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Gone with the Wind and the Myth of the Lost Cause

An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Honors in the
Department of Literature.

By
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Under the mentorship of Joe Pellegrino

ABSTRACT

Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* is usually considered a sympathetic portrayal of the suffering and deprivation endured by Southerners during the Civil War. I argue the opposite, that Mitchell is subverting the Southern Myth of the Lost Cause, exposing it as hollow and ultimately self-defeating.

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Gone with the Wind and the Myth of the Lost Cause

Introduction: Historical Grounding

Less than one hundred years after it gained independence from England, the United States of America found itself on the verge of civil war. The economies of the North and South had progressed in different directions since before these territories were even called colonies. Modernity ruled the North, as manufacturing and industry propelled urban growth and cultural progressiveness. In the South, however, an agricultural economy based on cash crops and slave labor created a hierarchical slave society, with slaves at the bottom of that hierarchy and the owners of mega-plantations on the top.

Three major events contributed to the rising tensions about slavery in the US, culminating in the outbreak of civil war. As the country continued to expand, opposing opinions about the extension of the institution of slavery into new Western territories came to a head after the U.S. Congress passed the Kansas-Nebraska Act in 1854, which effectively allowed slavery into the new frontier by siding for popular sovereignty over government edict. The violent struggle that ensued was known as “Bleeding Kansas”, as pro- and anti-slavery forces fought over the fate of the territory. In 1861, the conflict was settled as Kansas declared itself a free state. From this, a group of Northern abolitionists formed what was to be known as the Republican Party, whose presidential nominee, Abraham Lincoln, won the 1860 National Election (Rafuse 31). During this time, two other major events fueled the fire that was to become the Civil War. The first was the Supreme Court’s ruling on the Dred Scott case, which reiterated Congress’s lack of authority in U.S. territories by asserting black people, free or not, were not granted the

rights iterated in the Constitution. The second event was abolitionist John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry, a failed attempt to incite and arm a slave rebellion which would, he believed, lead to a collapse of the institution itself. These events caused outrage for both abolitionists and pro-slavery forces, respectively. Tensions boiled over with the election of the progressive abolitionist Abraham Lincoln to the Presidency. Within three months, seven states had seceded: South Carolina (seceded December 20, 1860), Mississippi (seceded January 9, 1861), Florida (seceded January 10, 1861), Alabama (seceded January 11, 1861), Georgia (seceded January 19, 1861), Louisiana (seceded January 26, 1861), Texas (seceded February 1, 1861). These states became the Confederate States of America. Secession was declared by pro-Confederate governments in Missouri and Kentucky, but did not become effective as it was opposed by their pro-Union state governments.

The outbreak of the Civil War occurred shortly after Lincoln took office. As a fleet of ships resupplied the federal Fort Sumter in South Carolina, Confederate forces fired the first shots of the war upon the fort, leading to a two-day battle ending with Confederate possession of the stronghold. After the conflict, four more states seceded to join the CSA: Virginia (seceded April 17, 1861), Arkansas (seceded May 6, 1861), North Carolina (seceded May 20, 1861), and Tennessee (seceded June 8, 1861) (Masur 57). The war would go on until 1865, with both sides experiencing heavy casualties. However, the Southern states suffered far more: Union production of war materiel far outpaced that of the South, and as the war led on, resources and manpower became scarce.

After a strong start in the first half of the war and a string of Confederate victories, the Confederacy began its downfall. A decisive Union victory at Antietam,

which was the single bloodiest day of the war, gave Lincoln an opening to issue the Emancipation Proclamation, on January 1, 1863 (Rodriguez). While this act freed all slaves, it also deprived the South of its labor and essentially halted its war efforts, as the focus of those on the now-slaveless plantations and farms necessarily turned inward, concerned with their own survival. Aside from a couple more high-cost military victories over the next two years, the South was in a rapid decline on every front, especially after the heavy casualty loss at Gettysburg. The final, obvious, coup de grace began in November of 1864, when Union forces cut a path of destruction through the heart of the Confederacy -- Sherman's March to the Sea -- that employed a "scorched earth" policy. Sherman's forces destroyed military targets as well as industry, infrastructure, and civilian property, which disrupted the Confederacy's economy and its transportation networks. This Savannah Campaign broke the back of the Confederacy and helped lead to its eventual total surrender on April 26th, 1865. President Lincoln did not live to see this unionist victory; he was assassinated two weeks before the end of the war (Masur 71-86).

The military loss at Antietam and Gettysburg, the removal of most slaves, and the wake of destruction that Sherman's forces left behind all crippled the Confederacy tremendously. Minor Reconstruction efforts had begun in 1863, but, immediately following the surrender of the CSA forces, the southern states were to experience a total upheaval of their peacetime society. The Antebellum South was no more, and the newest social conflict in both the North and the South was how to reintroduce the rebel South to the Union while preventing the restoration of its pre-war society.

Implementing Reconstruction presented a challenge. After President Lincoln's assassination, President Andrew Johnson was sworn in. Johnson's Reconstruction plans reflected his firm stance on states' rights and Unionism. In his eyes, southern states maintained the right to govern themselves, so he forbid federal involvement in state issues, such as voter requirements and land ownership. In fact, under the Johnson administration, southern land that had previously been redistributed to freed slaves by the Freedman's Bureau was returned to its previous owners.

After affirming their resolution to uphold the 13th Amendment and professing loyalty to the union and a promise to repay their war debt, the governments of the southern states maintained their prewar power. As a result, southern states enacted their "black codes," a series of laws that successfully limited the opportunities for education and the rights of citizenship for freed slaves. Freed blacks found themselves unable to participate in civil society, and, with other avenues for advancement blocked, were only able to serve as a ready source of cheap labor. The irony of a freed man performing the same functions that he previously performed as a slave was not lost on them.

These examples exemplified the dangers in Johnson's notion of Reconstruction. His leniency allowed southern states to maintain antebellum societal structures and ideas. However, backlash against this *laissez-faire* approach to the sovereignty of southern states would lead to Radical Reconstruction. Congress overturned two presidential vetoes concerning states' rights: the first ensured the passage of the Civil Rights Act, which established equality for all citizens before the law; the second established the Reconstruction Act of 1867, which transformed the South into five military zones, enforced ratification of the 14th Amendment, and led to the eventual ratification of the

15th Amendment. The Act also provided for public education of black children and outlawed racial discrimination in public transport and accommodation. Finally, the Act forced all southern states to overhaul their state constitutions. By the time all the rebel states re-entered the Union (1870), their constitutions were progressive. These events all led to the most radical post-war development of all: the introduction of interracial democracy, a state of affairs that was unlike anything previously seen in the South. This period saw black men elected to local, state, and federal positions.

With these revolutionary changes came extensive pushback. While blacks and whites were equal before the law, the same cannot be said of their positions in society. Centuries-old white supremacy in the South was not easily dissolved; increasing levels of violence against blacks demonstrated the disparity in both the laws and their enforcement. As federal support (and funding) for Reconstruction wound down, the South experienced a spell of economic depression, which only elevated the level of discontent among whites. The turmoil ushered in by the eradication of slavery continued throughout the South, and eventually drove the narrative of the Lost Cause in both the collective memory of southerners and their literature.

The Myth of the Lost Cause

Despite the advantages the North had over the South, in terms of production and population, the South had the military expertise with some of the best soldiers and commanders, as well as the crucial component that would drive the minor conflict into a full-scale war: a cause they believed in (Davis 120). This cause blinded the South with enough tenacious spirit to drive itself into the ground and allowed for the continued disillusionment with reality that would develop into what is known today as the Lost Cause.

The core belief of the Lost Cause was that the righteous South fought in the Civil War for worthy and just reasons. Today, it is known as a war ideology morphed into the deliberate reconstruction of social memory in an effort to justify the South's loss and continued belief in the righteousness of their justifications for warfare: a reaction against overreaching Federalism and the maintenance of States' rights. The Lost Cause was a deliberate movement. The South had lost more than just the war; it had lost its identity, its social structure, its livelihood, and its willpower (Davis 123). The effects of this resulted in a certain sense of self-preservation by way of the Lost Cause.

There are two ways the ideology of the Lost Cause was developed: through the desperation of a traumatized people, and the manipulation of retelling the war's events. The common people of the South had suffered through the losses of loved ones, a lack of necessary resources, and the destruction of not only their homes, but also their way of life. The people needed a reason to endure, and the only thing they had left to cling to was the idea that their fight was not meaningless, and that they had preserved both their divinely-ordained dignity and righteousness. They "salvaged their honor from the wreck

of seemingly all-encompassing defeat” by holding onto this belief (Gallagher 35). By the end of the war, it was clear that most Southerners cared more about saving their skins than winning a lost fight, but even this did not detract from their belief that their Cause was just. This firm (if self-deluding) creed only gained more and more traction once the war was over.

The other half of the Lost Cause is the deliberate rewriting of history. There were Southerners who understood that the winner writes history, and instead of letting the Union assume this role, Southern oral and written storytellers would recount their versions of events. Their narratives were widespread and easily accepted by former Confederates and their sympathizers, especially those who never accepted defeat. The results of The Lost Cause were not fully manifested in the first post-war generation in the South. These people were directly affected by the war (and still had vivid memories of its horrors), Reconstruction, and beginning of the New South. They believed in their lost cause but were not yet able to romanticize what had happened and forget their current situation. As time moved on, however, the trauma faded and false nostalgia took hold in their collective memory.

Civil War revisionism took place in both historical documentation as well as in fictional renderings. Perhaps the prominent instance of false historical texts were the writings by former Confederate Jubal A. Early (Gallagher 35). Early wrote letters and articles, as well as a memoir, condemning the Union army and promoting the idea that the war was fought over states’ rights, not slavery. His kind of postwar propaganda was meant to influence the masses; it succeeded in further solidifying Southerners who were already predisposed to this ideology. Early was particularly recalcitrant in his refusal to

accept any form of change to pre-bellum Southern ways, even if it resulted in progress. Thus, the Southerners who accepted defeat and progressed into the New South saw Early as an anti-Union fanatic whose only achievement was the creation of a tool for confirmation bias in other stagnant thinkers (Gallagher 36). While often controversial, Early's writings became a powerful force in establishing the ideas of the Lost Cause as a cultural phenomenon in the Reconstruction-era South.

Another highly influential phenomena that fed into the solidification of this Myth was Southern Romanticism, the literary movement that idealized the Antebellum South and sentimentalized the war by those who were years removed from the conflict (O'Brien). The texts of Southern Romanticism emphasized the tragedies of the war for the South and made the anti-Union sentiment almost tolerable, in spite of the war's momentous triumphs for humanity. Without an honest understanding of the historical context, which these writings successfully ignored, there was a dangerous appeal to nostalgia, to the forgotten origin and nature of the Civil War. This led to the apotheosis of the Cause and those who fought for it. "No southern *War and Peace*, *Guernica*, or 'Gettysburg Address' came out of [the war]," historian Charles Reagan Wilson writes, while the southerners who culled self-pity from their downfall "shaped postwar southern life." (19).

The war itself was not the only event that produced biased rewriting. The resulting Reconstruction had its fair share of scholarship denouncing the efforts to rebuild the South and instilling the idea of the South as an oppressed area broken by Northern aggressors. The most notable instance of this in the academy was the "Dunning School." This collective of scholars is named after Professor William A. Dunning of Columbia

University. His coterie of graduate students all promulgated what they learned from him: that both the Civil War and Reconstruction were manifestations of Northern aggression, while the South itself was merely attempting to hold on to a gentler and more harmonious way of life. This revisionist history gained traction within the academy from the end of the 19th century until World War I, but its influence continued, in various forms, until the middle of the 20th century. Dunning and his coterie gave the Lost Cause ideology a veneer of academic legitimacy, validating this false, racist, and ultimately self-deluding narrative.

The Dunning School promoted a historical representation of Reconstruction that painted a vengeful picture of Union greed and corruption. According to the Dunning interpretation of the period, after Lincoln's death, the Republican party sought to take control of all national politics. In order to maintain control, they consolidated the various non-Confederate groups in the South, aligning them against the former Confederates and ignoring any pretense of reconciliation. These groups included freed slaves ("ignorant" was the kindest term that Dunning applied to these people), carpetbaggers, and scalawags. For the Dunning School, these groups represented the lowest ranks of society exacting revenge on the gallant plantation class as members of that class tried to restore a "civilized" society and reclaim what was -- by both law and divine decree -- rightfully theirs. The irony in their self-identification as an oppressed people was lost on these wealthier white people, and the notion of their own superiority and offense at the injustices done to them gave rise to the violence enacted by sinister groups, such as the Ku Klux Klan. This dangerous narrative persisted because of the academic "credibility" lent it by Dunning and his graduate students. Later refutations of these biased accounts

denounced their credibility as historical analysis, and instead created a space where we can analyze the influence of the Lost Cause in Reconstruction historiography. Perhaps the most obvious manifestation of the skewed views of the Dunning school is D.W. Griffith's 1915 film about the Civil War and Reconstruction, *The Birth of a Nation*. In this silent epic, Griffith depicted the Ku Klux Klan as valiant saviors of a post-war South ravaged by Northern carpetbaggers and freed blacks. Historian Alexis Clark notes that,

Until the movie's debut, the Ku Klux Klan, founded in 1865 by Confederate veterans in Pulaski, Tennessee, was a regional organization in the South that was all but obliterated due to government suppression. But *The Birth of a Nation's* racially charged Jim Crow narrative, coupled with America's heightened anti-immigrant climate, led the Klan to align itself with the movie's success and use it as a recruiting tool. (Clark)

Obviously, the ideas promoted by the Dunning School were not exclusive to Dunning and his graduate students. The same themes had widespread recognition in many cultural productions across various media at the time.

Gone With the Wind

Margaret Mitchell's 1936 novel *Gone With The Wind*, and especially the 1939 movie based on it, has been positioned by some critics as wholeheartedly embracing the Myth of the Lost Cause. While the Myth may be present in the text, Mitchell's take on this view of the Civil War and Reconstruction is far more nuanced than pro-Myth sympathizers would have it. This study will attempt a more even-handed reading of Mitchell's novel, considering how she both valorizes the Myth and pushes back against it. It is, ultimately, like all good works of art, a product of its times and intellectual milieu and a response to its context.

Margaret Mitchell was born November 8, 1900 in Atlanta, Georgia. As a child, she described listening to former Confederate soldiers and others around during the Civil War tell their stories of bravery and hardship. Being raised on the stories of the former Confederates provided her a passion for writing, and biased historical accounts. In 1918, following her graduation from Atlanta Washington Seminary, she enrolled at Smith College for her undergraduate education. Mitchell returned home after her first year at school, during which her mother passed from influenza. In preparing for the debutante season, Mitchell met and married Berrien Kinnard Upshaw in 1922. The marriage quickly ended amid reports of abuse and alcoholism, and Mitchell landed a position at the *Atlanta Journal* Sunday magazine with the help of John March, who she later married in 1925. Although successful at the *Journal*, Mitchell suffered a broken ankle in 1926 that would keep her housebound and end her journalism career. However, from this setback began Mitchell's writing of what was to become *Gone with the Wind*. The highly successful novel was published in 1936, and won the 1937 Pulitzer Prize.

The extreme popularity of *Gone with the Wind* was, in part, due to the time period in which it was first published. In 1936, when MacMillan brought it to press, the United States was still deep in the Great Depression. This period of global economic crisis caused widespread unemployment, homelessness, and despair for people in the United States. So when *Gone with the Wind* came out, its message of perseverance through suffering and loss resonated with a large audience, especially women. Scarlett's drive and energy inspired those who had lost hope. When the film was released, in 1939, the *Gone with the Wind* craze peaked. Its premiere in Atlanta was an extravagant affair that put the city and the South in a national spotlight. After the ills of Reconstruction and the revitalization of the Myth of the Lost Cause by the Dunning School, southerners were seeking a validation of their struggles, and *Gone with the Wind* provided a narrative that mirrored their current situation.

Just as wealthy antebellum society experienced significant hardship after the war, the rural South in the 1930s experienced a tremendous downturn in all areas of life, and the idea of rising from the ashes appealed to all (and was especially attractive to Atlantans). Both Reconstruction and the Great Depression created similar psychological responses to maintaining established local customs while still trying to survive. Southern wealth and abundance, so apparent in the decades preceding both Reconstruction and the Great Depression, was lost yet again. But this time, the economic scarcity affected the entire nation, producing an even larger demographic of those who were suffering hardship, thereby increasing manifold the potential audience for Mitchell's work.

As in the novel, the South harbored an anger towards the wealthy urbanites that "caused" the Great Depression; this blame-shifting is mirrored in the novel where many

characters lay the responsibility for the ills of the South on the Yankees who both defeated her and then took advantage of her during Reconstruction (Morton). Despite the fact that the book was shipped and sold in June of 1936 for the incredibly high price of three dollars (almost unheard of at the time), by December of 1936 it had sold over a million copies. It was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1937, which caused another spike in sales. When the movie was released in 1939, sales of the book were over the two million mark. Even today, Simon and Schuster (who bought Macmillan Publishing) estimates it sells close to 75,000 copies of the book every year in hardcover, trade paperback, mass market paperback, and e-book formats.

A shallow look at Mitchell's Old South has the Confederates as the last of the knightly gentlemen protecting their genteel way of life. The women at home were southern belles who supported the cause while maintaining their plantations and slaves. The slaves never complain and never speak of freedom, and after they are freed, they are "childlike in mentality, easily led and from long habit accustomed to taking orders" (611). The Lost Cause mentality is evident. However, Mitchell created a narrative that explores the complexities of the characters' attitudes with a thin layer of Lost Cause sympathy on top to mimic a more realistic version of events. In Mitchell's portrayal, the Lost Cause is presented as the majority belief while most of the characters privately dissented. All four of the main characters openly admit at one point their disbelief in the Cause. Rhett Butler is the public dissenter who denies the validity of the Cause before the start of the war. Ashley Wilkes writes to his agreeing wife Melanie about the tragedy of Southerners risking everything for nothing. Eventually, the protagonist Scarlett O'Hara realizes the foolishness of her own ways and the South as a whole.

Rhett Butler

Rhett Butler, the dashing social outcast, maintains his criticism of the Cause throughout the novel. He openly expresses his indictments of the South and its inevitable downfall. His introduction in the novel was the example for which every disturbance of the status quo would follow. During a heated argument, he steps in to remind everyone of the lack of resources in the South for a weaponized war, and undercuts their inflated pride: “Why, all we have is cotton and slaves and arrogance” (123). He refuses to pretend that he cares for the fall of the South, and refuses to accept the emotionally charged justification of the Cause. When Scarlett accuses him of no loyalty to the South, he retorts that the South has no loyalty to him: “And yet you expect me to listen to orators like Dr. Meade who tell me our Cause is just and holy?...What kind of a fool do you think I am?” (238). His involvement in the war is for personal gain and he does not hide it, stating “I am making enough money out of the South’s death throes to compensate me for my lost birthright.” (238). As for others, he calls them on their lies of fighting for states’ rights and maintaining slavery, telling Scarlett that the slaves are “just the excuse”. He continues, “There’ll always be wars because men love wars” (256).

Throughout the war, Rhett profits from his blockades and continues to be a subject of disapproval as he never relents his criticism of the Cause. He knows all the passionate talk of the Cause is bogus, stating, “All wars are in reality money squabbles.” He manages to stay in society by providing luxuries from the Yankees and English that many condemn but few refuse, revealing their hypocrisy. In the end, when Sherman is beating down on Atlanta and the troops are running from the frontline, he tells Scarlett,

“Take a good look at them...so you can tell your grandchildren you saw the rear guard of the Glorious Cause in retreat” (369).

Scarlett O’Hara / The Women

Mitchell demonstrates the Confederate’s women’s false loyalty to the Cause through the eyes of Scarlett. Initially, the women seem to be loyal supporters of the “Southern way of life” without any doubt about the legitimacy of the Cause. These southern women, like Melanie, initially seem entirely devoted to and thrilled by their adherence to the Cause. They encouraged their men to be brave and give their services, and even their lives, if necessary, to defend their beloved South. When the soldiers departed, the women put on emotional displays of enthusiasm, despite knowing that many of them would never return: “Of course, there were empty chairs and babies who would never see their fathers’ faces and unmarked graves by lonely Virginia creeks and in the still mountains of Tennessee, but was that too great a price to pay for such a Cause?” (176). Mitchell pays particular attention to this female fanaticism at the charity ball. Eligible men who stayed on the homefront instead of enlisting were met with strong disapproval. Even Melanie, who sees the good in everyone, delivers sharp criticism of such men. For example, when Ashley heads off to war, she displays strong pride in her husband and states that she would rather see him dead on a battlefield than at home. This demonstrates the degree to which blind loyalty to the Cause affected even the most steadfast character:

There was a deep, almost fanatic glow in her [Melanie’s] eyes that for a moment lit up her plain little face and made it beautiful. The same look was on the faces of

all the women as the song ended, tears of pride on cheeks, pink or wrinkled, smiles on lips, a deep hot glow in eyes, as they turned to their men, sweetheart to lover, mother to son, wife to husband. They were all beautiful with the blinding beauty that transfigures even the plainest woman when she is utterly protected and utterly loved and is giving back that love a thousandfold. (176)

While Scarlett watches this show, she is astonished to discover that “she did not share with these women their fierce pride, their desire to sacrifice themselves and everything they had for the Cause” (Mitchell 177). The war means nothing to her. She understands that it only causes trouble, kills men, costs money, and makes it difficult to get good food and luxuries. She hates taking care of wounded soldiers and fears death. She sees the women who unreservedly support the Cause as stupid and hysterical. She thinks that the war itself should end, the men should come back home to grow cotton, and all should be as it was before, filled with parties, balls, and beaux. She realizes how she differs from the other women, but is not the sort to allow any self-censoring thoughts to intrude on her mood. She does, however, know that she cannot reveal her true feelings for fear of social reproach. She must be practical and pretend that she possesses the same level of enthusiasm and pride demonstrated by the other women, or she will be alienated from society. Scarlett is a woman who absolutely differs from the ideal model of Confederate womanhood.

But Scarlett’s admission that she will outwardly seem to participate in this farce makes the reader question the veracity of the emotions that the other women seem to profess. How many of them feel just as Scarlett does? Are they all truly willing to have their family members die on a battlefield so that they may preserve a certain way of life?

How will that way of life be altered by the absence of a family's breadwinner, or heir, or sibling? Can the future ever truly recreate a past that was characterized by an ill-defined, nebulous sense of "honor"? The historic distance between the end of the Civil War (and the beginnings of the Myth of the Lost Cause) and Mitchell's writing gave her the opportunity to see the ramifications of such social self-delusion. Scarlett's false front makes sense on a level that the social convention of blind allegiance to a prettified past does not.

Scarlett's question presents two separate issues for the reader. Together they deflate the puffery of these public tests of one's commitment, which is signified by how much one is willing to give up for the cause. The first, "their desire to sacrifice themselves," is, in fact, founded on an illusion. These women will not be called to literally sacrifice themselves. They will not be the ones fighting and dying. They do not "own" the loves of the men who surround them (unless of course, those men are slaves), so they overreach when they claim that they will sacrifice themselves. But perhaps they are aware of their own disingenuity in this, because they acknowledge that they will not be required to do so. Rather, they *want* to offer their lives for the cause. There is no scenario where the relinquishing of their lives would actually help the South triumph, but they nevertheless wish to do so. To offer such a "gift" although there would be no consequences for such an offer reduces that action to nothing but an empty public display, with all the trappings of excess that each woman can muster up.

The second sacrifice here is the real one. These women profess to be willing to lay "everything they had" on the altar of the Cause. A reader cannot fully assess the willingness of any particular woman to give up all her personal private property

(including land, slaves, crops, etc.), but we can think of the ramifications of such a sacrifice. What if a woman, any woman at this ball, were to lose everything she had? The loss of her property would mean the loss of her social status, the loss of her hold on and claim to some small part of the Cause. In short, she would lose the socio-economic status that she just sacrificed to preserve. Without either property or a provider, her claim to any level of gentility would have no foundation in the South. The great irony of their sacrifices for the Cause being the ultimate reason for their dismissal from any circle that might benefit from its preservation through those sacrifices is so blatant that it cannot be lost on even the most dense and deluded of these women.

The false selves that these women present are carefully calculated to ensure that no man or woman could doubt their sincerity. Scarlett had mastered the “outward signs of gentility” that created the “appearances of ladyhood” in her social class (180). One must abide by the unspoken social laws or else suffer the “bad reputation” of a “fast” woman (181). However, she acknowledges very early on that the false image she and all other women project is disingenuous. She says that “above all, you never said what you really thought about anything, any more than they said what they really thought” (180). Upon arriving in Atlanta, she learns that she is expected, like her saintly sister-in-law, to devote her time to supporting the Cause without complaint.

Women were expected to conform to the image of self-sacrifice that Melanie openly embraced. Originally, these women embraced this outward display of their willingness to suffer for the Cause in order to maintain their social standing. But they were quick to abandon their commitment when they were faced with any real privation. Scarlett’s moment of clarity about her commitment to the Cause is not singular; this self-

actualization occurred for each woman, and the ferocity of their “loyalty” was directly correlated with their insincerity. Antolini’s take on this is focused well: “like Scarlett, many southern women reluctantly filled the role of Confederate Woman; they embraced the role superficially and easily rejected it once the tangible sacrifices of the Cause destroyed any romantic notions of war and heroism” (25). These women believe that the Confederacy will prevail and the lifestyle and values of the South will remain unchanged. It is the firmness of this core belief that allows them to offer up their own “sacrifices” for the Cause, which they do, up to the point when they realize those sacrifices are real. The difference is between Scarlett and the other women is that, eventually, Scarlett will find herself cast out from the society she fought so hard to preserve because she finally showed her true feelings.

Mitchell casts this false commitment in striking relief when she shows the real-world results of getting beyond it. Later in the novel, when Scarlett finally disregards the restrictions on her personal agency, she saves her family from both physical and social ruin through her own labor and business savvy. It is only when she gives up the socially-encoded “lady-like” virtues that she is able to do something positive. She’s not devoted to the Cause or taking to her couch because of the loss of such a beloved ethos. Instead, she’s openly admitted what others have hidden for years. And this, as much as her presumption, is what creates a social backlash against her. Despite the honorable outcome, her rejection of traditional “Southern” values does not go unpunished.

Ashley Wilkes

The women are not the only ones who represent a false rendering of the Lost Cause. Ashley Wilkes, the epitome of a Southern gentleman, represents the lack of foundation the Lost Cause has always had. Ashley Wilkes is the gentleman for all others to be compared to. He is an educated, respected man who comes from a prominent Southern family. He maintains propriety in all situations, including marrying his most suitable match and signing up for a war he openly questions. As much as he represents the culmination of pre-war Southern culture, he also is a symbol of its death.

Before the war begins, Ashley admits that he is opposed to it. Although his opposition would seem disloyal to the Confederacy, it really stems from his belief that all wars, regardless of their causes or justifications, are futile. At his family's barbeque, in chapter six, he states, "Let's don't be too hot headed and let's don't have any war. Most of the misery of the world has been caused by wars. And when the wars were over, no one ever knew what they were all about" (121). Despite this admission, Ashley, ever the Southern gentleman, enlists in the Army of the Confederacy, and is appointed captain of the Jonesboro Troop, since he is the best rider in the county and considered level-headed (39). On the battlefield, Ashley appears to be both heroic and committed to the Cause. He reveals his doubts only in his private letters to his wife. When Scarlett gets a hold of one letter, Ashley's wavering fidelity to the myth of the Lost Cause is revealed.

Ashley begins this letter by explaining to Melanie that her suspicions about his reservation are true. He admits that he has reached the point in his military career where he questions everything he has been fighting for. He tells her, "I wonder, 'Why are you here, Ashley Wilkes? What are you fighting for?'" (211). He offers the reader one of the

basic foundations of the myth of the Lost Cause, in that once the excitement of marching and whipping the Yankees has worn off, Southern soldiers are left without a solid motive for fighting. He continues by explaining what he has realized he is *not* fighting for: “Not for honor and glory, certainly. War is a dirty business and I do not like dirt. I am not a soldier and I have no desire to seek the bubble reputation even in the cannon’s mouth. Yet, here I am at the wars--whom God never intended to be other than a studious country gentleman” (212). We see that he acknowledges the false claims of fighting for honor and glory, yet calls himself still a “country gentleman.” If he is not honorable and glorious, what does a Southern gentleman have left to claim as his identity? How does the reader grapple with the embodiment of the Southern gentleman confessing that what others see as his core virtues are in fact false? Ashley continues his explanation:

I see too clearly that we have been betrayed, betrayed by our arrogant Southern selves, believing that one of us could whip a dozen Yankees, believing that King Cotton could rule the world. Betrayed, too, by words and catch phrases, prejudices and hatreds coming from the mouths of those highly placed, those men whom we respected and revered—”King Cotton, Slavery, States’ Rights, Damn Yankees.” (212)

Here he admits something that no one would have dared say aloud, that their headfirst jump into the war was a product of their own arrogance and stupidity. He knows what every single supporter of the war will eventually figure out, that it was not driven by “states’ rights” or Southern freedom, but rather the fear of losing the little power they had. The men in the highest positions, with the most power, those with the most to lose, perpetuated the lie that the war was necessary. Their unrelenting grip on their power was

tight enough to separate their states from the Union and fight a war that they were unable, from the start, to maintain for more than a couple months.

Ashley echoes Rhett's statement about all wars being money squabbles, yet he still enlists to fight. Eventually he says what he knows he *is* fighting for: "For I am fighting for the old days, the old ways I love so much but which, I fear, are now gone forever, no matter how the die may fall. For, win or lose, we lose just the same" (212). He is fighting for something very personal, not a return to the monolithic social structures of the old South, but for the ability to return to Twelve Oaks, sit on the porch with his family, and read books. His conception isn't grand; it doesn't contain any sense of loss for the idea of white supremacy or the subjugation of another race. It's a small, familial future that he sees, constricted to and appropriate for a character with little ambition and less concern for how others perceive him. Ashley has figured out that this war has cost them much more than they ever anticipated, and it has taken from them "the old ways." Although he waxes poetic about the beauty of his plantation home and the old ways, he sees there is no outcome in which the South keeps its former way of life. If they win, they will control the market and become as capitalistic as the Yankees. If they lose, the foundation of their lives, slavery, is finally abolished. All the talk of states' rights and impeding Yankees was nothing more than an excuse to keep slavery and keep white landowners at the top of the food chain. Ashley comments on this, noting, "for our Cause is really our own way of living and that is gone already" (213).

Like Scarlett before him, Ashley scolds himself and wonders if he is the only one with these subversive thoughts. He recognizes that he sounds almost seditious, as he tells Melanie, "I should not write those words. I should not even think them," demonstrating

the reaction, instilled by years of privileged upbringing, that one must capitulate to the common beliefs so loudly and profusely proclaimed by all and sundry (213). One must, at all costs, appear to maintain total, unquestioning agreement with the others. Like Scarlett, he knows he is internally straying from the status quo, but admitting this publicly is not an option, lest he be ostracized from his people, as Rhett has been. Despite himself, he wonders, “if the twins or Alex or Cade think these same thoughts? I wonder if they know they are fighting for a Cause that was lost the minute the first shot was fired” (213). This sentiment mirrors Scarlett’s as she watches the women pledge their lives to the Cause, knowing she does not feel the same. But here, Ashley, wondering if the men next to him--those who actually did pledge and now risk their lives--feel the same way he does. However, in his most intellectually arrogant moment, he compares himself to his fellow soldiers: “I do not think they think these things and they are lucky” (213). This is astonishing because he, of all people, should recognize that this disbelief in the Cause they are fighting for is widespread. His intuition fails him when he believes that he is the only one who sees the folly of this war. He and Scarlett both make the mistake of buying into the social constructs they’ve been taught, especially the unquestioning acceptance of the general consensus.

Mitchell’s Revelation

Scarlett fails to finish reading the letter after she finds it mentions nothing of love or passion for Melanie. She becomes bored with its incomprehensible talk of defeat and loss. She is elated to find it is not a love letter to Melanie, yet when she attempts to understand the actual contents of it, it eludes “her uncomplex mind” (215). She fumbles

over his words, and instead of comprehending, she searches in vain for hidden messages of love. Scarlett, to much confusion and incredulity, is exposed to the real Ashley, not the fantasy she has created. In her eyes, the perfect southern gentleman, fantasy Ashley, has admitted his cowardice. For him to declare imminent defeat and denounce other's perpetuation of the Cause is the ultimate cognitive dissonance for Scarlett. She is confronted with the truth, but does not want to believe it, and chooses to ignore it to satisfy any discomfort in her current reasoning. Her inability to come to terms with the truth about Ashley parallels the South's view of the Lost Cause. Even upon seeing the error of their ways, the South chose not to reconcile truth and belief and thus largely ignored truth.

The inclusion of Ashley's letter and Scarlett's inability to grasp its meaning is Mitchell's authorial intrusion into the text. Not only is the content of the letter directly addressing the faults of the Lost Cause, but it's inclusion and dismissal by Scarlett represents the cognitive dissonance and confirmation bias of Lost Cause thinking. Mitchell's inclusion of the letter was used to directly address the Myth of the Lost Cause with the reader. The content of the letter is Mitchell's articulate recognition of the vain ideology of the Lost Cause. She uses Ashley, the incarnation of southern values, to prove the point that the Cause was always an act of sheer folly. Ashley explicitly acknowledges that the vanity of the southerners trumped reason as they pushed back against those who sought to take away their undeserved position in power. Mitchell outlines and debunks the Myth through Ashley's writing.

Of more importance is the authorial intrusion. Had Scarlett taken Ashley's words to heart and recognized the deluded beliefs they'd accepted, the letter would have been

the turning point for Scarlett as a character. However, the fact that the letter was ineffective in bringing change to Scarlett's view of the Cause demonstrates that it is meant for the reader. Scarlett does not even finish the letter, and fails to understand it. The reader, not Scarlett, becomes Mitchell's target audience through Ashley.

Now that she has the audience's attention, the meaning of the letter holds far more weight than Ashley's guilty confession. Mitchell is identifying the Lost Cause and criticizing those who laud it. She explains how it came to be, through acts of pride and vanity. She does not pretend the war was fought for anything other than power derived from slavery. The personal stake southerners had in fighting for the Cause is what drove them through years of a losing war -- to be defeated was to be stripped of the little power they had. Mitchell exemplifies this through Ashley's longing for a simple life at Twelve Oaks, something that was impossible without a plantation run by slaves.

More importantly, she wants the reader to assess the folly of willful ignorance. The South refused to think critically about the logistics and effects of war on themselves. This is not to say they were not presented with this information; even at a family barbeque, Rhett and Ashley speak of the foolishness of war and the South's participation. Yet they ignore logic and run into war with prideful fervor. The most disconcerting element of the Lost Cause is even when they realize the truth, noted by Scarlett and Ashley, they choose to outwardly support it for fear of social ostracization. They continue to support the thousands of deaths in vain to maintain a semblance of the antebellum society they already lost. Mitchell is demanding the reader to pay attention to this through the inclusion of the letter (see Appendix).

Conclusion

As a result of mounting tensions between the northern and southern states over slavery, the Civil War erupted and divided the country for years. Although the Confederacy won key battles in the first half of the war, the second half was plagued by diminished resources and heavy casualties. From the war came tremendous change, the most important of these being the emancipation of slaves. Despite the Union victory in eradicating slavery and reuniting the states, a division in the country lasted far longer than the day the South surrendered. Reconstruction brought social change that defied antebellum customs and led to unrest in southern society. The turmoil caused during and after the war produced the wayward mentality of the Myth of the Lost Cause, which would insert itself in both the collective memory and literature of the South.

The Lost Cause was the mindset held by Confederates that their involvement in the Civil War was a just and righteous effort to maintain their way of life supported by slavery. This idea later morphed into the Myth of the Lost Cause as a deliberate reconstruction of social memory that gave legitimacy to their justifications through Southern Romanticism and the Dunning School. The cultural impact of the Myth of the Lost Cause has led many to believe that Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* is a result of this racist propaganda. Its popularity grew from both Mitchell's storytelling and appeal to Depression-era readers has made it a cultural mainstay to this day. Despite current criticism admonishing the text, close reading reveals an firm narrative of dissent and an indicative authorial intrusion that confirms Mitchell's critical stance against the Lost Cause ideology.

Through the three main characters of Scarlett, Rhett, and Ashley, Mitchell shows that the Lost Cause was not the opinion held by most everyone, but rather a maintenance of the status quo as a result of ingrained social conformity. Rhett Butler is used to prove the point that speaking against the accepted opinion leads to social ostracization. Through Scarlett, Mitchell proves that image trumped truth. She demonstrates the ironic stance that Confederate women would rather sacrifice their loved ones than lose their social status, even though losing their men would lead to social fallout as well.

Most importantly, Mitchell includes a letter from Ashley Wilkes that defies the Myth in both content and form. Ashley disproves all notions that the war was being fought for anything but maintaining slavery and their way of life. Through him, she proves that they were all still fighting because they were not yet ready to accept defeat and loss of power. The most important revelation from the letter is that its inclusion was meant for the reader by authorial intrusion. Her purpose is to address the reader and force them to consider the effects of willful ignorance in the face of truth. She highlights the Confederacy's downfall due to pride, and challenges the reader to consider their own predisposed mentality regarding the war.

Margaret Mitchell wrote a sweeping tale of perseverance in the face of adversity, but also an analytical text against blind social conformity. Current criticism disregards the work as racist propaganda, and although it does have its flaws, it demands to be read openly and thoroughly. *Gone with the Wind* holds an important position in American culture, and as a result, it should be analyzed beyond a surface-level understanding.

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Appendix: The full text of Ashley's letter to Melanie

***Gone With the Wind*, pp. 213-ff.**

“My Dear wife: You write me saying you are alarmed lest I be concealing my real thoughts from you and you ask me what is occupying my mind these days—”

“Dear Wife, if I have concealed aught from you it is because I did not wish to lay a burden on your shoulders, to add to your worries for my physical safety with those of my mental turmoil. But I can keep nothing from you, for you know me too well. Do not be alarmed. I have no wound. I have not been ill. I have enough to eat and occasionally a bed to sleep in. A soldier can ask for no more. But, Melanie, heavy thoughts lie on my heart and I will open my heart to you.

“These summer nights I lie awake, long after the camp is sleeping, and I look up at the stars and, over and over, I wonder, ‘Why are you here, Ashley Wilkes? What are you fighting for?’

“Not for honor and glory, certainly. War is a dirty business and I do not like dirt. I am not a soldier and I have no desire to seek the bubble reputation even in the cannon's mouth. Yet, here I am at the wars—whom God never intended to be other than a studious country gentleman. For, Melanie, bugles do not stir my blood nor drums entice my feet and I see too clearly that we have been betrayed, betrayed by our arrogant Southern selves, believing that one of us could whip a dozen Yankees, believing that King Cotton could rule the world. Betrayed, too, by words and catch phrases, prejudices and hatreds coming from the mouths of those highly placed, those men whom we respected and revered—‘King Cotton, Slavery, States' Rights, Damn Yankees.’

“And so when I lie on my blanket and look up at the stars and say ‘What are you fighting for?’ think of States' Rights and cotton and the darkies and the Yankees whom we have been bred to hate, and I know that none of these is the reason why I am fighting. Instead, I see Twelve Oaks and remember how the moonlight slants across the white columns, and the unearthly way the magnolias look, opening under the moon, and how the climbing roses make the side porch shady even at the hottest noon. And I see Mother, sewing there, as she did when I was a little boy. And I hear the darkies coming home across the fields at dusk, tired and singing and ready for supper, and the sound of the

windlass as the bucket goes down into the cool well. And there's the long view down the road to the river, across the cotton fields, and the mist rising from the bottom lands in the twilight. And that is why I'm here who have no love of death or misery or glory and no hatred for anyone. Perhaps that is what is called patriotism, love of home and country. But Melanie, it goes deeper than that. For, Melanie, these things I have named are but the symbols of the thing for which I risk my life, symbols of the kind of life I love. For I am fighting for the old days, the old ways I love so much but which, I fear, are now gone forever, no matter how the die may fall. For, win or lose, we lose just the same.

"If we win this war and have the Cotton Kingdom of our dreams, we still have lost, for we will become a different people and the old quiet ways will go. The world will be at our doors clamoring for cotton and we can command our own price. Then, I fear, we will become like the Yankees, at whose money-making activities, acquisitiveness and commercialism we now sneer. And if we lose, Melanie, if we lose!

"I am not afraid of danger or capture or wounds or even death, if death must come, but I do fear that once this war is over, we will never get back to the old times. And I belong in those old times. I do not belong in this mad present of killing and I fear I will not fit into any future, try though I may. Nor will you, my dear, for you and I are of the same blood. I do not know what the future will bring, but it cannot be as beautiful or as satisfying as the past.

"I lie and look at the boys sleeping near me and I wonder if the twins or Alex or Cade think these same thoughts. I wonder if they know they are fighting for a Cause that was lost the minute the first shot was fired, for our Cause is really our own way of living and that is gone already. But I do not think they think these things and they are lucky.

"I had not thought of this for us when I asked you to marry me. I had thought of life going on at Twelve Oaks as it had always done, peacefully, easily, unchanging. We are alike, Melanie, loving the same quiet things, and I saw before us a long stretch of uneventful years in which to read, hear music and dream. But not this! Never this! That this could happen to us all, this wrecking of old ways, this bloody slaughter and hate! Melanie, nothing is worth it—States' Rights, nor slaves, nor cotton. Nothing is worth what is happening to us now and what may happen, for if the Yankees whip us the future will be one of incredible horror. And, my dear, they may yet whip us.

“I should not write those words. I should not even think them. But you have asked me what was in my heart, and the fear of defeat is there. Do you remember at the barbecue, the day our engagement was announced, that a man named Butler, a Charlestonian by his accent, nearly caused a fight by his remarks about the ignorance of Southerners? Do you recall how the twins wanted to shoot him because he said we had few foundries and factories, mills and ships, arsenals and machine shops? Do you recall how he said the Yankee fleet could bottle us up so tightly we could not ship out our cotton? He was right. We are fighting the Yankees’ new rifles with Revolutionary War muskets, and soon the blockade will be too tight for even medical supplies to slip in. We should have paid heed to cynics like Butler who knew, instead of statesmen who felt—and talked. He said, in effect, that the South had nothing with which to wage war but cotton and arrogance. Our cotton is worthless and what he called arrogance is all that is left. But I call that arrogance matchless courage. If—”