William Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily" and Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind*: The Heroines' Obsession with the Old South

Shinsuke Ohchi

Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* (1936) is the most widely read literary work set in the Southern United States. It was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1937, and its sales reached approximately 1.5 million in just the first year after its publication, making it the fastest-selling book in American publishing history (Jacobe 112). Still read all over the world, the book has sold over 28 million copies. Its film adaptation won Academy Awards in ten categories and still holds the world record for audience attendance (Haskell 5–6).

This paper examines the heroine's obsession with the Old South in *Gone with the Wind*—the world's best-known work of Southern literature—in comparison with William Faulkner's story "A Rose for Emily" (1930). This story is often said to be one of the major works of Faulkner, an outstanding writer of Southern literature. Similar to *Gone with the Wind*, this work was published in the 1930s, and it also has, as its heroine, a descendant of a Southern aristocratic family who suffers tremendous misfortune as a result of the Civil War.

First, let us examine the Old South, that is, the society of the Southern United States during the antebellum period. The Old South's major distinguishing characteristic was its system of black slavery. The Southern society had major problems related to race, class, and gender. Even though the United States as a whole was based on the values of liberty and equality, the South was home to black slaves and the white aristocracy who exploited them. To legitimize black slavery, Southern whites not only found approval in the Bible for the practice but also insisted that they were protecting the "stupid, lazy" black population as a man takes care of his wife and children

(Wilson 106, 203).[1] This paternalistic attitude made patriarchy extremely strong in the South. However, the Old South was exposed to dramatic changes through the abolition of slavery associated with its defeat in the Civil War. I see *Gone with the Wind* and "A Rose for Emily" as deeply reflecting the social issues faced by the Old South.

Now, let us look at these issues as reflected in "A Rose for Emily." As seen in the depictions of her below, Emily Grierson—the eponymous heroine of "A Rose for Emily"—is a ruined aristocrat. "[Emily's house] was a big, squarish frame house that had once been white, . . . set on what had once been our most select street. But garages and cotton gins had encroached and obliterated even the august names of that neighborhood; only Miss Emily's house was left, lifting its stubborn and coquettish decay above the cotton wagons and the gasoline pumps: an eyesore among eyesores" (119). "When her [Emily's] father died, it got about that the house was all that was left to her" (123). The inhabitants of the town of Jefferson are shocked when Emily falls in love with Homer Barron, a Northerner. Emily, however, trying to continue her life as an aristocrat after the end of the Civil War (Brooks and Warren 409–14), is so caught up in the patriarchy that governed the Old South that, overly fixated on father figures, she becomes obsessed with Homer, who resembles her father. While at first glance, Homer and Emily's father appear to be completely different with nothing in common, we need to look at the qualities that made them similar.

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[1] *Gone with the Wind* repeatedly depicts Southern whites characterizing African Americans as "stupid," "lazy," and "like children." "How stupid negroes were! They never thought of anything unless they were told" (390). "Negroes were provoking sometimes and stupid and lazy. . . . 'Always remember, dear,' Ellen had said, 'you are responsible for the moral as well as the physical welfare of the darkies God has intrusted to your care. You must realize that they are like children and must be guarded from themselves like children, and you must always set them a good example'" (447). "The mottled wise old eyes saw deeply, saw clearly, with the directness of the savage and the child, undeterred by conscience when danger threatened her pet" (561). "The more I see of emancipation the more criminal I think it is. It's just ruined the darkies. Thousands of them aren't working at all and the ones we can get to work at the mill are so lazy and shiftless they aren't worth having" (597). "There they conducted themselves as creatures of small intelligence might naturally be expected to do. Like monkeys or small children turned loose among treasured objects whose value is beyond their comprehension, they ran wild—either from perverse pleasure in destruction or simply because of their ignorance" (611). "But they were, as a class, childlike in mentality, easily led and from long habit accustomed to taking orders" (611). "[Northerners] did not know that negroes had to be handled gently, as though they were children, directed, praised, petted, scolded" (629).

While Irving Malin points out that Homer resembles Emily's father in that Emily loves both as dead men too (37), the two men are also similar in life in certain aspects. As Jack Scherting notes (401), both of them have macho images and they are both depicted as carrying whips.[2]

> People in our town, remembering how old lady Wyatt, her great-aunt, had gone completely crazy at last, believed that the Griersons held themselves a little too high for what they really were. None of the young men were quite good enough for Miss Emily and such. We had long thought of them as a tableau, Miss Emily a slender figure in white in the background, her father a spraddled silhouette in the foreground, his back to her and clutching a horsewhip, the two of them framed by the back-flung front door. . . . We remembered all the young men her father had driven away. . . . (123–24)
>
> [Emily and Homer] passed on Sunday afternoon in the glittering buggy, Miss Emily with her head high and Homer Barron with his hat cocked and a cigar in his teeth, reins and whip in a yellow glove. (126)

A second important point of commonality between Emily's father and Homer is that neither of them viewed Emily's marriage as a question of importance. As seen in the quotation above, Emily's father placed more stress on the social standing of the Grierson family than on Emily's marriage. The following passage exemplifies Homer's lack of desire to marry Emily: "When she [Emily] had first begun to be seen with Homer Barron, we had said, 'She will marry him.' Then we said, 'She will persuade him yet,' because Homer himself had remarked—he liked men, and it was known that he drank with the younger men in the Elks' Club—that he was not a marrying man" (126). A third important point of similarity between Emily's father and Homer is that neither of them is capable of marrying Emily. It goes without saying that Emily's marriage to her father would violate the taboo on incest, and there was a social taboo against a Southern aristocrat such as Emily forming a deep relationship with Homer—"Of course a Grierson would not think seriously of a Northerner, a day laborer" (124), as the people in Jefferson put it.

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[2] The whip is also a phallic symbol (de Vries 498).

We thus see that for Emily, her father and Homer are similar. Trying to carry on life as aristocrat after the Civil War, Emily—caught up in the patriarchy that governed the Old South—overly fixates on father figures and yearns after Homer, who resembles her father; however, certainly, her love is bound to be fruitless ("Barron" is a homophone for "barren"). Just as she refuses to part with her father's corpse, she has no recourse but to keep Homer's body at her side. Emily is ultimately a victim of patriarchy.

While both Emily from "A Rose for Emily" and Scarlett O'Hara, the heroine of *Gone with the Wind*, are descendants of Southern aristocratic lines, they appear at first to be diametrically opposite characters. Scarlett, unlike Emily, is depicted as a fully independent character who manipulates the men around her (Davis 162). Moreover, as Howard Harper states (309), she acts as she does to avoid going down the same road as her mother Ellen and her sister-in-law Melanie Wilkes, who are both great believers in patriarchy. However, Scarlett—like Emily—is so caught up in patriarchy that she maintains an empty pursuit of a father-like figure. I shall explain this point further below since it has not yet been noted.

First, let us examine the following passage: "[Scarlett] was his [Gerald's] oldest child and, now that Gerald knew there would be no more sons to follow the three who lay in the family burying ground, he had drifted into a habit of treating her in a man-to-man manner which she found most pleasant" (49). As we see here, in the absence of sons, Gerald, the head of the O'Hara family, treats his eldest daughter Scarlett as his son and heir. And, as we shall see below, Scarlett attempts to protect and preserve the plantation of Tara just as a son and heir would do.

> When she looked at Tara she could understand, in part, why wars were fought. . . . <u>These were the only things worth fighting for, the red earth which was theirs and would be their sons', the red earth which would bear cotton for their sons and their sons' sons.</u>
>
> The trampled acres of Tara were all that was left to her, now that Mother and Ashley were gone, now that Gerald was senile from shock, and money and darkies and security and position had vanished overnight. As from another world she remembered a conversation with her father about the land and wondered how she could have been so young, so

> ignorant, as not to understand what he meant when he said that the land was the one thing in the world worth fighting for.
>
> "For 'tis the only thing in the world that lasts . . . and to anyone with a drop of Irish blood in them the land they live on is like their mother. . . . 'Tis the only thing worth working for, fighting for, dying for."
>
> Yes, Tara was worth fighting for, and she accepted simply and without question the fight. No one was going to get Tara away from her. . . . She would hold Tara, if she had to break the back of every person on it. (413–14; The underline is mine.)

Scarlett is thus inordinately caught up in the Old Southern plantation of Tara and in the patriarchy that underpinned it. As a result, she gets obsessed with Ashley Wilkes, a character who strongly resembles her own "father" image.[3] Although, as Gerald says, "Our people and the Wilkes are different" (53), Ashley and Gerald, who at a glance would appear to be different, in fact have many things in common.

First, as we see in the following passages, both Gerald and Ashley are exceptionally skilled horsemen: "Filled with her own anxieties, she [Scarlett] nevertheless watched him with affectionate pride, for Gerald was an excellent horseman" (48) and "[Ashley] was the best rider in the County" (39). Moreover, just as Gerald is depicted in the passage, "Beneath his choleric exterior Gerald O'Hara had the tenderest of hearts. He could not bear to see a slave pouting under a reprimand, no matter how well deserved, or hear a kitten mewing or a child crying" (49), so Ashley is depicted as an extremely gentle character, to the point of being unable to bear seeing the vulnerable being abused. He is so exceptionally tender-hearted that he cannot bear to witness the mistreatment of the prisoners working at Scarlett's factory and refuses to make use of them despite the huge profits to be made in doing so. Furthermore, as evidenced in the quotation below, both Gerald and Ashley share the same opinion about marriage, which they discuss with Scarlett: "I [Gerald] want my girl to be happy and you wouldn't be happy with him. . . . Only when like marries like can there be any happiness" (53); "Love isn't enough to make a successful

[3] While there are some passages in which Scarlett appears to be obsessed with her mother Ellen rather than her father Gerald, Ellen herself acts in submission to Gerald.

marriage when two people are as different as we [Ashley and Scarlett] are. . . . Can't I make you see that a marriage can't go on in any sort of peace unless the two people are alike?" (129). In addition, because the Wilkes family members have the "habit" (105) of marrying their cousins, Ashley—who is already set to marry his cousin Melanie—is unable to marry Scarlett in the same way that her father Gerald is unable.[4] In fact, Scarlett's feelings for Ashley are all the more passionate precisely because he is unavailable, as we see in the following passage: "Night after night, when Scarlett went to bed after sitting on the front porch in the semi-darkness with him, she tossed restlessly for hours and comforted herself only with the thought that the very next time he saw her he certainly would propose. But the next time came and went, and the result was nothing—nothing except that the fever possessing her rose higher and hotter" (46).

Even though Ashley marries Melanie and has a child with her, and Scarlett marries a number of other men and has multiple children, she continues to long for Ashley:

> She belonged to Ashley, forever and ever. She had never belonged to Charles or Frank, could never really belong to Rhett. Every part of her, almost everything she had ever done, striven after, attained, belonged to Ashley, were done because she loved him. Ashley and Tara, she belonged to them. The smiles, the laughter, the kisses she had given Charles and Frank were Ashley's, even though he had never claimed them, would never claim them. Somewhere deep in her was the desire to keep herself for him, although she knew he would never take her. (775)

[4] Scarlett fell in love with Ashley two years before his marriage to Melanie (45), but for a number of years before this, she had been aware that she could not marry him. This is borne out by the following quotations from the Tarleton brothers and Mrs. Tarleton. "But Scarlett must have known he was going to marry Miss Melly sometime. Why, we've known it for years. The Wilkes and Hamiltons always marry their own cousins. Everybody knew he'd probably marry her some day, just like Honey Wilkes is going to marry Miss Melly's brother, Charles" (34). "Everybody's known for years that Ashley would marry her [Melanie Hamilton], that is, if he didn't marry one of his Burr cousins from Macon. Just like Honey Wilkes is going to marry Melanie's brother, Charles" (103).

Scarlett is obsessed with Ashley, who, like her father, is a "fine" (670, 859) member of the Southern aristocracy and also 'a man she cannot marry.' Due to this, when the way is clear for her to marry Ashley after Melanie has died while asking Scarlett to take care of him, which Scarlet had dreamed about for years, Scarlett suddenly changes her mind and starts to pursue Rhett Butler, who had been trying to find a way out of his marriage to Scarlett.

For Scarlett, at this point, the character who has come to resemble her father Gerald cannot be Ashley, who is now eligible, but rather Rhett, who is increasingly inclined to separate from her. Gerald and Rhett have many other points in common apart from the fact that Scarlett cannot marry either of them. Both of them are unconventional members of the Southern aristocracy and each of them—along with "his bounding assurance, his impudence and his restless vitality" (415)—has made a fortune through his outstanding skills in poker. Like her father, Rhett frequently comforts Scarlett and helps her out. Moreover, Rhett's conception of marriage, summed up in the phrase "[There] can't ever be happiness except when like mates like" (870), is exactly the same as Gerald's.

If I forecast the plot of *Gone with the Wind* beyond the end of the book, I can imagine Scarlett continuing to pursue Rhett if he makes no attempt to achieve a reconciliation with her and pursuing another man if Rhett is to make the attempt. In other words, Scarlett is not an independent woman, manipulating men at her will; in fact, she is in thrall to patriarchy just as the heroine of "A Rose for Emily" is, inordinately attached to and dependent on men (the father figure). She is engaged in a vain pursuit of the paternalistic society of the Old South, which is in no way any longer attainable. I would like to discuss this point in further detail below.

During the Civil War, Gerald "lost his mind" (402) due to the shock of the Union attack and the death of his wife Ellen, leaving him effectively dead: "The mainspring of his [Gerald's] existence was taken away when she [Ellen] died and with it had gone his bounding assurance, his impudence and his restless vitality. Ellen was the audience before which the blustering drama of Gerald O'Hara had been played. Now the curtain had been rung down forever, the footlights dimmed and the audience suddenly vanished, while the stunned old actor remained on his empty stage, waiting for his cues" (415); "Father [Gerald] is—is—he's not himself. He's been queer ever since Mother died and he can'

help me any" (545); "Mr. O'Hara was still 'not himself at all. . . .'" (558); "When Mrs. O'Hara died, his [Gerald's] heart died too and he was licked. And what we seen walking 'round here warn't him" (664). With the abolition of slavery, patriarchy in the Old South, which had underpinned the system of African-American slavery, lost its raison d'être (Wilson 106, 203). Southern paternal authority was also forfeited by its failure to protect women and children during the Civil War, and Gerald's actual death can be said to symbolize the collapse of patriarchy of the Old South.

On the other hand, Scarlett—characterized by Grandma Fontaine as a "practical" person (669)—does not seem to be obsessed with the lost Old South at first glance:

> When she arose at last and saw again the black ruins of Twelve Oaks, her head was raised high and something that was youth and beauty and potential tenderness had gone out of her face forever. What was past was past. Those who were dead were dead. The lazy luxury of the old days was gone, never to return. And, as Scarlett settled the heavy basket across her arm, she had settled her own mind and her own life.
>
> There was no going back and she was going forward.
>
> Throughout the South for fifty years there would be bitter-eyed women who looked backward, to dead times, to dead men, evoking memories that hurt and were futile, bearing poverty with bitter pride because they had those memories. But Scarlett was never to look back.
>
> She gazed at the blackened stones and, for the last time, she saw Twelve Oaks rise before her eyes as it had once stood, rich and proud, symbol of a race and a way of living. (407–08)

However, directly after this passage, she is depicted immediately harking back to the Old South; "the quarters" in the quotation below refers to the dwellings of the African-American slaves (Brown 157):

> Sometimes, in the days of backbreaking work, in the desperate struggle for food and the never-ceasing care of the three sick girls, Scarlett found herself straining her ears for familiar sounds—the shrill laughter of the pickaninnies in the quarters, the creaking of wagons home from the fields,

> the thunder of Gerald's stallion tearing across the pasture, the crunching of carriage wheels on the drive and the gay voices of neighbors dropping in for an afternoon of gossip." (408)

Thereafter, Scarlett repeatedly immerses herself in nostalgia for the Old South: "As the girls drove back to Tara, Scarlett was silent for a while, thinking of what she had seen in the various homes, remembering against her will the County in its glory, with visitors at all the big houses and money plentiful, negroes crowding the quarters and the well-tended fields glorious with cotton" (467–68); "Oh, lazy days and warm still country twilights! The high soft laughter from the quarters! The golden warmth life had then and the comforting knowledge of what all tomorrows would bring!" (856); "Suddenly she wanted Mammy [her former slave] desperately, as she had wanted her when she was a little girl, wanted the broad bosom on which to lay her head, the gnarled black hand on her hair. Mammy, the last link with the old days" (959).

Moreover, as Thomas Leitch has stated, for Scarlett, Ashley—the object of her passionate affections—is a symbol of the Old South (131). In the quotation, "That was Southern chivalry. A gentleman always obeyed the rules and said the correct things and made life easier for a lady" (187), we see that the society of the Old South was based on the chivalrous spirit connected with the patriarchy, and Scarlett repeatedly likens Ashley to a "knight": "He was still a young girl's dream of the Perfect Knight and her dream asked no more than acknowledgment of his love, went no further than hopes of a kiss" (215); "The bright new sheen of the gray coat was sadly at variance with the worn and patched butternut trousers and the scarred boots, but if he had been clothed in silver armor he could not have looked more the shining knight to her" (266); "She stood back and viewed him with pride, thinking that even Jeb Stuart with his flaunting sash and plume could not look so dashing as her cavalier" (267). In addition, as the following passage suggests, what Scarlett loves is not Ashley per se but rather the Old South based on the "chivalric spirit," which he personifies:

> "He never really existed at all, except in my imagination," she thought wearily. "I loved something I made up, something that's just as dead as Melly [Melanie] is. I made a pretty suit of clothes and fell in love with it.

> And when Ashley came riding along, so handsome, so different, I put that suit on him and made him wear it whether it fitted him or not. And I wouldn't see what he really was. I kept on loving the pretty clothes—and not him at all."
>
> Now she could look back down the long years and see herself in green flowered dimity, standing in the sunshine at Tara, thrilled by the young horseman with his blond hair shining like a silver helmet. (940; The underline is mine.)

At the end of the novel, Scarlett pursues Rhett instead of Ashley, the symbol of the Old South. At first glance, far from symbolizing the Old South, Rhett would appear to be, if anything, an antagonist to its traditions and values. While this is indeed the case in the earlier stages of the novel, as Leslie A. Fiedler states (59–70), in the same way as that Scarlett returns to Tara, Rhett ultimately tries to revert to the traditional world of his hometown, Charleston:

> ". . . I'm forty-five—the age when a man begins to value some of the things he's thrown away so lightly in youth, the clannishness of families, honor and security, roots that go deep. . . . I want the outer semblance of the things I used to know, the utter boredom of respectability—other people's respectability, my pet, not my own—the calm dignity life can have when it's lived by gentle folks, the genial grace of days that are gone. When I lived those days I didn't realize the slow charm of them—"
>
> Again Scarlett was back in the windy orchard of Tara and there was the same look in Rhett's eyes that had been in Ashley's eyes that day. Ashley's words were as clear in her ears as though he and not Rhett were speaking. Fragments of words came back to her and she quoted parrot-like: "A glamor to it—a perfection, a symmetry like Grecian art."
>
> Rhett said sharply: "Why did you say that? That's what I meant."
>
> "It was something that—that Ashley said once, about the old days." (956–57)

Thus, it seems as if the character of Rhett, now thoroughly immersed in nostalgia for the Old South, has morphed into that of Ashley, who symbolizes

that Old South. *Gone with the Wind* closes with the words of a Scarlett in pursuit of this version of Rhett: "I'll think of it all tomorrow, at Tara. I can stand it then. Tomorrow, I'll think of some way to get him [Rhett] back." (959).

Similar to *Gone with the Wind*, "A Rose for Emily" takes a character in thrall to the patriarchy of the Old South as its heroine. We have Faulkner's word for it that the short story depicts this patriarchy in a critical light. When asked, "What is the meaning of the title 'A Rose for Emily'?," Faulkner answered, "Oh, it's simply the poor woman had had no life at all. Her father had kept her more or less locked up and then she had a lover who was about to quit her, she had to murder him. It was just 'A Rose for Emily'—that's all" (*Faulkner in the University* 87–88). This critical perspective is also clarified in the final summing-up of Emily and Homer's relationship: "Then we knew that this was to be expected too; as if that quality of her [Emily's] father which had thwarted her woman's life so many times had been too virulent and too furious to die" (127). On the other hand, as I have discussed above, *Gone with the Wind* is a work brimming throughout with nostalgia for the Old South. According to John M. Grammer, Mitchell believed that she was writing a criticism of the mythology of plantation life (59), and while she was justified to a certain extent in thinking so, one must inevitably conclude that *Gone with the Wind* ultimately paints the Old South in a positive light.

Finally, let us also discuss these works by Faulkner and Mitchell from the perspective of race. In *Gone with the Wind*—a novel overflowing with nostalgia for the Old South—Mitchell legitimizes discrimination against African Americans (certainly, lynching also); however, the more she attempted to

glorify the South, the more her attention was directed to its inhumanity.[5] I think that this dilemma was the reason for Mitchell being unable to write another book after *Gone with the Wind*. Faulkner, on the other hand, was to intensify his criticism of the Southern society after the publication of "A Rose for Emily." For example, the lynching of African Americans is negatively depicted in works such as "Dry September" (1931) and *Light in August* (1932); furthermore, a series of subsequent works, such as *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936) and *Go Down, Moses* (1941), go on to directly tackle subjects such as slavery and racial discrimination.

Hiroshima University

[5] Blatantly discriminatory references to African Americans abound in *Gone with the Wind*: "Then Mammy was in the room, Mammy with shoulders dragged down by two heavy wooden buckets, her kind black face sad with the uncomprehending sadness of a monkey's face" (396); "Those damned nigger lovers. . . . Perhaps they'd even bring negroes here to dine and sleep. Will had told her [Scarlett] Jonas made a great to-do about being equal with the negroes, ate with them, visited in their houses, rode them around with him in his carriage, put his arms around their shoulders. When she thought of the possibility of this final insult to Tara, her heart pounded so hard she could scarcely breathe" (507–08); "Free issue niggers are something else, and a good whipping would do some of them a lot of good" (597); "Soon we'll be having nigger judges, nigger legislators—black apes out of the jungle—" (604); "Now she knew what Reconstruction meant, knew as well as if the house were ringed about by naked savages, squatting in breech clouts" (605); "Yes, things can get worse, even worse than they are now. Suppose we have a darky legislature? A darky governor?" (706). Moreover, writers, including Alice Walker, Mary Condé, Toni Morrison, and Gloria Naylor, have expressed indirect criticism of *Gone with the Wind*'s stereotypical depiction of African-American slaves as passive and content (Haskell 6). The following passages in the novel legitimize the system of African-American slavery (see also Note 1 above): "They kept the negroes stirred up with tales of cruelty perpetrated by the whites and, in a section long famed for the affectionate relations between slaves and slave owners, hate and suspicion began to grow" (492); "Slaves were neither miserable nor unfortunate. The negroes were far better off under slavery than they were now under freedom, and if she didn't believe it, just look about her!" (708). Furthermore, *Gone with the Wind* contains numerous passages defending the Ku Klux Klan and the lynching of African Americans (607, 608, 612–13, 695).

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