Scarlett O’Hara: A True Southern Belle?

One of America’s most beloved war stories and love tragedies comes to life on screen as a carefully crafted work of semiotics. *Gone with the Wind* portrays a main character filled with the spirit of the antebellum South; the spirit of loyalty and independence, and the charisma and guts of the not-so-typical southern belle. Scarlett O’Hara was born and bred to be a proper southern lady during the 1800s. To her dismay, the Civil War comes along to destroy her perfect world of barbeques and balls. Throughout the movie, Scarlett transforms from a charming young girl to an independent and feminist woman. Her choice of elegant and flaunting gowns along with her flirty eyes and independent actions reflect this shift in personality.

Scarlett’s true self is hidden deeply under layers of taffeta and locked up with an unbearable corset. Her appearance gives way to the beautiful southern belle she is. In the opening scene on her front porch with the Tarleton twins, Scarlett is wearing a modest frilly gown that reflects her charm and youthful innocence. She is seated on the porch steps with the twins on either side of her waiting to cater to any need she may have. Scarlett’s eyes and gestures provide suggestions that she is not the perfect lady. She teases the twins and obviously flirts with them. She acts youthful and ignorant when she states that there will be no war. Scarlett begins to go inside and is escorted by the twins on either side, with each of them pleading for a dance at the Wilkes’ barbeque the following day. She is quite aware that she is able to have any beau of the country wrapped around her finger.

The South has always had a way of following traditions, and during the seventeenth century, breaking any sort of social norm was unheard of. Scarlett, however, refuses to conform to the standards. A barbeque was being held at Twelve Oak one afternoon, and Scarlett was not about to wear a dreadful dress that did not mirror her fiery personality. She is worried about her
appearance, yet she does not want to follow the social standards. In an article by Paula Farca published in *Southern Studies*, she writes that Scarlett “feels the need to counteract this code with an affirmation of individualism” (77). Throughout the barbeque, Scarlett continues to break the “code.” This “code” is unwritten but well known by proper southerners. Men are meant to be gentleman and practice chivalry, while women are called to be submissive and run a household. All the other women have perfect etiquette and Scarlett “gives orders to the gentlemen around her, shows jealousy when they look at other girls, does not take a nap in the afternoon, and pursues the man she desires” (78). This shows that Scarlett is not afraid of what the other women think of her. She is confident in herself and her decisions. She, again, is breaking the unwritten social code of southern women. Women were supposed to be pursued by men and let the men give the orders, but Scarlett is not the typical woman of that time period.

When comparing two of the major women characters, Scarlett and Melanie, their levels of happiness are on opposite ends of the spectrum. Melanie is happily married with a child, and she is loved by all of the other women. The movie shows that “women’s happiness depends on their freedom, strength, public success, marriage, and motherhood (74),” but Scarlett struggles to find her happiness in each of these things. She is unhappy in each of her marriages and continually runs for her dream beau, Ashley Wilkes. Her freedom is limited by society, but she dismisses several cultural standards of the South. Farca rightly states: “Scarlett is not a good candidate for the position of southern lady because conventional society criticizes her free-spirited behavior, energy, and rebelliousness- qualities (75).” Scarlett is an independent woman and will not accept being bossed around. Her feministic views are obvious when she decides to take over her husband’s mill and begin running it herself. Even before that, Scarlett saves Tara by scrounging up money and planting the fields again. Her sisters are mortified when they begin
working in the fields and getting callused hands. Scarlett “proves men’s equal or stronger partner, friend, and wife” when she takes on these roles of hard work and independence (81). As Farca wrote, Scarlett is not a good representation of the southern lady. She is criticized for being an independent woman, hated for chasing after other men, and frowned upon for saving what she loved most; Tara.

Scarlett wants to use southern rules, but only on her own terms. This shows how independent she is and how much she longs to be in constant control of everything. She notices Rhett Butler’s lack of southern chivalry and criticizes him for that. Rhett encourages Scarlett and her headstrong ways. At the benefit ball, Scarlett is supposed to be in mourning, but she dreads wearing black dresses and not being allowed to dance. When Scarlett decides to dance with Rhett, he says, “Now you are beginning to think for yourself instead of letting others think of you. That’s the beginning of wisdom.” Rhett can be compared to the male version of Scarlett. He continually dismisses cultural standards. Rhett is a wealthy southern man, but unlike other wealthy southern gentlemen, Rhett does not think the South will win the war, and he does not enlist. He voices his opinion and does not care what others think. At the Wilkes’ barbeque, Rhett is talking with a group of gentlemen in the parlor about the war and states that it is likely the South will not win the war because “all we have is cotton…and slaves…and arrogance.” His statement is offending to the men yet true. Rhett supports Scarlett’s independence, but it concerns him when it interferes with his image. He does not want there “to be any doubt in anybody’s mind about who wears the pants in the Butler family.” This shows that Rhett does not want Scarlett to be too independent and higher than him. When Scarlett and Rhett are walking Bonnie, their child, down the street, Rhett is the one pushing the stroller and speaking to the
women as they pass by. These small actions help to show that Rhett is in control and Scarlett is submissive, supposedly, to him.

Scarlett is the perfect image of feminism in the seventeenth century. Despite the fact that she is a fictional character, there were definitely women like her during that time. She was fed southern manners with a spoon and tried to put on a façade to receive approval from her mother and darling Ashley. From the opening scene at Tara to the closing scene in the fog, Scarlett transforms from a flirty young girl to a woman willing to take on any challenge a man can handle. This is seen through her coquettish to independent actions and her choice of clothing. She does not fall into the pattern that southern culture teaches most women. Scarlett is an icon of independence for young women wishing to step outside of the boundaries set by society.