

MARGARET MITCHELL and "GONE WITH THE WIND"

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Margaret Mitchell needs no introduction to this group. As to her, I shall indulge myself in only a few personal words.

I have known Margaret Mitchell about 25 years, and those of you who know her will immediately calculate that I have known her since she was a small child. When I moved into my home on Peachtree Street some twenty-five years ago, her father and family lived just a block further down the street. They were among the earliest friends my wife and I made after we came to Atlanta in 1907.

Margaret and my daughters were friends and playmates. She was frequently at my home.

Her intellectual quickness, her capacity for saying bright things and odd things, her aptness in the use of words and phrases, were quite noticeable in her as a young girl.

She used to visit my daughter Frances and they would go to Frances's room to talk.

My wife would always go to the sitting room just across the hall and sit with the doors and her ears open. Margaret insists that Mrs. Powell was chaperoning Frances to see that she (Margaret) did not use language unfitted to the ears of a jeune femme bien elevee. Mrs. Powell says that Margaret is mistaken; that she just sat to listen because Margaret talked so interestingly.

Neither Mrs. Powell nor I was surprised when it was announced that Margaret had produced a novel. We got it and read it promptly upon publication. We were surprised that anyone could write so great a novel, but we both agreed that Margaret could have done it, if anybody could have written it. The marvelously successful sale which followed surprised neither of us. In fact, so sure were we that it was a "hit" that we bought several copies--about a dozen in all, I think--and sent to friends and relatives.

Margaret Mitchell as a Great Artist

I promised Margaret that if she would honor us with her presence this evening, I would attempt to analyze her book from a standpoint which, so far as I know, has not received the notice of any other reviewer.

It would be possible to treat this remarkable novel from many points of view--from the standpoint of the praise and popularity it achieved almost immediately; or from the standpoint of the immense labor bestowed upon it by the author; from the standpoint of the reader's interest, which she catches with the first paragraph and holds throughout more than a thousand pages, to an end that leaves the reader crying inwardly for more. I shall deal with none of these.

Her remarkable accuracy as to every detail is almost universally spoken of by those who know. I have read and reread her book, to see if I could catch an anachronism or a factual solecism. She is pressed for time in the little more than eleven years the story covers to get Scarlett married, have a son born, and have her first husband die, mourn his death, marry again, have a daughter born, have her second husband die, mourn him a year or so, marry the third time and have a daughter of this marriage die more than four years old; but I think she accomplishes it without palpable neglect of the time element.

I wish to speak of the book as a masterpiece of art; not using the word "art" in any general sense, but in the specific sense in which it is applied to great esthetic creations such as sculpture, painting, architecture or poetry.

I use the word "art" even in a more specific sense than I would if I intended to speak merely of the artistry, that is to say, of the taste and especially the skill displayed throughout the book. Such artistry is displayed when Browning makes some simple work so expend in meaning that it conveys the normal thought of ten. Or when Robert Frost, more by the form in which the words are arranged than by the simple content of the words themselves, gives vividness to his poems. (Read his "Little Norman Colt" with this in

mind and note that the mental picture you get is not by any means contained in the words alone).

Good prose, as well as good poetry, may be enhanced in style when the author is skillful enough to use the very form of the diction to give to the description of something over-tones of vividness beyond the natural meaning of the words that have been used to carry the thought.

There are many instances of artistry of this sort throughout Gone With the Wind. Think on Chapter xvii in which she describes the retreat of the Southern army from Dalton to Atlanta. With inimitable sleight of style, she makes you see things and feel things no simple narrative, however replete with descriptive nouns, verbs, and adjectives, could make you see and feel. All the inexorableness of Sherman's drive, all the skill but hopelessness and helplessness of Johnston's slowly yielding retreat are there in a way that words without artistry of arrangement could never depict. She knows how to throw swiftness into her diction or to hold back the telling of something to let a thought sink in or to let the desired mental picture form; and this is art; but not the art I have in mind.

There is artistry in the opening and the closing of the book. She begins: "Scarlett O'Hara was not beautiful, but men seldom realized it when caught by her charm." Interest is immediately stimulated. The fade-out with which it ends "Tomorrow is another day" is a classic. It rivals the art with which Marfield in the Music Master utters a sigh and give the meaningful gesture to create the climax for the fall of the curtain.

She attains a distinctly artistic effect by the introduction of the singing of "Lorena" -- a senseless song if we look only to the words of it, but carrying within the words certain overtones of melancholy romanticism, which, when enhanced by the minor chords

of the music, produced a harmony of abstract beauty capable of stirring strong emotions in the hearts of all Southerners. The way she uses the melancholy strain of "My Old Kentucky Home," "Just a few more days for to tote the weary load," from time to time is quite effective.

I do not know anything else in literature anywhere that excels in vividness her description of the fall of Atlanta and Scarlett's flight. It is essentially melodramatic yet it is so written that the impression is that of actuality and not of melodrama. Compare it with Hugo's description of the Battle of Waterloo, or Wallace's description of the chariot race in Ben Hur. It excels these and anything else I have ever read.

I could point out other instances of artistry, but I put these to one side.

Now, having subordinated so much real art and artistry on the promise of revealing a truer and greater art, I am embarrassed by the lack of vocabulary to express my thoughts. But if even Tennyson could lament, "Oh that my tongue could utter that thoughts that arise in me," a fortiori I may be excused for having a thought that I can but poorly express. I shall have to go about it awkwardly and describe it by illustration and in a roundabout way instead of saying directly what it is.

Generally stated it is this: There is a coordination between the characters which she has created and the historic setting of the book such as exists in the grand opera between the theme and the music, between the action on the stage and the strains of the violins, the cry of the horns, and the beating of drums and cymbals in the orchestra. The spirit with which she endows the lives and actions of her artistic creations, Scarlett O'Hara, Rhett Butler and others, is but a romantic incarnation of the spirit of the times, of the war and the reconstruction, indeed of the whole historic background that she uses.



An opera, as a whole, is greater, as a work of art, than the sum of its parts. It is more than a libretto, plus the singers and the singing, plus the symphonis concert of the orchestra; plus the stage and the scenery. It is the harmonious attunement of all these things into an artistic whole; the proper distribution of the harmony to secure the prominence of the leading parts, and the balance of tone; and the appropriateness of the timbra, of the sentiment, and other things I do not know enought about to mention, or even name.

In the field of esthstics, it is the height of art to create music, characters and theme which so mutually support one another as that a perfect harmony results.

Margaret Mitchell took the romantic Old South for stage setting, the conflict and t turbulence of the 11 years from 1861 to 1872, of War and Reconstruction, as an orchestra and created a group of major heroes and heroines and other characters, the conflicts and turbulence in whose natures and experience perfectly harmonize with the stage-setting and the orchestra. In other words, she has created Scarlett O'Hara, Rhett Butler, Ashley Wilkes, etc., with such innate natures and put them through such experiences as that there is perfect attunement between them and the times and background which she used as a historic setting. There are Old South, War and Reconstruaction in these characters. There is an attunement of all these things into a harmonious whole; and the whole is greater than the sum of the parts.

Many novels have been written with the scene and action laid in this same era; but insofar as I know, no other novel has achieved the orchestration Margaret Mitchell has achieved as between her characters and the historic action of the times in which the scenes are set.

Gone With the Wind is an opera in prose with every character, every action and every detail of the background developed methodically along so that each illustrates and supports the other in the sense that the accompanying music embodies the theme and supports the voice and the singers.

"Why did Margaret Mitchell end the book in the middle of things as she did?" I have been asked this question time and again. I would reply that since History called a halt to the orchestra that she could not allow the caste on the stage to continue to act, without detraction from the theme and artistic effect of the work. Of course a Lady or the Tiger ending is interesting, but I do not think Margaret chose it in mere imitation of Trowbridge.

"Tomorrow is another day," said Scarlett as the curtain fell. That morrow was the morrow that heard and heeded the conciliatory speeches of Ben Hill and Henry Grady. It was the morrow of the New South. It was the morrow of the birth of the "Spirit of Atlanta." It was the morrow that took the phenix as the emblem on its coat of arms and as its motto the word "Resurgens."

When asked whether Margaret would likely write a sequel to let the readers know whether Scarlett and Rhett ever became united, I have replied that no sequel is necessary to answer that question; that if the historic background were projected to support a sequel, the element of reconciliation and the growth of a new spirit in the background would, for sake of harmony, necessarily require such a reconciliation and growth of new spirit in the principal characters.

But Rhett and Scarlett could not, it seems to me, be the principal characters in the sequel. The spirit incarnated into them is that spirit which it was the purpose and the attainment of the New Era to overcome. It would be necessary to create new characters for the caste.