

# *Progressive and Conservative Ideology of Women in Gone with the Wind*

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**Abstract:** *Gone with the Wind* is a feminist novel set against the backdrop of the American Civil War, in which the author Margaret Mitchell depicts the damage caused by the war and how Scarlett O'Hara, a progressive woman in this particular period, uses her strength to achieve a happy life under the confines of the world. Even so, out of the historical background of the 1870s, Scarlett O'Hara, the heroine of this paper, still has some typical characteristics of women in that era, and it is because of these typical characteristics that she is able to realize her various demands and achieve success step by step by exerting her upper-class femininity. In this paper, the progressiveness and limitations of the female characters in *Gone with the Wind* are listed, and compared from different perspectives. Through the comparison of these progressive limitations, it can be seen the rapid development of feminism in modern times and the necessity of developing feminism in this way.

**Keywords:** *Gone with the Wind*, feminism, American Civil War, female consciousness, freedom of marriage

## 1. Introduction

Born in Atlanta, Georgia, Margaret Mitchell, the author of *Gone with the Wind*, is a well-known modern American author who also worked as a reporter for the Atlanta Journal News. Growing up in Atlanta, she often listened to her grandmother's stories of the war, and her grandmother told the story of the night of the fire on November 15, 1864, in graphic detail, "A great, great flame engulfed the city, and everywhere you looked, a strange, indescribable brightness reflected in the sky". This is the prototype for the night Atlanta fell. As she describes it, as they neared Marietta Street, the trees thinned out and the tall flames roaring up above the buildings threw street and houses into a glare of light brighter than day, casting monstrous shadows that twisted as wildly as torn sails flapping in a gale on a sinking ship.

Influenced by nearby Confederate veterans, Margaret Mitchell learned to ride over fences, making him more of a tomboy, and thus created a female character based on herself and her mother with advanced period significance. When Vivien Leigh appeared in front of the audience in a dress transformed from a green curtain, such a lifelike Scarlett O'Hara came out of the long history. As Margaret Mitchell's only book, there have been many analyses of the advanced feminist ideas in *Gone with the Wind*, and few have noticed the minor flaws of the novel. *Gone with the Wind* could very well be a feminist work, but calling it a feminist work is not nearly enough [1]. The feminist ideas in *Gone with the Wind* were extremely enlightening to the nineteenth-century awakening of women's

consciousness, for example, encouraging women not to consider marriage and love as their whole life, like Scarlett, and promoting freedom of marriage while alleviating women's marriage anxiety [2]. But in the long run, *Gone with the Wind* has many limitations of its time compared to the ideas of the recent feminist movement.

Through a literature review, this paper focuses on contrasting these progressive qualities and limitations, this paper hopes to provide some useful suggestions for future studies of the work by others.

From a social perspective, the study can also explore the relationship between feminist development and social development and can be useful for the personal growth of modern independent women.

## 2. Progressiveness in a Special Era

### 2.1. The Pursuit of Freedom of Marriage

In *Gone with the Wind*, Scarlett has experienced three marriages, all of which are marriages of her own independent choice, rather than marriages at the mercy of her family. Her first marriage was to Charles Hamilton. when she was a proud rich girl, she was brave enough to express her love to Ashley, even though the other party had a marriage contract. After being rejected by Ashley, she gamely agreed to Ashley's fiancée's brother's proposal, which was a hasty decision but a choice she made on her own [3].

In the middle of the Civil War, Scarlett heard that her sister's boyfriend, Frank, had made a small fortune. In order to keep her family's estate, she chose to steal Frank and marry him, which was her second initiative to a man, and it was because of her beauty and her initiative and boldness, which was different from that of her female contemporaries, that she was able to obtain a second marriage. Her second marriage completely overturned the ultimate beliefs of women in that era about love and marriage. She used her marriage as a bargaining chip in exchange for benefits rather than the whole of life, and her concept of treating love and marriage as a small part of life rather than the whole of life was a huge breakthrough for women at that time [2].

Her last marriage took place while she was in mourning for her second husband, and she married the speculative businessman Fred White, despite the opposition of those around her. She thought that all she wanted was money, but she fell in love with Brad as an afterthought. This was the only time she really married love, although each marriage was her own choice.

In this historical context, the author gives Melanie Hamilton, another aristocratic woman of her time, for comparison with Scarlett. Melanie married Ashley, who was married to her family in her time and stayed married to one. She was not without love for Ashley, she was even willing to risk her life to have a child out of love for him, but even so, their marriage was based on a traditional family union. The aristocratic education she received since childhood made her willing to accept such an arrangement and cultivate her love. For her, love is built slowly on top of family, and after she chooses a man, she will guard their home with all her strength, because that is all she lives for.

Compared to Scarlett, Melanie is lucky that Ashley did not die in the war and did not elope with Scarlett. Melanie's perseverance for love and family was rewarded with positive feedback, while Scarlett lost three husbands in quick succession. And even if their circumstances change, Melanie will most likely mourn for her husband until she loses her own life, she is such a great woman worthy of respect.

It is worth mentioning that, at the end of the book, even though Brad has sadly left Scarlett, she also confidently believes that she can redeem Brad. Scarlett's confidence in the pursuit of love is what makes her so progressive as a woman of her time.

## 2.2. Women's Independence in Business

The Southern women in the author's book are not an ignorant and weak group, despite their oppression, but they are able to support the Southern civilization and the Southern plantation economy with their love, wisdom and perseverance, proving that they are fully capable of getting out of the family and escaping from the social status of male subordinates [4]. In the American South during the Civil War, the homesteaders believed that women should be at home taking care of chores rather than getting involved in business and politics [5]. Although Scarlett had never been involved in politics, she started her own sawmill and hired inmates to work during her marriage to Frank. She rode her carriage every day and became the laughing stock of everyone in front of her home and sawmill, and her husband also objected to this, but Scarlett realized the importance of money, and all she did was not be like other decent upper-class women who were starving and bullied by hoodlums in the back of the war and hired prisoners just to maximize profits. Learning to give up so-called decency is something she learns in her brutal life, picking cotton, cooking, milking cows, and even killing the soldiers who break into her house and steal from her. It is hard to relate this to the haughty young girl in a dress sitting among men at the beginning of the story, which is a breakthrough for Scarlett herself and a breakthrough in the thinking of upper-class women during the Civil War.

Unlike any other female character of the same period, Scarlett learns too early in the war the fragility and futility of a once-rich life and the unreliability of men. She understands that it is foolish and impractical to tie her life to the man she marries and vows to live happily ever after with her own hands and her own strength.

Scarlett's success in business is not just due to her good fortune, but to the fact that she has many good qualities that men cannot yet possess. From her confession to Ashley's failure to break the cup can be seen, Scarlett is a fighting spirit and will put their unrealistic ideas into practice, as long as she wants to do things, she will do her best to do them. During the fall of Atlanta, everyone was in danger, Scarlett's mother was critically ill, she could have fled for her life out of nature, but she remembered her promise to Ashley, so she resolutely stayed to take care of Melanie and her baby, she also missed the last side with her mother and finally drove back to Tara Manor with a weak Melanie and the new baby in a carriage, and she was saved by the woman who stole her faithfulness and fearlessness should make many men ashamed of themselves.

Even today, in the 21st century, there are still many women in developing regions who cannot participate in the workforce and are taught to devote their lives to their husbands and children. There are many progressive women like Scarlett, who have come out of the home to enter the workplace and use their wisdom and strength to change their lives, often under great pressure from their families and society.

## 2.3. Breaking Free from Class

Unlike many recent personal autobiographies, the protagonist makes the class leap through desperate efforts and is ultimately comforted by becoming upper class. Many of the contradictions and hardships in Scarlett's life come from her own noble birth. Precisely because she is not of the common class, there are more rules and regulations that confine her, and the education and restrictions she receives have strong characteristics of the times. For example, a girl cannot eat much or go out alone, and the most rebellious feature of Scarlett's character is that she shares her father's hobby - horseback riding [6]. Since the late Middle Ages, the aristocracy was of the opinion that it was inappropriate for women to ride horses across, and the skirts that were prevalent at the time were not convenient, so the rise of female side-riding horseback riding, which greatly increased the difficulty and danger of women riding horses. Scarlett, as described in the article, was the only one of the three O'Hara daughters who shared her father's love of horseback riding, as did Bonnie, her daughter with White

Ryder. It is clear that for most women of the American Civil War Southern manorial class, horseback riding was too intense and challenging a sport for their refined manners and was not conducive to finding good husbands. She often attributed her impetuosity and a strong desire to her father's Irish heritage, but Scarlett was indeed more combative and competitive than a native-born American aristocratic girl.

Both the three marriages and her starting her own sawmill were opposed by many of the original estate owners. Scarlett is often gossiped and ostracized by some of the noble wives in the novel, and her daughter is even partially affected by the situation [7]. It is worth mentioning that the classic scene in the book, i.e., Scarlett leading the dance at the fund-raising ceremony with Brad, took place during her mourning for her first husband. As a member of the Southern American manor class in the nineteenth century, she was a target of the widowed, and those noble wives were watching her every move at all times. But under the particular circumstances of the time, Bared's attraction to her and her desire to break free from her chains far outweighed the feudal ideas that bound her. As depicted in the book, he is a dashing figure and one that people turned to look at. He spent money freely, rode a wild black stallion, and wore clothes which were always the height of style and tailoring. The latter was enough to attract attention to him, for the soldiers' uniforms were dingy and worn now and the civilians, even when turned out in their best, showed skillful patching and darning. Scarlett thought she had never seen such elegant pants as he wore, fawn-colored plaid, and checked [8]. The author's bold and groundbreaking depiction of Scarlett's behavior is in line with Scarlett's own spirit of resistance and the significance of the times. This is precisely her way of encouraging women to break free from traditional constraints and be themselves.

### 3. Remaining Traditional Ideas

#### 3.1. Attention to the Relationship Between the Sexes

*Gone with the Wind* is often categorized as a romance novel because of its strong romantic overtones, and many emotional descriptions make people overlook the significance and progress of the novel itself. This is where the novel's shortcomings lie, as all of Scarlett's life turns on marriage and gender relations. She is rejected by Ashley to marry Charles, which is the beginning of her miserable life in Atlanta during the war. And afterwards, she wore a green dress converted from curtains to visit White Ryder in prison in order to keep Tara Manor, also in the hope of exchanging the other party's goodwill towards her for wealth. Moreover, the capital for the establishment of her sawmill came from her second husband Frank, and when she needed help and money to advance her life, almost all of them had men willing to give her money and energy. However, as a successful businesswoman with her own sawmill, Scarlett could not help but express her love for Ashley, the love of her youth, and the importance she attached to gender relationships did not weaken as her life changed, nor did she realize the more valuable sense of independence she possessed. In the 1840s, when women's consciousness was first awakened, what Scarlett embodies is not equality but preference, which is obtained at the expense of some men who favor her, and this is the limit of women's consciousness in the specific context of time [9].

#### 3.2. Scarlett's Own Limitations

Unlike the feminist works of the 21st century, the not-so-beautiful heroine encounters many difficulties in her life, yet her struggle and indomitable spirit make her finally successful. As an early feminist literary work, what is presented in *Gone with the Wind* is far less than the strength of modern women breaking free from social bondage.

Although the female character portrayed by the author has the spirit of resistance and self-awareness, she is still not free from her personal attributes of a vase, she is still a beautiful and fragile

female character who is good at using men. Scarlett is brought up with the sense that women need to learn to dress, not to be too smart, to find a loving husband and to play an appropriate little fool in front of him. Although she often scoffed at these demands, even when her mother advised her to pretend to faint when she saw rats and snakes outside, her nature was very different from the mainstream upbringing of the time. However, when she encountered real difficulties, she still needed to show off her beauty and charm. As stated at the beginning of the article, Scarlett O'Hara was not beautiful, but men seldom realized it when caught by her charm as the Tarleton twins were. Even though Margaret Mitchell has tried very hard to make Scarlett O'Hara's character breakthrough feudal ideas, the so-called feminist ideas in the text are still too conservative from a 21st-century perspective because of the era in which the author herself lived.

Scarlett does not want to become a helpless, weak and stupid woman under the male gaze angle, but during the American Civil War, society's definition and expectations of women made her not able to fearlessly release her nature. It can be said that the realization of her rebellious spirit is based on these personal conservative attributes. If Scarlett had not been beautiful and had not used her charms, her story might have been completely different.

In her second marriage, she struggles to revive her home and yearns to return to a life of wealth, and she struggles to find a way out, eventually targeting her sister's fiancé, in total disregard of her sister's thoughts. Such an approach is not encouraged or supported in any era, yet Scarlett broke through the moral values that bound her for her own good. It can be said that all the hardships she had suffered made her choose to do so, and for her, poverty was far more horrible than immorality.

In addition, Scarlett's most admired woman, her mother Ellen, also has a profound influence on Scarlett. Ellen in Scarlett's mind has always been a gentle and virtuous ruler of the family in good order the image of the lady of the manor, and she was in love with her cousin when she was young before, she gambled to marry Gerald O'Hara, which is very much the same as Scarlett's first marriage. She is both an invisible moral judgment code and a spiritual support for Scarlett [10], sustaining her as she runs all the way back to Tara Manor with Melanie and her new baby and as she fights tirelessly to keep Tara.

In short, Scarlett does not do what she does out of her awakening and desire for equal rights for men and women, but solely for her own interests, so *Gone with the Wind* cannot be called a feminist work, but only a feminist work [1].

#### 4. Conclusion

As the only book written by Margaret Mitchell, *Gone with the Wind* is to a certain extent a reflection of Margaret's advanced feminist thinking and a very important inspiration for the development of feminism later on. However, *Gone with the Wind* can only be judged from the perspective of its time, and in the 21st century, when the feminist movement is developing rapidly, some of the views and behaviors in this book are quite limited, however, these minor flaws do not affect the status of *Gone with the Wind* in the history of women's literature. The content of this paper is only based on the references and original works, and some social studies on *Gone with the Wind* and feminism should be added so that future studies can make some progress in social research.

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