

Scarlet o'hara: symbol of the delusional south



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Gone with the Wind opens with a grandiose description of the South: according to the opening text, this is the region where “gallantry took its last bow” and “knights and their ladies” took a stand against the onslaught of Northern aggression. This terminology tries to tie the genteel South depicted in the film to the ideals and perception of the chivalric medieval times. This tie is appropriate, as both times have been misrepresented historically; that is, many romanticize the medieval era of European history and the antebellum era of American history. For them, it is easier (or less painful) to see the beautiful damsels and the gallant knights in shining armor—the equivalent of the belles and the plantation owners—than to see the serfs and lower classes struggling to build a castle or tend a field, just as slaves kept plantations and tended crops. The mechanism by which these time periods were established and maintained—i. e. slave labor—is overshadowed to the point of nonexistence by the spectacle of the settings and characters associated with those periods. Gone with the Wind gives viewers a distracting visual stimulus—what Tom Brown, quoting Laura Mulvey, calls “to-be-looked-at-ness”—in its over-the-top sets and costumes, but it also presents the character of Scarlett O’Hara as an object to be observed. The irony here is that, through various actions, Scarlett becomes a representation of that portion of the South’s population (both past and current) who cannot see past the perceived grandiosity of the past, yet she is also a representation of that same grandiosity. She, as well as those who cannot see the horrible truth behind the constructed legend of a South that never was, cannot look beyond her own interests to see the truth.

There are numerous examples within the movie which show Scarlett's lack of vision. She marries Charles Hamilton out of frustration and spite, in hopes of angering Ashley Wilkes; and she marries Frank Kennedy only to use his money to pay the taxes on Tara, thus protecting a home and way of life that can never return. She is an opportunist and a user. She seems to have no notion that her ideal childhood at Tara never really existed—it appeared care-free to her, but it was bought with the blood and sweat of an enslaved people. Scarlett never acknowledges this fact. She, as the lead character of the film, represents the great southern separation of perception from reality—a delusion still present at the 1939 premiere of the film. As Edward Campbell states in "The South as National Epic, 1939-1941: *Gone with the Wind*": "One critic reported that thirty-eight survivors of the Civil War emerged from the theatre convinced that the movie was 'true. . . to the South of their own childhoods.'" I postulate that the "survivors of the Civil War," both those present at the premiere and those not, entered into a state of mass psychosis. The only way to deal with the atrocities of slavery and the pain and humiliation of the South's defeat was to suppress them and turn them into something more palatable. In essence, certain Southerners made a ball gown out of their dingy curtains, and many have been dancing in the delusion ever since. I would like to say that this delusion is dead, but one need only look to Civil War reenactments and plantation-themed weddings to see that it is not.

The most prominent example of Scarlett's refusal to accept reality is found at the end of the film. Bonnie is dead, Rhett has left, and Scarlett has collapsed at the bottom of the staircase. Rather than accepting what is at

hand, she stares into the camera and thinks of Tara again. Her longing for what was is still her driving force. She wants to go back and rebuild Tara (and possibly her relationship with Rhett), but it is impossible to do so.

Scarlett will not accept this fact, and the movie ends on this perceived high note. This is appealing to those in the audience who refuse to accept reality. Moviegoers buy in to Scarlett's denial of her circumstances because they too deny their own. She cannot accept her lot in life, and neither can they.

On pages 163 and 164 of "Spectacle/Gender/History: The Case of *Gone with the Wind*," Tom Brown describes the "historical gaze" found in epic films such as *Gone with the Wind* as a kind of foresight found in the prominent figures in those movies. He states that they "seem endowed with a clairvoyance through which they appear to recognize events to come." If this is the case, then Scarlett's "gaze" only works in the short term and in reverse. She can only see the outcomes of her actions as they relate to her status, and she cannot see far into the future because she continually looks backward to the Tara of her youth.

If anyone in the film has a real "historical gaze," it would be the young man playing the horn in the middle of town as the lists of fallen soldiers are distributed. He is weeping as he plays an up-tempo song while the news of death is passed around. The ridiculousness of the whole situation is revealed as the camera singles in on his tear-filled eyes. The song the band plays sounds lively—almost celebratory—but it cannot mask the horror of the situation, just as Scarlett's doggedness cannot restore Tara and her youth, and the delusions of grandeur associated with the antebellum South cannot erase the truth of its daily workings.