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Powered by Social Energies: A New Historicism Approach to *Gone with the Wind*

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Abstract

Gone with the Wind was a runaway bestseller in the 1930s due to Mitchell's ability to pull the circulating social energies of her own time period into a book ostensibly set in the Civil War and Reconstruction Period. Using Stephen Greenblatt's ideas from *Shakespearean Negotiations*, I trace these in *Gone with the Wind* with support from multiple sources. These swirling social energies provide a sense of inevitability to the story, which underpins Scarlett's frantic survivalism, but they are not transformed. This lack of transformation creates a disturbing reality wherein Scarlett can learn nothing, change nothing and rail against her apparent victimizations, which parallels the situation we as modern readers face in an increasingly complicated and divisive world.

Gone With the Wind combines social energies that terrify us: the loss of personal sovereignty over our bodies and the loss of the American Dream of prosperity through the saga of Scarlett O'Hara. Like a breeze in a wind turbine, these pervasive social energies power the narrative as Scarlett navigates loss and love during a difficult and divisive era of American history. As New Historicism is "interested in tracking" these social energies as they move into and out of texts or, representations, I will use some of the strategies presented by Stephen Greenblatt in *Shakespearean Negotiation* to explore how Mitchell pulls at the social energies of her time, ultimately writing the 1920s and 30s into her text (Gallagher 13).

These social energies are defined "only indirectly, by [their] effects:... manifested in the capacity of certain verbal, aural, and visual traces to produce, shape and organize collective and mental experiences" (Greenblatt 6). Social energies affect Scarlett's feelings, decisions, and actions. She fears rape in the Appropriation section, she expresses a love for her plantation home in the Synecdoche section, and she endeavors on a defeatist pursuit of Ashley in the Metaphor section. These all draw upon external social energies. Further, their effects extend out into the readership during the 1930s as their presence in the text produces the experiences they were drawn from in the first place, but within a new narrative space that can obscure their "minimal predictability. . . and range" (Greenblatt 6). By examining how social energies are pulled into the text and used to drive it, we can recognize whether they are transformative and give the reader an opportunity to examine their own cultural milieu.

The text acquires social energy through a complicated process termed "negotiation" by Stephen Greenblatt which forms the foundation for my exploration of both *Gone With the Wind* and Scarlett O'Hara, one of the most recognizable and complicated heroines of popular literature (8-11). Scarlett's experiences draw upon collective fears such as the loss of personal sovereignty over our bodies and the loss of our American Dream, as well as conflicting desires such as a nostalgia while simultaneously a desire for feminine accomplishment outside the home. These fears and desires draw upon common experiences and emotions they can be viewed as the social energies powering the text.

Appropriation

Until Scarlett returns to burned out Atlanta to secure the future of Tara, the racism portrayed within the book is covert. However, during the Reconstruction period it becomes overt through the appropriation of the

social energies surrounding rape (Mitchell 781). Greenblatt's definition of "appropriation" is close to a lay understanding of the term, "objects appear to be in the public domain... Or, alternatively, objects appear to be vulnerable and defenseless, hence graspable without punishment or retaliation" (9). In this case, as we are dealing with racism and rape, the appropriation would be based upon people of color appearing vulnerable to the author working in the 1920s with the text showing no reciprocal understanding of what it is appropriating. Mitchell villainizes people of color and victimizes whites during Reconstruction by appropriating 1920s energies, which regarded rape as an excuse for lynching. Mitchell side-steps the politics of racism through Scarlett's experiences and understanding.

Scarlett is only able to understand what Reconstruction means when she realizes that, "the negroes were on top and behind them were the Yankee bayonets. She could be killed, she could be raped and, very probably, nothing would ever be done about it. And anyone who avenged her would be hanged by the Yankees, hanged without benefit of trial by judge and jury" (Mitchell 790). Mitchell thus takes the social energy of rape and pairs it with the new political reality of the South. Scarlett, as a woman of that time, is ignorant of the workings of politics, and up until this point is focused on her own personal difficulties securing enough funds for her family. To Scarlett, and so to the reader, the horror of the loss of Confederate sovereignty is swallowed up in the loss of her personal sovereignty, giving the situation a visceral and powerful sympathy with not just Scarlett, but the whites in this new political situation.

The reality of women being raped by the opposing side's soldiers is an established fact of war time, yet this fear bleeds into the Reconstruction period. Erin Sheley points out in her article dealing with how the collective trauma of lost sovereignty is displayed in *Gone with the Wind*, that "Mitchell repeatedly associates black 'freedom'—as it was associated throughout the Jim Crow era—with a threat to white feminine virtue" (10). The social energy of rape is connected to the loss of sovereignty as the South begins to lose the war and Yankee soldiers march toward Atlanta. Repeatedly, women whisper about "bayonets through children's stomachs" and other horrors (Mitchell 470). After fleeing to Tara, Scarlett is confronted by a Union soldier; she knows she is alone at the house and at his mercy before she murders him. Later, a troop of Union soldiers arrives and she fears for both her livelihood and her virtue, but she is not actually touched with violent intent until the period of Reconstruction, when a black man assaults her in her carriage after dark while she is on her way home from her mill (Mitchell 788). Mitchell builds

the tension surrounding rape in the book during the Civil War period, with the risk seeming greatest after the South has lost its sovereignty. In this way, she appropriates the social energy of rape, tying it in the reader's mind to the loss of sovereignty. However, this connection between the two as a justification for the KKK "was much more characteristic of twentieth-century lynch law" than of the time period in which the story is set (Sheley 12). In the early days of the Klan—during Reconstruction—the violence against people of color usually targeted those in possession of power or property, and was not for revenge for sexual assaults on women as the text represents. Scarlett's first exposure to KKK justice is when she helps Tony evade the Northerners after murdering a black man to protect his sister's honor; there is no indication in the text of the man, nor any other black character, gaining power or property (Sheley 12, Mitchell 756).

As Sheley explains, the social energy surrounding rape and the gallantry of men who stand against it lends legitimacy to both Klan violence and the Jim Crow laws enacted throughout the 1920s and 1930s (3-15). Thus, this "appropriation" is not transformative within the work, but may have left Mitchell's contemporary audience with personal justification for 1920s Jim Crow laws and public lynchings based on Scarlett's experiences.

Synecdoche

As a recognizable symbol of both *Gone with the Wind* and the antebellum South, the setting of Tara—Scarlett's family plantation and home—is rich with social energy. Greenblatt states that social energy within a synecdoche is acquired "by isolating one part or attribute of a practice, which then stands in for the whole" (11). Tara, a part of plantation ideology, stands in for the whole and is drawn with great care at the beginning of the novel. Mitchell describes the architecture of the big house before moving on to the green fields of cotton and the slave laborers who work the land which seems to produce for the Southern planter—without much effort or regard to capitalism—a sort of pastoral dream. Jessica Adams notes in her discussion of plantation ideology that "slave masters [are] changed into passive recipients of the land's bounty...[and] Extremes of cruelty...replaced by love" (167). Further, at Tara—the synecdoche of that ideology—Ellen goes about caring for each slave with more motherly tenderness than she spares for her own children, thus connecting the system to a loving mother (Mitchell 32, 35). It is an impossible dream filling Tara with the energy of happy childhood, and through Tara the plantation system.

This synecdoche connecting childhood dreams to the lost plantation ideology is just that: a dream. Amy Clukey in her examination of trans-Atlantic and capitalistic plantation ideology points out that this ideology is presented as “uniquely regional” to the South with “origins in a dreamy feudal past” while it is actually “built on...the economic structures of capitalism” (507-508). Sarah Churchwell in her article about the cultural myths the South used and uses to sustain itself states that “[Walter] Scott’s bestselling romances filled southerner’s heads with enchanted “dreams and phantoms . . . with the sillinesses and emptinesses, sham grandeurs, sham gauds and sham chivalries of a brainless and worthless long-vanished society” both in the antebellum period and in Mitchell’s 1920s (36). Mitchell employs both the regional uniqueness and romanticism of Walter Scott when she describes Tara. Tara’s foundations are mere dreams and its precarious position calls on the collective memories of a lost childhood or a lost dream common to all readers of all time periods, thus filling it with these social energies.

Scarlett’s father, Gerald O’Hara, the master of Tara and an Irish immigrant, is also a synecdoche. His character is drawn based upon “demeaning stereotypes of Irish culture drawn from British imperial discourses” such as his bluster, drunkenness, and ignorance (Clukey 512). Through Tara this energy is combined with that of lost childhood. Gerald named his plantation after the lost family estate, which was taken from them by the invading English and precipitated his move to America. Clukey notes that by “equating Celtic nobility with Southern plantocracy, the novel coopts Irish ‘authenticity’ and colonial grievances in order to naturalize the slave-owning elite” thus pulling the social energy of successful immigrants into the plantation ideology (516).

As Jessica Adams noted in her article, legitimations through the positive social energies provided by happy childhood memories and the successful immigrant are necessary to modern enjoyment of plantations (164, 185), which is also true for Mitchell’s readers. However, these energies go further, and through their painful loss villainize the efforts of the North to free the enslaved who do the actual work within the plantation ideology. Adams notes that through this legitimizing process “the white Southerner inhabits the place forcibly vacated by the slave” and that “blacks get effaced from plantation life; the planter becomes the real laborer, and the real victim, of slavery” (166). This phenomenon is the entire saga of Scarlett’s struggle during Reconstruction. She does the work of picking cotton and the reader experiences her suffering. In essence, the white planter loses their American dream through no fault of their own.

In her article, Clukey points out that prior to Mitchell's historical period, the Irish identity as white was contested "with southerners...clos[ing] ranks against racial uplift"(518). Then, suddenly, the Irish were considered white in solidarity against freed slaves making economic gains during the 1920s (518). Gerald at Tara embodies the idea that whites of all kinds can succeed, if only they are given the opportunities Reconstruction took away.

Through these processes, Mitchell "negotiates" happy childhood experiences and the fear of the loss of the American Dream into Scarlett's narrative as she loses her mother to death, and her livelihood to the war and Reconstruction. These energies are transformed through the villainization of Northern carpet baggers which simultaneously victimizes Scarlett and her fellow Southerners, ultimately making the politics of the Civil War and Reconstruction appear personal to the reader. These energies transform to become almost totally negative and leave Scarlett focused on personal survival at the expense of being the sort of motherly presence Tara used to have.

Metaphor

Scarlett's tortured love for Ashley and Rhett drew on her personal experiences of suppressed desire and motivated a deep connection with the text. It might be a leap to conjecture that most readers of *Gone with the Wind* feel the same way, but in her article Blanche Gelfant focuses on the love plot and its tortured impossibilities. The love plot drives much of the story and informs most of Scarlett's actions, and through it Mitchell uses the familiar experience of suppressed desire in the text in order to "negotiate" deep nostalgia as well. Greenblatt states that "metaphorical acquisition works by teasing out latent homologies, similitudes, systems of likeness, but it depends equally upon a deliberate distancing or distortion that precedes the disclosure of likeness" and we can see this at work in the layered love plot (11).

Scarlett loses Ashley to Melanie in the first few chapters of the novel, and she spends the rest of the book attempting to win him back from his wife; it becomes one of her main motivations through the novel. Danielle Barkley discusses how historical fiction uses metaphor to depict nostalgia and points out that obsession is Scarlett's driving force, which is almost as fierce as her desire to survive and restore Tara (58). Ashley desires Scarlett, but suppresses his desire throughout the text and steadfastly refuses to commit adultery. Scarlett, however, is merely stymied by this resistance; this is most obvious in the scene when Ashley has returned to live with Melanie at Tara during the Reconstruction. Scarlett finds him alone, and urges him to act on his suppressed

desire. She manages to gain a kiss before Ashley shoves her away and then avoids her (Mitchell 654). Her obsession continues, and she promises Melanie to look out for Ashley. Later, after Melanie is safely dead, Scarlett believes she and Ashley can move forward, but he still refuses her (Mitchell 813).

Scarlett's obsession over Ashley thus evokes the experience of the pursuit and loss of love, but as Barkley explains, it is the "vehicle by which [the depth of nostalgia in which nothing is forgotten or abandoned] can be conveyed" (56). The suppressed desire draws both on the reader's personal experiences with their own love plots and the energy of nostalgia for a lost past common during the 1920s reaction to World War One.

This desire remains a mystery to Scarlett even as she pursues it and is pursued by Rhett Butler; it drives the plot's inevitabilities and marks Scarlett as a "divided woman" (21). When Rhett enters the ballroom in Atlanta and fulfills Scarlett's deepest wish at the time, to dance, he does so by flouting the social restrictions Ashley represents. Scarlett's wish for the long last past is complicated by her wish to be free of the social restrictions of that past. Morton states in her article about feminine roles and responsibilities changing that this division tears Scarlett not just between Rhett and Ashley and the "New South" and "Old South" each represent, but also "between economic and cultural imperatives" of the 1920s (57, 59). Scarlett's desire for Rhett remains suppressed as does Ashley's desire for Scarlett to leave them, each blameless in a sort of ignorant innocence. This ignorant innocence parallels Mitchell's and her readers' experiences of the rapid social change of the 1920s. Further, Scarlett remains unchanged by her experiences, as though she were merely a receptacle for these powerful personal experiences and social energies. She ends the book in much the same way she began, untransformed by a narrative pulling in powerful nostalgic feelings and pairing them with suppressed, obsessed, and ultimately a lost desire or love. Her love plot overlays the political and economic crises of the book and imbues them with that energy of nostalgia, and so Scarlett's lack of transformation keeps the reader from gaining new insights.

Conclusion

Mitchell taps into the social energies of her time, the 1920s through various means, as all authors do. Greenblatt advocates for an examination "into half-hidden cultural transactions . . . [and] the collective production of literary pleasure and interest" yet he also points out that most works of art, when moved to another time or place, lose much of their social energy (4-

7). Mitchell has a deft hand with synecdoche, appropriation, and metaphor in various “negotiations” examined here, yet as we have seen one final piece is missing, that of transformation. In order for a work to maintain resonance, or relevance, it must transform the social energies circulating into and out of it, so that as Greenblatt notes “the exchanges are multiplied over time,” and *Gone with the Wind* does not manage to perform this crucial act (20). Scarlett, the embodiment of many of these energies and the vehicle through which the reader experiences them remains unchanged in the end, as confident in her ability to win Rhett back as she was going into the library to claim Ashley for her own in the opening chapters. She is controlled by the social energies circulating around her, and since the point of view is centered almost exclusively within Scarlett’s point of view, so too is the reader controlled by these social energies. In fact, most readers do not recognize the negotiations as they read. The social energies are encapsulated and become merely borrowed ideas and energies from the 1920s, preventing both surprise and examination.

There is a feeling of inevitability throughout the text, coming not just from the knowledge of how the Civil War ends, but also from the untransformed social energy contained within the book. There are no real surprises; Scarlett is interesting to observe and maddeningly foolish, but it all feels inevitable. The KKK must murder, because a woman’s virtue was assaulted; Scarlett murders the Yankee soldier, because she had to protect herself; Scarlett marries Frank, because she had no other way to enter the labor force. This lack of surprise leaves the reader feeling helpless, and wishing to return to their own nostalgic visions of the past.

It is this helplessness that is more damaging than the racism inherent in *Gone with the Wind*. The text is driven by social energies, and does little to examine or transform them, creating a picture of persons incapable of doing more than what they must to survive -- even if that means Jim Crow laws, lynching and clinging to a nostalgic past forever beyond their grasp. The reader is left searching and scratching against inevitability with Scarlett, confused about how to react to these terrors, yet feels justified in whatever schemes are proposed to change them. In many ways, the text itself represents contemporary readers who look for something to blame as economic and cultural imperatives tear and shift. Readers look to the same solutions as the bewildered Southerners of *Gone with the Wind*: racism and impossible wishes for a perfect past that never actually existed. Without a transformation of the social energies true solutions remain elusive, and we should be wary of any text that calls upon them without transforming them.

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