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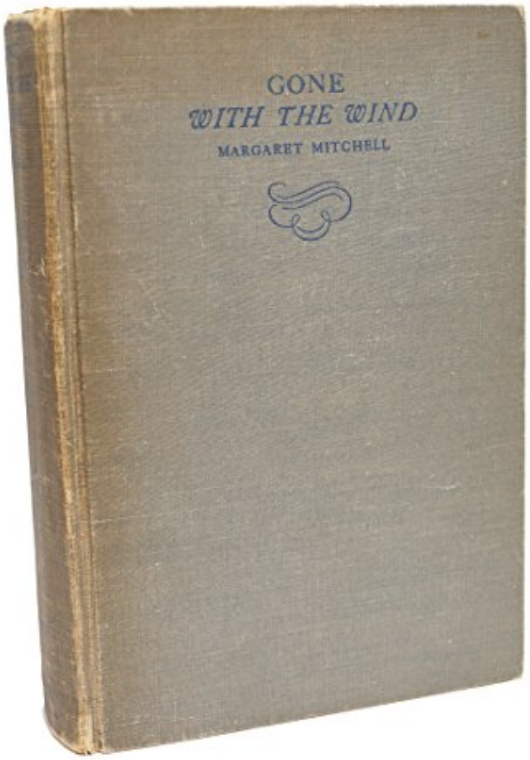

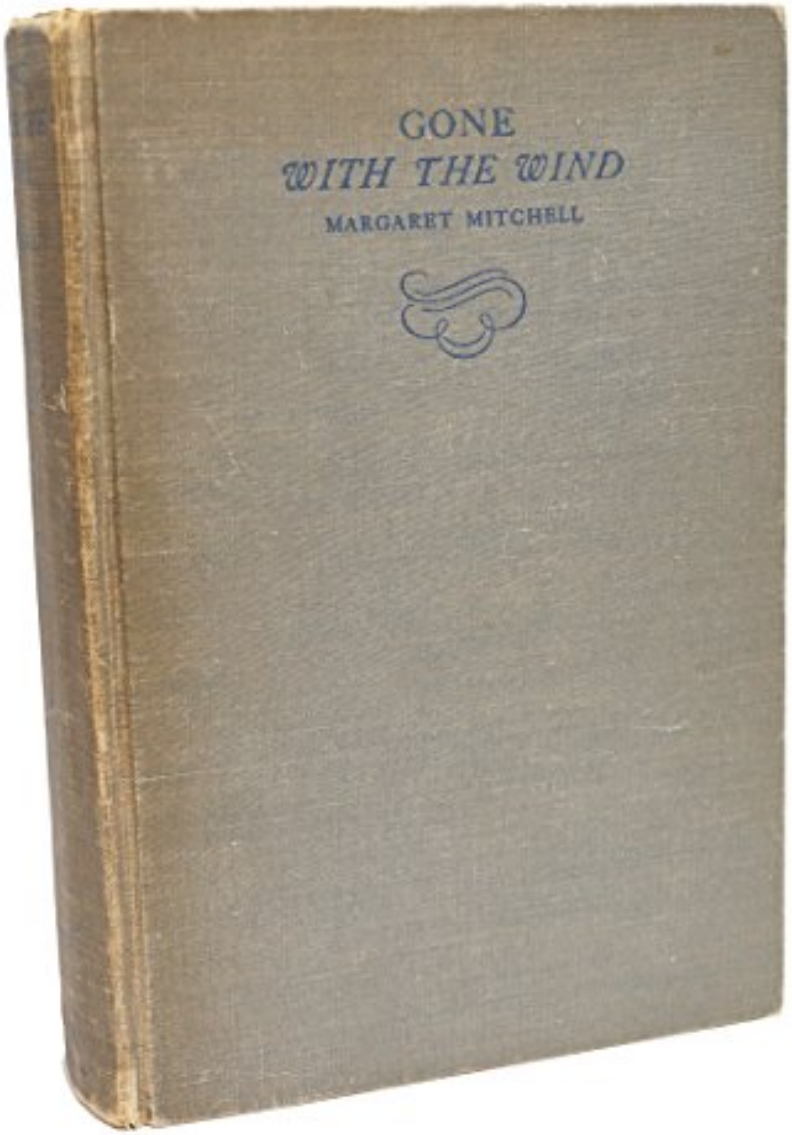

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Division and reunion, and the child and adult, in "Gone With the Wind"
By James Wood
"Gone With the Wind," as a novel, has been mistakenly dismissed by literary critics as pulp fiction for the masses. This view is premature and biased, in my opinion. If one digs deeply into the fabric of this very complex novel, one is likely to find that this novel works on two very different levels: the external level, in which themes such as survival and romantic love figure prominently; and the internal level, in which themes such as division v. reunion and the child v. the adult figure prominently.

An external analysis of the novel yields much that has been obvious to the reading and movie-going public for years. "Gone With the Wind" is, most obviously, a very powerful novel about a young woman's survival of two unique crises: the American Civil War and Reconstruction of the South that followed. The personal qualities of those who survive and prosper in this novel -- characters such as Scarlett O'Hara, Rhett Butler, Mammy, Will Benteen, old Mrs. Fontaine, even Mrs. Merriwether -- are contrasted sharply with those who do not survive and prosper: Ashley Wilkes, Ellen O'Hara, Gerald O'Hara, and Scarlett's first two husbands, Charles Hamilton and Frank Kennedy.

Melanie Hamilton presents an interesting study in the story of survival. Margaret Mitchell uses her to represent the dignified stateliness of the Old South matron. Rather than becoming a victim of the Old South's disintegration, she survives in a way that equals or even surpasses Scarlett's survival. Melanie, whom Mitchell originally intended as the novel's heroine, is the woman who saves Tara from burning to the ground; the woman who drags her father's Mexican War sword to the landing at Tara, helping Scarlett defend it from the Yankee invader; and the woman who stands against polite society in order to defend Scarlett, her beloved sister-in-law, from the town's gossip. Yes, she dies at the end of the novel, and Mitchell uses this to represent the passing of the Old South. However, even here, Melanie dies in her own bed, in her own home, with her own family about her, and she dies on her own terms: after conceiving a child she knew placed her own life at risk.

It is also about three interconnected love stories: the traditional, dignified courtship and marriage of Melanie Hamilton and Ashley Wilkes; the thwarted, unconsummated relationship between Ashley Wilkes and Scarlett O'Hara; and the temptuous, passionate courtship and marriage of Scarlett O'Hara and Rhett Butler. The central theme of these love stories is summarized early in the novel by Scarlett's father, Gerald O'Hara:

"Only when like marries like can there be any happiness."

These themes, while universal and very powerful, are only external to the novel, and I don't believe the novel's power or universality are derived from the themes of survival and love. I believe its power is much more subtle. Indeed, for years, it has been a mystery to literary critics why this novel was received equally well by 10-year olds as well as 95-year olds. Therein lies its secret: it is a novel with which both the 10-year old child and the 95-year old adult can identify strongly. It is a novel about children and it is a novel about adults.

Every one of the major characters has qualities of both children and adults in them. These are handled subtly, not obviously, and the language of the novel, which I believe Margaret Mitchell crafted deliberately along these lines, takes the reader in this direction. For example, listen to what Scarlett says about men: "All the men in Scarlett's life, the Tarleton twins, the Calvert boys, Charles, and Frank, she could dismiss with the phrase, 'What a child!' Not Rhett. He was an adult in everything he did. Only Rhett and Ashley ..."

Scarlett is portrayed as both child and adult. "I'm always your little girl," she says to her mother in the middle of the Civil War, when in fact she is a widow with a 2-year old son. The woman whose heroism saves Tara from oblivion is evaluated by Rhett at the end: "My pet, you're such a child." By the end of the novel, when Scarlett is only 28 years old, she has been married three times, widowed twice, given birth to three children, and buried one of them. Yet, in her dreams, she is still "a lost child." When asked if she thought Scarlett ever got Rhett back, Margaret Mitchell said: "I don't think so, but I do think she finally grew up."

Melanie is the adult who masquerades in child's clothing -- and has a child's figure. Mitchell takes pain to describe Melanie's physical appearance "as that of a 10-year old boy, with narrow hips and height barely coming up to Ashley's shoulders." Yet it is Melanie who has the wisdom to see Scarlett's finer qualities, her strength of character, her commitment to her promises, and her ability to survive -- wisdom that is ironically viewed by Scarlett (and others) as foolishness. She is portrayed as foolish to be so loyal and loving to Scarlett; yet it turns out, in the end, that Scarlett's attachment to Ashley was imaginary, and it turns out in the end that Scarlett loves Melanie deeply. She is portrayed as foolish for defending Rhett Butler so staunchly, yet her wisdom about his good qualities is thoroughly vindicated by the novel's end. Of all the principles, it is Melanie who is the most wise -- and the most adult. Yet her external appearance is very childlike.

Rhett is usually depicted as an adult, the black sheep of a prominent Charleston family who makes his own fortune as a blockade runner from just a $1,000 investment. He admits, at novel's end, that he wanted to care for Scarlett, as an adult would care for a child; yet he is relentlessly mothered by Melanie, especially toward the end: she straightens him up so that he can be presentable to Scarlett after her miscarriage; and only she can convince him to consent to Bonnie's funeral. Further, he enables Melanie's mothering throughout the novel. She is the only person that he truly respects because, I suspect, she is a reminder to him of his own mother, a character who is rather prominent in the novel, though largely absent. Interestingly, it is only Melanie who comes into contact with her, as she greets mourners for Bonnie in the parlor of Scarlett and Rhett's mansion.

Ashley Wilkes is the real child of the four principles, but it takes Scarlett the entire duration of the novel, more than 12 years, to realize this. Ashley is the weakest character, the one who has failed to give up the "life that [he] loved," the one who depicts the charm and grace of the Old South to Scarlett -- the only time that she succumbs to the mistake of looking back. Mitchell is very deft with this scene. It is portrayed as a scene that exposes Ashley and Scarlett's illicit love for each other. However, what's really being exposed here is their common dependence on the past, Ashley's being overt and Scarlett's much more deeply repressed. By implication, it's also exposing the true nature of their attraction for each other, because they

shared a common upbringing, growing up on neighboring plantations.

This scene is expertly crafted. While Ashley and Scarlett are reminiscing about the charm and grace of their common past -- an event which culminates in their hugging in a truly platonic manner, one in which they begin to understand each other -- they are exposed to the gossip and criticism of Atlanta society. What's being exposed here is not their unconsummated romance; it's their common reliance on living in the past. It's fitting that they should be exposed when they're reminiscing about their common past, because that is the real force of their attraction, the real reason for their love (an ultimately childish love, by the way). Mitchell uses this scene to expose them not to Atlanta society, but to the reader. They're not in love with each other; they're in love with a life that is (forgive the cliche) gone with the wind. At the end of the novel, when Scarlett realizes she truly loves Rhett, she sums up her relationship with Ashley: "I've lost my lover and I've gained another child."

Virtually every relationship in this novel can be evaluated as child v. adult; think, for example, of Mammy, the real mother figure of the novel. Look at Ellen and Gerald O'Hara; he was 43 when they married and she was 15; yet she mothers him, right up until her death. Consider one of their final episodes, recounted to Scarlett in Atlanta by John Wilkes, in which Gerald wanted to fight in the war. Ellen puts him to the test insofar as riding his horse is concerned, a test that "little Gerald, who barely came up to her shoulders" failed miserably. After Ellen dies, Gerald's life collapses and he is a broken man, right until his death.

Finally, there is the theme of division and reunion that appears on numerous occasions throughout the novel. Consider how the novel starts: Scarlett is seated on the front steps of Tara between the Tarleton twins -- a divisive force for two brothers who are otherwise as "alike as two bolls of cotton." The novel begins with internal and external symbols of division. The Civil War starts. We are introduced to Scarlett and Melanie, the two heroines who are complete opposites and, at least for Scarlett, adamantly opposed to one another. We are introduced to Ashley and Rhett, the two heroes who are also complete opposites, at least externally, and rather opposed to one another; Ashley dislikes Rhett's blackguardism, and Rhett has contempt for Ashley's weaknesses.

Mitchell deliberately tries to convince the reader, by cleverly contrasting their external characteristics, that these characters are hopelessly divided. Scarlett "hates" Melanie because she is a foolish simpleton and Ashley's wife; Rhett is a symbol of the New South, and Ashley is a symbol of the Old South; Rhett is a survivor, Ashley is a victim. Scarlett is a divisive figure in Melanie and Ashley's marriage. Scarlett is a divisive figure in the Hamilton-Wilkes families: toward the end, she is the indirect cause of a family feud that splits the family into two separate camps. Scarlett, herself, is a divided character - the result of an alliance between an Irish immigrant and an established aristocrat from the Savannah coast. "In her face were too sharply blended the sharp features of her father, an Irish immigrant, and the more delicate features of her mother, a French aristocrat from Savannah." Mitchell has even put division on Scarlett's face -- one reason that Vivien Leigh, who as an actress utilized divided eyebrows (one up, one down) for Scarlett, was such a perfect choice for the part. "She is my Scarlett," admitted Margaret Mitchell.

Division is the premise of the novel. Reunion is its conclusion. Everything that was divided is ultimately united by novel's end. Melanie and Scarlett reach an understanding with each other; Scarlett comes to realize how much she loves and relies on Melanie, and comes to appreciate her strength, the "steel courage" that has sustained her through many crises. Indeed, the evolution of their relationship is one of the most touching and endearing aspects of the novel. Whereas we begin the novel with Ashley depicted as the war hero whose life is lived for "dignity and honor" and with Rhett depicted as the blackguard who is motivated only by crass selfishness, we end the novel with Ashley reduced to a helpless, purposeless victim and Rhett enhanced as a loving husband and father. Along the way, the stark contrasts that Mitchell draws early between Rhett and

Ashley yield to sympathetic comparisons. "Did it ever occur to you, Scarlett, that Rhett and I are fundamentally alike?" Ashley inquires toward the end. Yet their similarities are evident -- though repressed -- from the beginning. In a surprising confrontation with Mrs. Merriwether, Melanie defends Rhett's criticisms of the war because they mirror things her husband has written to her. Ashley and Rhett begin the novel as divided and opposed to one another; they end united and unified as characters. Melanie and Scarlett, likewise, begin the novel as opposed opposites and end the novel united and unified. Division begets reunion.

This theme, division and reunion, is especially powerful when you consider the historical context of the novel. In my view, it is no accident, but rather a careful decision on Margaret Mitchell's part, to time the action of the novel from April 1861, the start of the Civil War, the ultimate symbol of division, to September 1873, the end of Reconstruction, the ultimate symbol of reunion. It is a breathtaking historical backdrop for a novel whose dramatic power is derived from characters experiencing division and reunion in their lives.

It is curious that Mitchell's novel has born the brunt of belittling and contemptuous literary criticism over the years. When it debuted, it sold millions and won the Pulitzer Prize; no film, before or since, has ever been so widely anticipated as the 1939 film was. Its massive popularity, I suspect, and Mitchell's melodramatic writing style have contributed to this contempt. However, when one considers the thematic breadth of the novel, its impeccable structure, and the awesome scope of its narrative force, "Gone With the Wind" is a singular and astonishing achievement. I believe its universality, its appeal from the 10-year old to the 95-year old, is best explained by the themes of child v. adult and division v. reunion. I also believe that it is these themes that explain why it captivates us after 71 years and will continue to captive generations to come.

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Broke My Heart!
By Melissa Martin's Reading List Blog
I spent over 12 hours today finishing this book. 1037 pages! 1. Because I wanted to know what was going to happen! 2. I have no sort of life so I can do this from time to time.

I can not believe it took me so long to read this book! I didn't think it would be my kind of book and I have never watched the movie

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