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TITLE:

**Scarlett and Sethe: Ruled
by Race Ruled by Gender:
An Examination of the
"Unredeemable Woman" in
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American Literature**

DATE: May 29, 1994

***Scarlett and Sethe: Ruled by Race Ruled by Gender:
An Examination of the "Unredeemable Woman"
in Twentieth-Century American Literature***

by

Darcy E. Howe

A Thesis

Presented to the Graduate Committee

of Lehigh University

in Candidacy for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in

English

Lehigh University

1994

This thesis is accepted and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

Apr. 15, 1994
Date

~~Thesis Advisor~~

~~Chairperson of Department~~

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my gratitude to Dr. Elizabeth Fifer for her extremely valuable advice during the formative days of this thesis, her editorial assistance throughout the writing process, her overall patience and guidance without which this thesis would not have been written, and her continuing encouragement during my career at Lehigh University.

I am profoundly grateful to my father, David R. Howe, for his support and calming effect. I thank Jeffrey A. Baylor for being my second pair of eyes with which to see, and Dr. James R. Frakes for helping me.

And I thank my comrades for propping me up when I was ready to surrender.

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Abstract

Most people would think there could be no two characters in American literature further apart than the pampered, willful Scarlett O'Hara from Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind* and the enslaved, brutalized Sethe from Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. However, these two intrinsically Southern, intrinsically Ante- and post-Bellum characters have in common that they are ruled by the stringent, soul-killing white male codes that control every aspect of their lives, whether sexual, social, or political.

Both novels create the past out of the pieces that survive that shattered past. Both are tales of escape, bypassing history to create history. Both explore the meaning of crime, guilt, and innocence, and their impact on women specifically--both "continue the serious work of beating back the past that is compelling and terrible".

Each is an open-ended novel. Nothing is completely solved. The possibility in each is that of a final healing. But this simplistic view ignores the complex issues and questions that lie within the very (limited) natures of Sethe and Scarlett. The men who interact with these heroines are no less limited; but are the men unsympathetic? Evil? Is there the familiar paradox of the unredeemable woman (because of her actions) and the ordinary man (whose actions do not matter, because he is a man)?

In both, there is a reluctance to dwell on the slave era (of 300 years), the expendable generations of slaves and poor immigrants. Each dwells, instead, upon the personal, hopelessly intertwined with the historical, experiences of some slaves, some few women, who make it through scenes of absolute horror.

Both novels propound the idea of part of the human race as the "Other". The "Other" can be another gender, another race, another social class, but the "Other" is unknowable; and can only be discovered by the unwilling exploration of degradation of oneself. This exploration can take place only by exploring the meaning of time, memory, and "how to remember" the past; that enslaved, enslaving past that either destroys or preserves life and history.

Introduction

Introduction

"The past is not dead. It isn't even past." - William Faulkner

Maya Angelou once wrote,

"There is a much-loved region in the American fantasy where pale white women float eternally under black magnolia trees, and white men with soft hands brush wisps of wisteria from the creamy shoulders of their lady loves. Harmonious black music drifts like perfume through this precious air, and nothing of a threatening nature intrudes" (Angelou 516-7).

This pretty picture is from the same American dream factory that insists that all Robin Hoods are handsome with perfect teeth, all heroines are beautiful and worth saving, and all cowboys are the good guys. This picture exists only twice in Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With The Wind*, once on the first page, second paragraph, and once in a tricky recollection near the end of the book; and the picture does not exist at all in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. Yet these two books, with their anger, hatred, and almost constant violence, present pictures of the Old South that are far too powerful for any dreams to be made of.

Beloved and *Gone With The Wind* are narratives that risk alienating a large portion of society--both are cautious and angry by turns, careful in the selection of past moments and the rendering of those moments. Both Mitchell and Morrison wrote these novels as "correctives" to right the wrong and

explain the real story--rememorying the "true past," recovering what really had happened--to journey to the remains/ruins and reconstruct the interior lives of the people who did not write--and they both are inventing the truth.

Both novels create the past out of the pieces that survive the shattered past. Both are tales of running away, of escape, bypassing history to create history. Both explore the meaning of crime, guilt, and redemption, and their impact on women specifically: both continue the serious work of beating back the past that is compelling and terrible.

Gone With The Wind and *Beloved* are historical novels, but are they true to "the facts," and if so, which facts? How detached are the narrators? Who really tells these women's stories? Can Sethe and Scarlett ever tell their full stories to anyone? Are these melodramas or fictional history with authentic footnotes chosen to back up these "true facts," assuming we'd all go along with premonitions and hauntings?

In both, there is a reluctance to dwell on the slave era of 300 years in the South, and the expendable generations of slaves and poor immigrants, used as buffers to prevent the possibility of class and gender war. Each dwells, instead, upon the personal, hopelessly intertwined with the historical experiences, not of slavery but of some

slaves, not of woman but of **some few** women: those who manage to survive scenes of absolute horror, and what they do to make it through--Scarlett suffering and working harder than any slave or any man, Sethe running and nearly dying, with no lasting sympathy or understanding freely given to either during or after their pain.

Morrison says, "There's a special kind of domestic perception that has its own violence in the writings by black women--not bloody violence, but violence nonetheless. Love in the Western notion is full of possession, distortion, and corruption. It's a slaughter without the blood" (Butler-Evans 9). She evidently believes that white women writers don't see the violence present in domestic life. Mitchell did--she modeled Rhett Butler after Red Upshaw, her first husband, who beat her to ensure his connubial rights (Pierpont 99).

Of course, Morrison presents the reader with a much more complex narrative strategy, a deep exploration into "forgotten" history, and a Lacanian entry into language through the exploration of the "black voices" from pages 198-217 (Butler-Evans 5); while Mitchell works with the broad strokes of D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (*The Clansman*). Still, Mitchell is also retelling the "history" put forth by Woodrow Wilson in *History of the American People*, that also asserts "negro" animalike behavior and the rape of white women during Reconstruction. While Morrison

propounds whites as "alien and hostile Others" (Butler-Evans 24), Mitchell propounds Yankees, not blacks, as "Others." Too, while Morrison symbolically "..construct(s)..a community in which the desires of Black women are seldom realized and often frustrated" (Butler-Evans 61), Mitchell reveals the terrible unnaturalness forced upon the archetypal Southern belle. Both writers take up the issue of "whose vision of the world is finally more meaningful, ours or the ... oppressors? What is truth? Or more precisely, whose truth shall we express, that of the oppressed or of the oppressors?" (Butler-Evans 28).

Chapter One:

The Monomyth of the Unforgiven Woman

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The Monomyth of the Unforgiven Woman

Most people would think there could be no two characters in American literature further apart than the pampered, willful Scarlett O'Hara and the enslaved, brutalized Sethe. However, these two intrinsically Southern, intrinsically ante-/post-bellum characters have in common that they are ruled by the stringent, soul-killing, contradictory white male codes that control every aspect of their lives, whether sexual, social, or political. Each novel explores the deterioration and despair of the woman who has overstepped the boundaries of her civilization--that each, in trying to destroy the monster created by the Southern white male code, becomes a monster--a monomyth of the unforgiven woman. Although written about Morrison's *Sula*, the following holds true for Scarlett and Sethe as well: "In spite of their attitude toward Sula, the community does not expel her. Rather, it uses her, in spite of herself, for its own sake, as a pariah, as a means of reaffirming their oneness as community" (Butler-Evans 62). Each is driven to kill and willing to kill for her beliefs--simplistic rather than complex in her reaction to ultimate stress. The environments that determine their reactions--Sethe in slavery, Scarlett in absolute poverty and starvation--are the contexts for their "mad" behavior. In

addition, Sethe is deliberately degraded physically by her white master, the Schoolteacher, and his nephews, who observe and record her every response (Morrison 193-5, 198); and Scarlett is deliberately degraded morally by Rhett Butler, who measures and observes her every response (Mitchell 150-1, 180, 193-5, 269-70). The men allow these women to know why they are degrading them, and the women are never allowed to respond to or reject their degradation.

These books are also about language--Scarlett's incomprehension of words spoken to her and words binding her to perpetual burdens and promises, and Sethe's cursings and comfortings--and how each novel responds to its time and its contemporary sensitivity, and how this colors our view of each character. Who speaks for Scarlett? Who for Sethe? We may, in our time, wish to rely on "fully documented material" about the past of the South, but how are our beliefs measured with regard to such "color"-related, troubling issues?

Both novels propound the idea of part of the human race as the "Other." The "Other" can be another gender, another race, another social class, but the "Other" is unknowable, and can only be discovered by the willing exploration of the meaning of the degradation of oneself even when owned by a "man of humanity" or pursued mercilessly by a murderous realist. This discovery can only take place by exploring the meaning of time, memory, and "how to rememory" the past-

-that enslaved, enslaving past that either destroys or preserves life and memory.

Each is an open-ended novel. Nothing is completely solved. The possibility in each is of a final healing, even though the overwhelming historical "truths" revealed through the novels threaten to destroy romantic love. But this simplistic view ignores the complex issues and questions that lie within the very (limited) natures of Sethe and Scarlett. The men who interact with these women are no less limited; but are the men unsympathetic? Evil? Rhett Butler deliberately conducts a moral seduction of Scarlett, in order to acquire her sexually and own her as--his words--"a child" or pet (828); Stamp Paid deliberately seeks out Paul D to inform him that Sethe is a murderer, fully knowing that this will spoil Sethe's and Paul D's happiness with one another, signifying that Sethe is still unforgiven for her sin (154-158).

The bigger question arises: Can evil be redemptive and good enslaving? If Sethe had been "good", that is, passive, she and all her children would have been dragged back to slavery. But Sethe sacrificed her baby, the baby she had suffered and longed for and nearly died for in the wilderness, and saves her three other children and herself from further degradation at the hands of Schoolteacher (251). It is plain to see that Stamp Paid would have sympathized with Sethe if she had cut her own throat in

sacrifice, rather than her baby's (164). But her "evil" act, while insuring Sethe and the three other children's freedom, holds Sethe accountable for Baby Suggs' death, the ghost that curses #124, and Sethe and Denver's isolation from the community (170-173).

Scarlett and Sethe "unsex" themselves because they find that "compassion, softness, and love" will only get them and their families killed. Both "eradicate 'feminine' traits, replacing them with hardness, self-denial (not self-sacrifice)... it creates a bond different from love, an instrument for a 'higher' good, a transcendent goal: power over their families and themselves. Further, each rejects her mother "and with them, the 'female' world" (French 15).

Scarlett deliberately murders a Yankee to save her family and Tara (349), steals her sister's fiance, and runs a successful business (502-3)--this last is her most unforgivable sin. Thus, in acting to save herself and her family from starvation, she is called a whore, threatened with rape, and cast out of society (596, 629, 635, 692-3, 700-1). In opposition, Rhett Butler murders a black and a Yankee because of mere words (497) and deserts Scarlett, and Paul D lives like an animal and deserts Sethe (164-5, 187, 219), and Stamp Paid rejects his wife because his young white master raped her (232-3); and none of these men are held accountable for their actions. Is there the familiar paradox of the unredeemable woman (because of her

re/actions) and the ordinary man (whose actions are not judged, **because** he is a man)? These men rationalize the sexual abuse of the women they purportedly love in order to reinforce male dominance in a world where the social codes change constantly to appease the oppressor and injure the oppressed.

With the appearance of Beloved, Paul D begins to leave Sethe, by moving out and having sex with Beloved, and degrading Sethe when he learns that she has murdered her baby. Sethe's community of women finally decide to confront her--realizing the depth of damage she has done to her absent sons and aberrant daughters--and herself (255-257). However, goaded by Beloved (who is a "Kleinian baby" of destructiveness and hate, whose fantasies are rooted in greed, malevolence and envy, and who covets not only the love Sethe deprived her of, but Sethe's own body as well, who misses the "good" breast that held Sethe's milk and who wants to punish and possess Sethe entirely, (Jones 410-2), Sethe is saved from murdering again by her daughter and the community of women (262).

When Scarlett lets go of her fictional past with Ashley, she is condemned by her community of women for what she has already given up, as well as for her neglect of her children, which is abetted by her husband, Rhett, because he can only reintegrate himself and the children by degrading Scarlett further (722-3, 727-9, 791). Scarlett keeps

repeating the same unsatisfying patterns of action, remaining emotionally trapped in the "grey mist" that threatens to consume her (in the classic Sullivan mode, Scarlett keeps searching for satisfaction and security, but never finds either, so her interrelationships are mutually unsatisfactory and insecure) and so keeps allowing others to damage her (Jones 412-3). Each of these women and their families had appeared to be self-sufficient, but sons are alienated, daughters killed, and family images taken over by death.

Each novel also contains mythic homes--Sweet Home, which, in spite of its physical beauty, spawned degradation, madness and torture; #124, imbued with Baby Suggs' memories and the ghost of Sethe's past (183); Tara, which supports the O'Hara's with its rich blood-red soil, and Atlanta, ugly, brash, and cruel. These mythic homes bestow identities and relationships. Sethe has a husband named Halle, one of the Sweet Home men, who is noble and self-sacrificing--too noble and sacrificing. Halle has spent years working on his own time to pay for the freedom of his mother, Baby Suggs. Halle is kind and gentle to Sethe. However, Halle is not strong enough to either bear Sethe's degradation or to take his revenge on those who tormented her. Instead, Halle goes insane witnessing Sethe's degradation and thus deserts her when she needs him most (69, 225). Likewise, Ashley's dreams are consumed in the

fire that destroys Twelve Oaks and ties him onto Scarlett's pursestrings. Noble though Ashley appears to be, he never takes up any of the burdens Scarlett suffers--in fact, he adds himself and his family to those burdens (418-26). Neither of these impractical dreamers can cope with the pain of real life.

In contrast, Paul D has suffered pain and isolation through criminality, prison, and working for both the Northern and Southern armies (106-13, 268). In spite of his human frailties/experiences, he has continued on his quest for an authentic human experience. Paul D has experienced death and rebirth in an underground cell, but that has not destroyed all hope for his future. At first he brutally rejects Sethe, calling her an animal after Stamp Paid tells him her murderous history, and hides in a church cellar and drinks, but finally he does return to Sethe and refuses to let her die. He will cleanse Sethe anew; he will stop her disintegration, the disintegration of herself as the woman who can re-member men, and perhaps plan for a future instead of accepting passivity and death (270-3). However, Rhett rejects Scarlett entirely, not giving her the empathy he demands for himself--he is also a murderer, a user, a man who has worked for the North and the South for his own profit, who has rejected all he has learned, and so Scarlett must return to what she loves--Tara--to cleanse and nurture herself (776, 832-3).

Each novel fastens upon the matrilineal line of both women--of all women--as being invulnerable to time, even as the male line is too easily impaired or killed--though this primal relationship is lost; all women are "submerged in false roles" in the midst of the "commonality of feminine experience" (Vertreace 80). Vertreace notes what Scarlett and Sethe cannot learn:

"If the mother-daughter dyad exists to provide a haven..it also seeks to safeguard the past, which the mother knows and the daughter needs for survival. When that transmission is broken, through the mother's death or separation, the daughter is left to discover for herself the secrets of the past. Regardless of when the break occurs, it is always untimely; there always remain secrets left to tell and learn" (83).

The link with the severed/dead mother and the history lost between all mothers and daughters is the most important link within each character--the cycle of mother/daughter, abandonment, and realization/rebirth is the continuing cycle of internal emotion and meaning, codes that Scarlett and Sethe must permit themselves to understand and remember so that they can free themselves of the crippling past and allow themselves to plan a future free from fear. However, Ellen dies without remembering her husband or children, only crying out for her dead love, Phillip; and Mammy loses all hope of reconciliation with the past after Scarlett's daughter, Bonnie Blue, dies; Mrs. Garner cannot even speak to Sethe to offer help or sympathy

after Sethe's assault and before Sethe runs because she is dying of cancer; even Baby Suggs, the black community's healer, refuses to remember the past or focus on the future after she witnesses Sethe killing her granddaughter--she can only focus on "colors" because colors don't have the power to hurt her family line further. Scarlett can only do this by falling out of love with Ashley and living through her nightmare (820-2)--Sethe can only do it by accepting Beloved and changing her past by attacking a white man, challenging all of the ghosts of memory (257-61)--and the layers of understanding for both can finally be unveiled, by surrendering completely to the past. Freedom from the past, and hope, can be found.

However, both women are cultural orphans. Sethe knows no female rituals at Sweet Home, and her only confidante there is the sickly, helpless Mrs. Garner, herself a woman without a daughter (59, 159-61). The female rituals that Scarlett has learned are all useless in regard to the sex act, childbirth, or survival (352-3, 431-2). Each has only the barest participation in their communities of women--Sethe is nurtured by Amy the white runaway slave, who rubs her feet, tends her wounds, names the "chokecherry" tree on Sethe's back (giving Sethe back a portion of bodily beauty) delivers her baby, and, frightened, runs away

(79-85). After the murder, Sethe is shunned by the women of her community. Scarlett delivers Melanie's baby in almost total ignorance (290-3), dislikes bearing her own children, is also shunned by the women in her community for running a business (791), and loses the only women she has ever loved--her mother and Melanie (321, 812-3).

Scarlett and Sethe are trapped in their culture's stages of transition, and each culture gives them only the illusion of support after their struggles, only to punish them for defining their realities without conforming to the hidden social code. Neither woman knows that only when she can understand what is happening to her family will she know what is right or wrong--and no one tells them what is happening. Both women are isolated in their places in the family line--Sethe is the only child her mother did not kill (62) and Scarlett is her parents' oldest child, taking the place/persona of the son after her parents' sons all die (45-7).

For each, childbirth and flight are journeys from death to life--the flight from Sweet Home and overwhelming physical pain, the flight from Atlanta and overwhelming terror, and the absolute misery both experience at discovering that all their pain has been for nothing, that all their plans are destroyed by

white men who invade the places that both have fought so desperately to reach--#124 and Tara. Both are runaways, and keep running even after they've achieved their material goals, running from intimacy and dependence.

While each woman commits murder to preserve herself and her family, each finds that act holds them hostage to the past, accountable and guilty and isolated from community and love, as if the "possession of killing" another deliberately has stopped their own spiritual growth, but each must face the ultimate purpose and promise of their "sin", to find forgiveness and the return of "the self." Sethe killed for freedom; Scarlett killed for Tara. Scarlett is also held accountable for the murder of her second husband, Frank Kennedy, because of her "unwomanly action" in running a business alone. Although Frank's involvement with the Ku Klux Klan leads to his death, it is seen as Scarlett's fault--she resisted male demands to subordinate herself in order to "protect the family" (Intro 18). All the blood is on these women's hands. Neither Scarlett nor Sethe can earn forgiveness; they must rise above it, dive beneath it; only then can they live with their memories and really believe in the possibility of love. Scarlett and Sethe must realize the ambiguities of the human soul that transform race

and gender. They must discover for themselves what history has omitted.

Scarlett's screaming nightmares of being forever lost in grey mist (684-5) and Sethe's fear of her bodily disintegration (34, 272) are brought about by their lack of security--Scarlett and Sethe share the horror of "men without skin" (211)--the terror of the body disintegrating. Sethe has been part of the chain of women enslaved with no respect for their bodies, raped, physically tortured, and left detached, with a "tree" of scars on her back (17); Scarlett has worked in an Army hospital, assisting in amputations performed without anesthesia (238), her skirts soaked in blood, wiping up shattered brains (253-4, 262), and has survived the hell of escaping the Yankee forces, saving Tara by beating out Yankee flames, disregarding the fact that her back catches on fire (371-2). However, both are "dismembered," lost, cut off, because of their survivalist actions; they are not "remembered"/reintegrated by their communities of women. This sets up another paradox--the woman practicing violent sacrifice in order to save her family being cut off from the community by her own ruthless, although successful, actions. This paradox belies the crucial theme of culture, language, and women, and how severing the mother-daughter link taints them.

Past memories must be re-membered, recreated by present memory and history--when past memories hurt so much they have to be forgotten, because remembering horrors of such magnitude can cause despair so profound that pleasure cannot occur and there can be no solutions. All future pleasure is wiped out by such a tortured past. Scarlett has nightmares and never experiences happiness (376, 718, 785). Sethe lives in a colorless home, alone with Denver and the ghost that recalls her past sin (3-13). Both must discover that they cannot pursue the future without remembering the past, because that denies individual and collective responsibility. Sethe has never planned for the future after the crime that punctuates her "28 days of freedom" (173). Scarlett has never had the freedom to make the "moral choice," and her existence focuses only on the immediate stopgap measures that punctuate her impulsive, unhappy life (388, 430-2).

Both women are separated from their mothers; both forget what their mothers tried to teach them; and both are separated from their children--Scarlett's two oldest children fear her more than they love her (767); Sethe's two oldest run away, driven away by the ghost and their fear of their mother (3, 206). Scarlett loses her most longed-for baby in a miscarriage brought on by Rhett's abuse (767-72); Sethe murders her beloved

baby in a moment of anguish, trying to escape further abuse. Scarlett's Bonnie Blue is Rhett's child, and her death is accompanied by Rhett's ghoulish refusal to surrender the body and his oath to murder Scarlett (797-9); Sethe's Denver leaps on her mother in order to prevent Sethe from murdering Bodwin, and leaves her mother in order to work and to court, free from the ghost of the past. Only one child is important to each--the one who dies. And each concerns herself sexually with the material symbol of her family rather than her physical family--Sethe with the engraver so he will chip "Beloved" on the child's tombstone (5), Scarlett with Frank and Rhett so that Tara can prop up her family.

Sethe has reclaimed herself when she reaches Baby Suggs, is cleansed and is integrated into the community, celebrated with a feast--before Schoolteacher's appearance sends her into absolute despair and murder. She is never able to hope again. Scarlett reclaims herself by reclaiming Tara, and so reintegrates her community--before the second appearance of the Yankees sends her into despair. Sethe's murder of her child and Scarlett's murder of morality--both making people into things--pollutes each woman's family and community, which react with outrage and the perpetual memory of what sins each woman has

committed, in order to keep each of them down and unable to rejoin. Each community is outraged by its woman's lack of repentance, but each community, because of envy, had failed them by not warning them ahead of time of the danger. Their communities believe that each woman's struggle for love is even more profane than murder, and their communities try to stop them from achieving love by casting them out as perpetual sinners, isolating them physically and morally.

Scarlett and Sethe try to make their lives work with no ties at all, no real love at all--no love of men, and no affection towards their children, that they can allow themselves to admit. It all hearkens back to the severed mother-daughter relations--"those recollections woven with painful abandonment"(60).

Sethe does remember she had a link with her mother--the mark--that she wanted to have for her own--but was denied then and is ashamed of now (61). Scarlett's bond with her mother--"ladylike behavior"--is broken during the war, as Scarlett realizes that none of her early training is any good faced with starvation and murder--so Scarlett is no longer a "lady" after the war--not her "mother's daughter" (342-4, 740-1).

Each woman experiences being cast out of her community for appearing unrepentant for her "mad" actions, while each also sees their men, who have

resorted to similarly desperate actions, being redeemed into the community. Each has been imprisoned by the labels others fasten on them: lover, wife, widow, mother, whore, murderer, bitch. Each is manipulated by males in her community without regard to race. Each suffers poverty and the self-hatred that makes it nearly impossible to remember her past. And, finally, each is promised a future by the ghosts of all her ancestors lost to time and memory--Scarlett by the hordes of Irish murdered by the English (332-3), Sethe by the millions of slaves murdered by slave traders and owners (214-7). Only through this realization of their own place in these companies of the past can these two very different women finally place themselves in the present, and move on.

Chapter Two
Natural Angels and Unnatural Demons

Chapter Two

Natural Angels and Unnatural Demons

The first three chapters of *Gone With The Wind* mention two non-fatal shootings, seven vicious threats, two trappings by a wild horse, ten references to drunken violence and recklessness, two murders, two references to the "code of dueling" as well as four episodes of random violence recalled as part of the "normal" white aristocratic Southern life--and there are 59 chapters to go. Mitchell is setting up a world wherein violence is expected, and not only that--she sets up powerful rivalries and hatreds--Gerald O'Hara is a hard-drinking, reckless "bogtrotter" who fled Ireland after killing an English landlord.

Mitchell's choice to create Gerald O'Hara as an angry Irishman who had to flee to the New World and then make his fortune is a remarkable one, especially in light of the Southern code of slavery, for if Gerald had not been able to escape Ireland, he would have experienced the slavery of transportation. The Act of 1597, declaring that "rogues" must be transported to work the plantations of Virginia and the West Indies, ensured that many Irishmen who resisted the invasion of the Lord Protector were removed from their homeland and sold for seven to fourteen years to the white

aristocrats in the Americas (indeed, Amy the white girl in *Beloved* is just such a slave). Of course, since the black slave trade was increasing at that time (47,000 African slaves per year were sent to the Americas in the late 1700's), rebellious Irish were sent, along with British petty criminals, to Australia, where they were enslaved by the British government to labor for British fortunes (Hughes 41). The Irish were "oppressed with special vigilance and unusually harsh punishments"; they were considered by the British to be "a rude and ignorant people," "wild and lawless," more like animals than men (Hughes 180-4). At this time, Irish Catholics (like Gerald O'Hara) had no legal rights--they could not vote, teach, hold army commission, sit in the Irish Parliament, sit as judge or jury in trials, will or inherit land, protest through words written or spoken, benefit economically from their own labor, engage in free trade, or join political groups--much as African slaves were disbarred from legal rights in the Americas (182-183). At or about the time Gerald O'Hara would have fled to America, all Ireland was under British martial law; the Irish were hated for their "unnatural" ties to their kin and clan, despised by the British as "tribal people..depraved..designing and treacherous" (352).

Too, transportation of Irish political prisoners

and African slaves was chillingly similar. Prisoners were transported on slave ships used on the "Middle Passage"--their legs were bolted at the ankles, allowing them no movement; they were sluiced with sea water, "crusted with salt, shit, and vomit, festering with scurvy and boils," chained "two and two together," and scarcely fed or watered. One convict told of the amazing lengths he and his fellows would go for extra food--"(W)hen any of our comrades that were chained to us died, we kept it a secret as long as we could for the smell of the dead body, in order to get their allowance of provision" (145). This is a direct link to the horrors that the enslaved African woman experienced on the "Middle Passage" in *Beloved* (210-3); being chained to a dead man, immobilized, starving, sick, dying.

The British treated the Irish appallingly during transportation--one captain sentenced 32 Irish political prisoners to a total of 7,900 lashes, killing six of them. One prisoner was sentenced to 800 lashes--it took him several days to die. The captain also cropped an Irishwoman's hair, lashed her face and neck, and double-ironed her. The ship's surgeon "cowered in his cabin, listening to the whistling lash and the screams of the Irish" (149).

Many readers of *Beloved* are appalled by the

details of Sethe's whipping and Paul D's torture and imprisonment. The flesh of Sethe's back is torn by the whipping Schoolteacher's nephews give her (79, 202); Paul D is gagged with a metal bit (the same kind that stretched Sethe's mother's mouth into a permanent mirthless grin), put into wrist and leg irons, and sentenced to a chain gang--locked into a small box each night, sexually degraded, and forced into utter silence (106-9). This is what Gerald O'Hara would have been subjected to in Australia. Sentences of 200 lashes with the cat o' nine tails were usual. One prisoner had been lashed so often that his back was "quite bare of flesh, and his (collar) bones were exposed looking very much like two Ivory (polished) horns. It was with some difficulty (they) could find another place to flog him" (Hughes 115). As one jailer commented at the time, "One of the favorite punishments was to make the leg irons more small each month so they would pinch the flesh" (Ibid. 115). Other punishments suffered, especially by the Irish, were the "dumb cell," a completely dark and soundless isolation chamber, and the "water pit", filled waist-high with water so a prisoner could not sleep. These relate directly to the small box Paul D is locked in each night in the prison camp in Georgia. Again, another punishment suffered by Paul D was also suffered by the Irish prisoners--the

gag; this operated exactly as Morrison says, with the addition of a small tube that rendered breathing difficult (Hughes 535). Other punishments included chaining prisoners upside down, to iron frames, or in the fetal position. These punishments were dealt out for smiling, singing, and insolence, as well as "mutinous behavior" (480).

Too, female prisoners, especially, suffered under the British transportation system, as Sethe does under slavery and Scarlett under white male misogyny, simply because of their gender and the way they were perceived by white male authority figures. Women were believed to have gone too far in crime (even political crime) to ever be redeemed under the system, "inviting contempt rather than pity from (their) social superiors, rape rather than help from men" (Hughes 245), just as Sethe is sexually assaulted, whipped, and maltreated by white men and black (because she has gone too far--in telling Mrs. Garner of her assault, in running away after being whipped, in murdering her child so that her children will not be enslaved), and Scarlett is assaulted, raped by Rhett, and degraded (because she has gone too far--in running a business, in not acting like a lady). Women were seen as angels or demons at that time, and these are also the only choices offered to the women in *Gone With The Wind* and to Sethe.

Ellen O'Hara married Gerald at the age of 15 (the same age Sethe is when she "marries" Halle), not loving him, incapable of loving him, because the cousin she loved was murdered in a barroom brawl. Ellen is described as being a perfect lady (unlike her wild, half-civilized, half-Irish daughter Scarlett), "chained to duty" (Mitchell 46). Ellen is a "perfect lady" because while she is incapable of love, she is very capable of long days sewing, watching and training her slaves, tending to the budget and the books, raising her daughters, and coddling her husband, who never notices her voluntary sacrifices, her hours of real physical labor on his behalf in making Tara run smoothly and economically. Indeed, Mitchell makes much of the sacrifices expected of a "good" lady--knowing that

"It was a man's world. The man owned the property, and the woman managed it. The man took the credit for the management, and the woman praised his cleverness. The man roared like a bull when a splinter was in his finger, and the woman muffled the moans of childbirth, lest she disturb him. Men were rude and outspoken, women were always kind, gracious, and forgiving" (46-47).

She teaches Scarlett how to live in this social prison: how to walk pigeon-toed so that her hoop skirts sway, how to bat her eyelashes, and how to conceal a talent for mathematics, so that Scarlett won't scare away beaux (47-8). It is Scarlett's peculiar problem that

Ellen was not able to teach her how to be stupid. Ellen is an angel, because of her constant self-sacrifice. Scarlett is demonized because she refuses to sacrifice herself--her sharp intelligence--to the needs of others, particularly the men in her life.

Sethe is seen as an angel when, at fifteen, she arrives at Sweet Home and is allowed to choose a mate for herself among the male slaves. Paul D, even through his torture and travelling years, retains this image of Sethe as a pretty, obedient, and shy girl (164). When he learns of her desperate act of murder, he demonizes her, calls her an animal--just as the town has for years (165). Of course, part of Sethe's peculiar problem is that, even though she was kept apart from her mother, and thus did not learn how to be a mother, she has "inherited" her mother's anger at enslavement. Sethe is told that she is the only baby her mother allowed to live. For Sethe, then, it would be unnatural if she could not find the power within herself to kill her baby rather than allow it to be enslaved as she was.

In *Gone With The Wind*, Mitchell sets up hard differences not only between Scarlett and "ladies", but also between class, race, and gender. The Slaterrys are poor white trash, stained by illegitimacy, and conscious of being looked down upon by the local black

slaves--Jeem and Mammy both hate poor whites because of the whites' poverty--shown by their wearing ragged clothes and eating possum at dinner (14-7, 30-1, 39). The slaves have their own hierarchy, from houseslave to craftsman to field hand (46) and their own interrelations and family structures that parallel their white owners. The Tarletons produce a couple of drunks every generation, the Fontaines breed murderously angry young men, the Wilkes impractical dreamers. These roles are expected and accepted. Scarlett, however, from the very beginning, exceeds her role as a young lady--she is too vigorous as a baby, likes to run and play with slave children and boys, and is often treated as a "replacement" boy--"masculine" in intelligence and activity--for the O'Hara sons who died at birth (46-8). Sethe also exceeds the boundaries allotted a young black female slave--she is allowed to choose her mate, she is intelligent enough to realize what Schoolteacher's measuring of her means, she registers a (futile) protest after being sexually assaulted, she finds the strength to escape even though beaten, bleeding, and pregnant, she allows herself to trust a white girl (enough in itself to turn many of the blacks in her town against her), she kills her baby rather than let it be enslaved. Sethe's problem, as seen by the other blacks in her society, is pride

(256); pride in her escape that results in the envy-provoking feast, pride in her aloneness at #124, pride which shouldn't be the property of an escaped female murdering slave.

Women in Scarlett's world are trained to be unnatural, as Mitchell says: "There was no one to tell Scarlett that her own personality, frighteningly vital though it was, was more attractive than any masquerade..for at no time, before or since, had so low a premium been placed on feminine naturalness" (64), so that the Southern white male ideal of the Southern lady would never be shaken. Scarlett is trained to "conceal from men a sharp intelligence beneath a face as sweet and bland as a baby's" (47); never to betray she knows more about some matters than men, to cover up her obstinacy (the same obstinacy that makes it possible for Scarlett to flee Atlanta and help her family to survive), and to hide her natural talent for business (in which she does not succeed, and is therefore vilified). In Sethe's world, there are no "natural" women--slave women come, by definition, from broken families, lose their men, lose their children--and so Sethe's stubborn desire to save all her children and keep her family together (even her desire to be really "married" to Halle) is seen as unnatural and as the cause for the trouble that falls on #124 and, by

extension, the black community.

Scarlett's appetite for food, pleasure, and life is immense, but she is always imprisoned by the dictates of her society, and literally by the stays that compress her waist to as little as 17 inches. These stays keep her breathless--ladylike--through all the events of her life, before, during, and after the war. These stays, that must be laced tightly every day, and leave red welts on her body when taken off at night, are as much a part of Scarlett as are the rules of the society she lives in--even when reduced to utter poverty, Scarlett plows the land of Tara while wearing stays that bite into her. Denied marriage with Ashley, she marries Melanie's brother and is widowed within a month, condemned to the dim memory of her husband's face, and three years of wearing unrelieved black, with a black veil reaching to her knees, never to laugh or smile again. This Southern tradition of widowhood is worse than that of wifhood--wives are at least allowed to wear grey and lilac. Sethe, too, is condemned by her society to isolation and sorrow--she is blamed not only for the murder of her baby, but also for Halle's presumed death, Baby Suggs' despair and death, her sons' running away, and her daughter Denver's fear. Sethe lives in a colorless world because her society deprives her of the choice to redeem her life with

them.

Scarlett is sixteen when the war begins. Widowed and an unwilling mother already, dressed in the black mourning that the strictures of white Southern culture force her to don, she works in the hospital in Atlanta, picking maggots out of festering flesh, assisting at amputations performed without anesthesia. As the war drags on, she, too, undergoes the siege of Atlanta, with its chronic food and clothing shortages, duels with Rhett Butler, who assaults her psychologically to twist her nature in order to satisfy his appetites, boards wounded men in her house, learns that almost all her childhood beaux are killed, delivers Melanie's baby alone, persuades Rhett to help herself, Melanie, the baby, and Prissy escape the burning of Atlanta, is abandoned by him on a road thick with Yankee troops, and, due to her obstinacy and perseverance, gets home to Tara. Here she finds her mother dead, her father hopelessly insane, her sisters useless and sick with typhoid, and her family--including slaves--without food. All these burdens fall on her shoulders, and she is sustained only by a nighttime vision of her Irish ancestors, who had fought and died for their land in Ireland.

In the days to come, Scarlett gathers yams and apples for food--the only food the Yankees didn't take,

nurses her sisters and Melanie, splits kindling, plows, picks cotton, milks a cow, murders a Yankee (rapist) deserter, fends off the further depredations of more Yankee troops, fights a fire at Tara when her back catches on fire, and fights nature itself to keep her family together. She can feel herself changing--a hard core forming around her heart--and it helps her "to forget her own bitterness that everything her mother had told her about life was wrong" (343)--that the collapse of her civilization renders her early training useless. The only thing that hasn't changed is her inherited desire to keep Tara--to keep her own land--because that's what her Irish forebearers would do. Scarlett deliberately forgets the past because her future belongs only to Tara.

Sethe also restricts her own memory so that she can survive. Owned by Garner, a "man of humanity," she is privileged over most slaves and allowed to choose Halle, a sensitive man, as her mate. Life at Sweet Home, while filled with work, was at least tolerable. Halle gives Sethe great caring, Mrs. Garner gives her crystal earrings, and the other male slaves respect her. However, with Garner's death and Schoolteacher's arrival, all the rules of Sethe's world change. Far from treating the slaves as humans, Schoolteacher whips them for exercising choice, withdraws Halle's ability

to work on his own, and measures the slaves in order to categorize their human and animal traits. After the slaves make their plans to escape, Sethe is assaulted and then whipped--Schoolteacher measuring her every response (as Rhett does to Scarlett in his psychological assault on her). Sethe escapes, and survives giving birth with almost superhuman perseverance and strength attended only by an ignorant white girl. Sethe's sufferings and wounds are great, but she makes it to #124--and is followed by Schoolteacher and forced to commit her "mad" act by an impulse she has inherited from her mother, who would suffer any pain to fight enslavement, even killing the babies she had by white men.

In these two works there is the problem of interrelational identity, the series of assumed masks and power positions the main characters undergo, as well as the question of the image/meaning of what a "woman" is. Scarlett begins her story inside her society, as Rhett, by his immorality and violence, begins outside. By story's end, their positions are reversed: Rhett, though a known privateer, profiteer, and murderer, is allowed inside the circle of Southern society, in great part because of the negative roles in which he casts Scarlett to the public, and Scarlett is thus forever beyond her society's circle of women

because--and only because--she no longer acts like a "lady." Worse, she publicizes the inefficiency and unnaturalness of "ladylike behavior"; she should be raped (shown her proper place) for this--but her husband Frank, a member of the Ku Klux Klan, dies in a shoot-out--which is also all her fault. Everything negative can be attributed to Scarlett, though she is the sole support of her extended family, because she is not "her mother's daughter." Scarlett's sin is pragmatism; she has no natural desire to submit to the rules of her society, and is therefore naturally removed from it, so that she cannot taint others. Scarlett disapproves of the Klan on the grounds that the Klan disrupts her business; she also regards the people around her--black and white--only in terms of their own usefulness and ingenuity, which guarantees that she'll be shunned by those worried about the shift of racial power even though it is her energies and her practicality that provide the food on her extended families' tables, her brusqueness and sharp tongue alienate those who wish that Scarlett would be a lady, even as they realize that they would go hungry if she did. She becomes unloveable, because she does not show her love to her family and her submission to men as a woman should. Her return to Tara is significant--her "motherland," Ireland, instilled in her children the

desire to own property, land, soil, because their own land was stolen from them. At Tara, therefore, Scarlett can be both mother to her extended family and daughter of her father's land, without being at the mercy of those who value superficiality over security.

Sethe's problem is that she was never "her mother's daughter," and, therefore, is an unnatural mother. Never learning in her youth about the proper ways of women, wives, and mothers, she finds the audacity within herself to survive sexual assault, proclaim it to her voiceless/helpless "mother," Mrs. Gardner, withstand a whipping, escape without the aid of her husband or any man, gain the aid of a white woman, and attain her goal of freedom for herself and her children. These feats, which many would find admirable, become suspicious after Sethe murders her child. After all, all slave women were subject to sexual abuse--why did she cause such a ruckus about it? In fact, it must have been Sethe's fault her husband, Halle, lost his mind. For a man to see his wife raped is more painful for him than the actual act of rape is her. And how did a whipped, exhausted, pregnant woman survive the perilous trip? How did she entice a white woman to help her, rather than turn her in? All these triumphs of Sethe's will to be free, and have her children free, show, instead, the awful stupid

stubbornness of an unnatural woman. No wonder that she murdered her child rather than allow it to be enslaved --measured--raped--whipped. Sethe's sin is pride, and her desire for complete freedom over her body and those of her family offends those who do not have her single-minded drive. Yes, her crime--murder--is unspeakable, but it is a tragic necessity, made all the worse by the only society available shunning her and her children. Her society's anger at Sethe's and Baby Sugg's pride ensured disaster. Sethe met that disaster in an unwomanly, unnatural manner. While her independent act gave her and her family freedom, it also marked her as deeply as the whip--she becomes unloveable, because she has not submitted passively to a black woman's fate. In order to regain her place in society, and some measure of love, Sethe must return to her past, and her mother's past, even to the motherland in Africa, to ask for love and forgiveness, even if the victim of her pride cannot grant this. It is her offering of her life to the ghost of her past, and her act of aggression toward a white man, rather than her child, that returns her to her society of women. The women now can see that Sethe has dislodged herself from her place as Mother in order to empower her child, and they must correct this displacement. They may now act to save Sethe from herself.

Conclusion

Dis/Empowerment and De/Feminization: Woman and Text

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What Scarlett and Sethe have in common is that they are both brought up to expect that their early lessons will carry them through their lives--that the simple methods of pleasing others, such as obedience, shyness, and prettiness, will guarantee their safety. All that is destroyed by the collapse of the old ways of living, and the imposition of the new, cruel ways to which they don't know how to respond. So, each deliberately turns her back on the past ways of behaving (because she must) and commits a desperate act to gain a freedom she could not have imagined before. In the end, Southern men have betrayed these women, but each attacks a Northern man (the Yankee soldier, the old Abolitionist)--the agent of their futures--in order to begin their new way of life and learning.

The male characters in *Gone With The Wind* and *Beloved* are reflections of the experiences of the female characters. The dis/empowerment and de/feminization of Scarlett and Sethe are direct acts against male violence and manipulation. Neither woman is perceived as a hero (always excepting Melanie's belief in Scarlett) and that is why these works have been rejected even as they've been accepted into the

mainstream of American literature. These women work against the accepted cultural mores of girl/wife /widow/mother--and this pattern is not only deplored by the other characters in the books, but by "serious" arbiters of American culture, who insist that Morrison is too tough, Mitchell too sentimental, Sethe too violent, Scarlett too amoral. These are works about people in transition--that most uncomfortable of places to be--and about women who define their reality without conformity.

Although *Beloved* won the 1988 Pulitzer prize, and Morrison the Nobel; although *Gone With The Wind* has sold millions of copies and was made into one of the most influential films of the American cinema, both are still viewed as "outside" works done by writers "outside" the canon. Scarlett would understand: for all her virtues, she is perpetually "outside"; for all his faults, Rhett is forever "inside" the heroic mold. Both books are accused of being books about women who do things natural women wouldn't do, as if only books with proper romance and happy endings reflect preferred reality.

What also keeps these particular meditations on history from being fully accepted--*Gone With the Wind* is racist, it glorifies the Old South, Scarlett is a bitch; *Beloved* is just another Black woman's book about

how they can't depend on men, it's anti-white, it covers a part of history with which we are uncomfortable--is that they suggest, in their primary romantic relationships, that it may be possible to escape from a power relationship, from sex entwined "naturally" with violence. Initially, Rhett seems the perfect partner for Scarlett--he makes sex fun, he allows her her head in business, he adores her children--but his desire to master her and make her love him causes him to hate, rape, and abandon her.

Likewise, Paul D seems to be comfortable in his relationship with Sethe--he awakens sexual desire within her, fights her poltergeist for her, and takes her to a fair. However, his discovery that she is no longer the idealized doe-eyed submissive girl from Sweet Home, and his discomfort in sharing a life with any woman, causes him to move out of her bed, make love to her (dead) daughter, insult her, and abandon her. These men, black and white, rationalize the sexual abuse of the women by claiming they need male supremacy in their primary relationships, as the larger society has previously denied them supremacy in their public dealings. The contingencies and possibilities for a free exchange of respect and affection between the primary (and secondary) pairs in these books are cut off, cut off as completely as Sethe's scarred flesh is

from feeling a healing touch.

There is the possibility in *Beloved* that Paul D will return Sethe to her woman's self by giving her unconditional love and tenderness and forgiving her completely. However, even Morrison does not explore this part of unwritten history--this possibility of full human emancipation. This is the possibility of total redemption, of "loving the enemy"; and when has that ever happened?

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END

OF

TITLE