self-interested and distinctly doesn't look like a lady. The seeds of her future success in business are present, which is quite obvious by looking her talent for calculating figures. When she gets into business, this skill proves useful and enables her to defeat the competitors. In a broader sense she too calculative, always quick enough to seize an opportunity and pursue her ambition, no matter whatever may be the human cost.

The factor that enables Scarlett to break out of her role as demure Southern belle and become a successful businesswoman is the war. Before the war, the Southern economy was based around the plantation. Certain roles were assigned to men and women, the men being in charge of the plantation and the women in charge of the household and the warfare of the slaves. However, that Mitchell makes clear that while Gerald takes credit for being in charge of Tara, it is Ellen who is the real manager: she does the accounts, deals with the slaves and employees, and is the recognized voice of authority on the plantation. It was socially acceptable and did not challenge traditional gender roles, because Gerald is normally in charge, with Ellen the quite power behind the throne.

The war destroys the plantations and with them, the traditional economic and social systems. Southern gentleman like Ashley is not fitted for anything but running a plantation, and cannot deal with the cut and thrust of the new climate of entrepreneurship. It is left to the strongest, bravest and most adaptable to become the new generators of income and sometimes, these are women, such as Scarlett. Though Scarlett is disapproved of by the Old Atlanta society for her "unwomanly" behaviour in running her own business, the war has at least made it possible for a woman to break out of her traditional gender role – such a thing would have been unthinkable previously. Scarlett begins to talk

and act like a man, takes charge at Tara, supports Ashley at her mill, all activities that are traditionally the preserve of the male. Scarlett's disinclination to have children would have been viewed in both hers and Mitchell's time as extremely unnatural in a woman, and underlines her rejection of the traditional female role.

Necessarily, a woman taking the male role has the effect of somewhat emasculating the men. It is notable that Scarlett's second husband, Frank, is referred to as an "old maid in pants" and Ashley often appears more of a woman than Scarlett, taking the sexually passive role to Scarlett's aggressor and having to take orders from her at the mill.

Rhett is the only Atlanta who consistently supports Scarlett in her business activities. He also expresses feminist ideas. For example, he does not see any point in widows being expected to refrain from enjoying themselves, or pregnant women hiding themselves away from view. More practically, he helps three women (Scarlett, Belle Watling and Mrs.Merriwether) set up or expand their business by on their own.

Mrs.Merriwether, who runs a pie-making business after the war, is not socially disapproved of as much as Scarlett. Rhett thinks that this is because she has good grace not to be too successful and not to appear to enjoy working. Other factors may be that the men of her family help her in the business and the business itself revolves around the traditional feminine activity of baking.

SOCIETY AND CLASS STRUCTURE

The traditional rigid class structure of the south is broken up by the war. Before the war, plantation owners are at the top of the social hierarchy, though graduations are clear even with this sector, with old aristocratic families like the Robillards being placed above self-made but lowly born people like Gerald. The plantation owners are superior to their overseers, who in turn are set above the slaves. Within the slave society, house slaves are set above field slaves. All the slaves, in turn, look down upon poor "white trash" like the Slatterys, who are at the bottom of the heap.



The war, in which plantations are ruined and slaves are freed, subverts this hierarchy. Those who were high are brought low, and those who were low but have some useful skill are able to rise in the newly fluid society. Formerly powerful gentlemen from grand plantation families like Ashley are no longer valued if they lack practical skills such as farming or an entrepreneurial spirit that will allow them to succeed in trade. A poor white, Will Benteen, is able to become master of Tara because of his farming skills and general competence.

As well as breaking down class structure, the war also begins to dismantle social conventions that gather previously exercised an iron grip. Young men and women ignore the usual rules of courtship and marry in haste, before the men are called away to fight. People ignore class divisions in choosing a marriage partner, paying more attention to practical matters of survival: the aristocratic Cathleen Calvert marries her family's former overseer, Mr. Hilton, so that her sick brother can be taken care of; and Will Benteen is able to marry Suellen O'Hara, a woman who before the war would have been out of his reach, because he is a capable farmer. Rhett, who is the target of a scandalized society's disapproval at the novel's beginning because he stayed out all night with a woman and yet did not marry her, is welcomed back into society when his work as a blockade-runner makes him able to provide sought-after supplies. In the most shocking (for the time) breaking of social boundaries, many 'respectable' Atlanta gentlemen find themselves indebted for their lives to the prostitute Belle Watling, who provides them with an alibi for murder after a Ku Klux Klan raid.

SARDONICISM-IRONY

Scarlett's self-absorbed blindness to the truth of many situations leads to our seeing more than she does, which in turn results sardonic. The chief irony of the novel is that Scarlett's obsession with Ashley prevents her from appreciating that Rhett is the perfect match for her. Paralleling this is the irony that Ashley only realizes how much he loves and relies upon Melanie when she is dying. Similarly, it is ironic that Scarlett hates and despises Melanie throughout most of the novel while Melanie loves Scarlett and is

her devoted champion, a fact that infuriates Scarlett. Like Ashley, Scarlett only recognizes how much she values Melanie when she is about to lose her through Melanie's death.

There is irony too in Melanie's persistent attribution of Scarlett's support of her to noble qualities like altruism and bravery, when in fact, Scarlett only acts the way she does because of a promise she made to her beloved Ashley.

The disruption of the social hierarchy by the war leads to many ironic situations. Jonas Wilkerson, the former overseer at Tara, ends up in charge of the local Freedman's Bureau after the war. In his new position of power, he is able to raise the taxes on Tara so high that Scarlett looks set to be forced to sell the estate to him. Wilkerson and Emmie Slattery turn up at Tara in a fine carriage and expensive clothes and offer to buy the place. The irony is that before the war, the O'Hara's had wanted to buy the Slattery's land but the Slatterys had been too proud to sell. The war has brought about this reversal in fortune.

Another social irony is the power that (in Mitchell's view) is granted to the freed slaves by the victorious Yankee government, while the former ruling class is disenfranchised and disempowered. The freed slaves after the war are courted and manipulated by the Yankees, as their votes decide who is appointed to political office. Mitchell says, "The South had been tilted as by a giant malicious hand, and those who had once ruled were now more helpless than their former slaves had ever been." The white former ruling class is denied the vote, and the former slave class is given the vote.

THE TRANSFORMATION OF OLD SOUTH AND ITS CULTURE

Gone with the Wind is both a romance and a meditation on the changes that swept the American South in the 1860s. The novel begins in 1861, in the days before the Civil War, and ends in 1871, after the democrats regain power in Georgia. The South changes completely during the intervening years, and Mitchell's novel illustrates the struggles of the Southern people who live through the Civil War era.



The novel opens in prewar Georgia, where tradition, chivalry, and pride thrive. As the Civil War begins the setting shifts to Atlanta, where the war causes the breakdown of traditional gender roles and power structure, when south loses the war and the slaves are freed, putting a stop to the Southern way of life, The internal conflicts intensify. White men fear black men Southerners hate profiteering or domineering Northerners, and impoverished aristocrats resent the newly rich. Mitchell's main characters embody the conflicting impulses of the South. Ashley stands for the Old South; nostalgic and unable to change, he weakens and fades. Rhett, on the other hand, opportunistic and realistic, thrives by planting one foot in the Old South and one foot in the New, sometimes even defending the Yankees.

WILLPOWER

Scarlett manages to overcome adversity through brute strength of determination. She is delineated as a feminist heroine because she relies on herself alone and survives the Civil War and Reconstruction unaided. She rebuilds Tara after the Yankee invasion and works her way up in the new political order, taking care of helpless family members and friends along the way. Mitchell suggests that overcoming adversity sometimes requires ruthlessness. Scarlett becomes a cruel business woman and a domineering wife, willingly coarsening herself in order to succeed. Other characters succeed by exercising willpower, among them Old Miss Fontaine, who has seen her entire family in lurch as a child and then gritted her teeth and worked to raise her own family and run a plantation. Rhett Butler also wills his way to success, although he conceals his bullheaded willpower with a layer of ease and carelessness

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF NATIVE LAND

In Chapter II, Gerald tells Scarlett that "The only thing in the world that amounts to anything is land". At critical junctures Scarlett usually remembers that land, specifically Tara, is the only thing that matters to her. When Scarlett escapes to Tara from Atlanta during the war, she lies sick and weak in the garden at neighboring Twelve Oaks and the earth feels "soft and comfortable as a pillow" against her cheek. The land reinvigorates her strength. After feeling the

comfort of the land, she resolves to look forward and continue the struggle with renewed vigor. Scarlett prizes land even over love. When Ashley rejects Scarlett's proposed affair, he gives her a clump of Tara's dirt and reminds her that she loves Tara more than she loves him. Feeling the dirt of her hand, Scarlett realizes that Ashley is right. At the end of the novel, when all else is lost, Scarlett thinks of Tara and finds strength and comfort in its enduring presence.

Thus *Gone with the Wind* has many themes of its own which make the novel more enthusiastic for the reader to enjoy the experience of reading this fiction. Though there are many themes it retains its unity and coherence. Mostly the novel revolves round Scarlett; the self-confident schemer has a charm of her own. She is the combination of beauty and guile. *Gone with the Wind* is not a happy book. There are flicks of humour, but for the most part, a deadly seriousness pervades the novel, and in the end the callous, grasping cynicism of the leading characters mocks them and, properly leaves them with an empty loneliness. *Gone with the Wind* will remain as a memorable work of literature not only because Scarlett O'Hara embodies some of the most admirable, if not responsible, qualities of human behaviour but also because it chronicles a period and culture of American history that have become mythic in their proportions.

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