

GONE WITH THE WIND

Directed by Victor Fleming
Produced by David O. Selznick
Distributed by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer
Released in 1939

Read a different dictionary, get a different definition of racism. Various, it could be (and **R**is) defined as a prejudice of dislike/disdain/distrust against a person of a particular race, because of his race and not the person, himself. Or it is reckoned to be manifested in one person's dislike/disdain/distrust of another person even though the object-person's race is not a contributing factor to the supposed-bigot's view. Alternatively, it could be discerned in the words of a person who is making a sweeping statement attributing to a race of people a defining or frequently-observed characteristic (even if positive). Or, an accusation of racism need not, perhaps, be justified at all; it is merely the 'gotcha' word that wins an argument by default. For if the speaker is successfully maligned, his argument will be dismissed out of hand.

Gone With The Wind is dismissed by many critics as a racist film, and therefore, unworthy of discussion. Given that neither blacks, slavery, nor emancipation are a central focus of the film, it is difficult to describe the entire production as racist. However, the film may very well betray racist tendencies in how it handles—or ignores—black characters.

Regardless, *Gone With The Wind*, adjusted for inflation, is the biggest box-office draw in cinema history. As such, it seems a very worthy candidate for serious discussion. This film should not be circumscribed by racial case theory, but should be allowed to speak on many levels. Whether for good or ill, race-critical or race-conscious interpretations (or denunciations) of *Gone With The Wind* will not be, herein, entertained. So let's shoot the elephant in the room and get on with it.

The film centers on four main characters over the course of about ten years. They are Ashley Wilkes, the dreamer; Melanie Hamilton, the saint; Rhett Butler, the rogue; and Scarlett O'Hara, the bitch. The story concerns the effect of the Civil War and Reconstruction on well-to-do Southerners. The characters fight to save their way of life, then fight to survive, some embracing honor, others dismissing it as outmoded, hypocritical poppycock. But this is just the backdrop to interlocking love triangles—Melanie-Ashley-Scarlett and Rhett-Scarlett-Ashley. Ashley marries his cousin Melanie Hamilton early in the picture, but Scarlett remains determined to steal him away somehow. Ashley, to his immense discredit, is merely physically committed to Melanie, and does not unflinchingly rebuff Scarlett. (During the picture they kiss twice, passionately, and one can only imagine what happened before we entered the story.) Rhett meets Scarlett at the film's beginning, recognizes her as a fellow conniver and iconoclast, judges her gorgeous, and resolves to, someday, win her over. Scarlett ignores Rhett's advice (as well as that of her father) and marries Ashley's brother, Charles, to prove to her naysayers that she's not just an unmarriageable tease, as well as to make Ashley jealous. Charles soon dies, and Scarlett resumes her pursuit of Ashley, Melanie oblivious to her machinations.

Critics charge that the film loses energy and a unifying focus in its second half, once the Civil War is over. Reconstruction was a protracted period of mourning and economic

dislocation for the South, barely less consequential than the war, itself. But even if it can be conceded that Reconstruction is not as dramatically compelling as the wrenching conflagrations of the Civil War, the film is really an intimate love story told against a huge canvas, much like *Doctor Zhivago* (1965), and to a lesser extent, *Titanic* (1997). This is really a story of four people. So for critics who got bored in the second half, it's probably true that they were never interested in what the story is really about—it was the fear, pathos, and grandeur of the film's first hours that they found compelling. Perhaps it is too hard to accept that a woman as beguiling as Scarlett O'Hara, who can have any man she wants, obsesses over the insufferably honorable Ashley Wilkes. And yet...maybe she only pined for him so long because he was the one who said 'no,' the one who was unobtainable. Isn't it ironic, after all, that, with Melanie at death's door, Scarlett finally realizes that, after—what—fifteen years (!) she doesn't actually love him? She's so different from Ashley in her lack of ideals and her gross pragmatism that she seems—indeed, is—much more compatible with Rhett; they're a pair of handsome miscreants.

And if we narrow our focus even further, it becomes obvious that the film is about the relationship between Scarlett and Rhett. It's boy-meets-girl (the last great party at Twelve Oaks), boy-gets-girl (Scarlett's third marriage), and boy-loses-girl (Rhett learning Scarlett doesn't want more children and discovering the secret Ashley daguerreotype).

Part of the extraordinary power of the film is its characters' obsessing over something that is unattainable (shades of *Vertigo* [1958]). Scarlett spends nearly the whole picture chasing a dream (her beloved Ashley), and, after the marital rape, after he returns from London, and after the miscarriage-fall, tries to cultivate Rhett's affections. But he, in the first two scenes, cannot admit he loves her, and in the third scene, with Scarlett in delirium, he tries to seek her out, and she, hopeless, fatalistically assumes he will only ignore her pleas to comfort her at her sick bed. Both of them, because of their common arrogance and cheap self-reliance, refuse to take the other seriously. Rhett, when he proposes marriage, can't help but make a joke out of it, talking about catching her between husbands. Is this because he knows *she* doesn't take it seriously (and just wants his money) or because he just plain wants her because she's bad and beautiful? (The sparkling dialogue is teasingly ambivalent). He grows to love her, but she can't admit it until it's too late.

The best scene (in a movie loaded with incredible moments [the film is, alas, less than the sum of its parts]) is probably the quiet exchange between Melanie and Rhett after Scarlett has suffered her tragic miscarriage. In a sitting room in Rhett's mansion, with the rain pouring just beyond the open window and idly-banging shutters, an unshaven Rhett receives Melanie to discuss Scarlett's condition.

There are three prime elements to the scene. The first is that Rhett's implication that his wife loves Ashley is warmly rejected by Melanie as "idle gossip." Rhett is surprised by her (apparent) naiveté, but of course, unwilling to press the issue. Second, Melanie launches into an impassioned defense of Scarlett's love for Rhett. (All through the film, Melanie defends Scarlett against all her detractors—it's like she's willfully ignorant of Scarlett's rotten core; or maybe Melanie sees her extraordinary capacity for good and prefers to inspire Scarlett to live up to her potential.) This is the heart of the scene. It's the first close-up of both characters, the cut occurring after Rhett has moved to the window and Melanie has followed him. She says,

"You're so wrong. Scarlett loves you a great deal, much more than she knows." It's almost as if Melanie, being privy to so many events of the film, but not being the prime mover, is in a unique position to provide commentary (to the audience) of what is actually going on. (Her last words to Scarlett, on her death bed, confirm her unique position in the narrative.) After all, this is really a film about Scarlett realizing that she loves Rhett.

Third, Melanie shares that she plans to have another child, in spite of her weak constitution. This seems to inspire Rhett. He tells her that he knows of no one of her character, someone who is "really brave," and the realization that there is still such quiet decency and courage in the human race seems to give him hope that both Scarlett and he can reform.

What's great about the scene is that nothing really happens. We are given a chance to process what we have seen and are given a preview of the film's end (Melanie's death and Rhett's departure). Also, Clark Gable drops his macho-man routine and shows he really can act—it's a stunning contrast from Rhett's usual posture and it begs the question of how Scarlett would respond to him if she could see his 'sensitive side.' Would she lose respect for him? Or (more likely) would she be compelled to start taking their marriage seriously? Instead of just *being* married, might not she start *relating* to her husband on an emotional level? Might she not drop her 'act' as well? The only time we've seen her, since their marriage, be emotionally transparent and vulnerable was when she had the nightmare on their honeymoon, and she allowed herself to be cradled and soothed by Rhett.

But Scarlett doesn't make the necessary changes. She waits too long. So after boy-meets-girl, boy-gets-girl, and boy-loses-girl, the story breaks with convention. He never 'gets' her back—he's not sure he wants to. Indeed, boy remains married to girl, then, strangely, girl loses boy (just as she learns to admit her love, he ends the marriage).

Critics may fault the story for its construction or its sociological myopia, but they never fault the production design, the costumes, the music, the editing, the make-up, or the pioneering color cinematography. The film is a visual and aural feast. One scene may feature a great set that is used once (like Belle Watling's boudoir) while the next scene introduces a supporting character who adds humor and fun to the drama (like Aunt Pitty). And Scarlett O'Hara may be the best-cast part in the history of cinema. Vivien Leigh, a virtual unknown before this film, is unbelievably good. Not only does she look incredible, she handles every type of dramatic situation with total conviction—and she's in almost every scene! The film was made incredibly well, and, even though the production took a full year, it's amazing it didn't take longer.

Gone With The Wind is a great film, but why? Is there a comprehensive, succinct answer? Probably not. But consider this: Life isn't all happy endings. There's too few of them. So stories with happy endings give us something to strive for, a hope amidst the ruins of our lives. But can they touch us where we are?

Gone With The Wind, for all its romanticism, is jarringly realistic in documenting the flaws of its lead characters. They have qualities we can aspire to, sure, but most of us act more like Scarlett and Rhett than Ashley and Melanie. Who amongst us is long-suffering, faultlessly

kind, principled, and humble? Most of us act more like Scarlett and Rhett (but, alas, don't *look* like them).

So if *Gone With The Wind* is escapist historical revisionism, it, paradoxically, is also painfully, achingly true. We don't have enough happy endings, and it's easy to distrust films that condescend to us by imagining that everything is o.k., like what is up on the screen is not only bigger than life, but the way things are writ large. *Gone With The Wind* leaves us with hope of "another day," but we are also forced to reflect upon our own bad choices and the extraordinary difficulty that we have groping our way into the future, grasping for hope.

Eventually some of us do what this film does, and we revise our own past, assigning blame to others where we have no one to blame but ourselves.