

A Comparison of Rhett Butler and Ashley Wilkes in Gone with the Wind

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Abstract

Gone with the Wind is a profound novel written by Margaret Mitchell, who spent ten years to accomplish this book. Malcolm Cowley regarded it as an encyclopedia of plantation lore. With the background of civil war, the book reveals not only the frame of people living in the south of America, but also the whole process of the economic collapse of the slavery plantation. This book displays the astonishing transformation in the aspect of social politics, economy and morality. In this book the peculiarities of two leading male characters are attractive. Ashley Wilkes and Rhett Butler were born in the south, both of them were wise and fearless elites, but they differed from each other in numerous aspects. Ashley Wilkes was the typical representation of graceful gentleman in the south of America, on the contrary, Rhett Butler rebelled the spirits of the south. After the civil war, Ashley was too fragile to move towards a new life. While Rhett making full use of his strengths and completing the transformation smoothly. In this thesis, Ashley Wilkes and Rhett Butler will be compared from several aspects to demonstrate their similarities and differences.

Keywords

Ashley Wilkes; Rhett Butler; similarities; differences; the civil war.

1. Introduction

Since it was published in 1936, *Gone with the Wind* has always been popular and loved by people. The story is set in Clayton County and Atlanta, both in Georgia, during the American Civil War and Reconstruction Era. Written from the perspective of the slaveholder, *Gone with the Wind* is a fiction about Southern plantation. Its portrayal of slavery and African Americans has been considered controversial, as well as its use of a racial epithet and ethnic slurs common to the period. However, the novel has become a reference point for subsequent writers about the South, both black and white. Scholars at American universities refer to, interpret, and study it in their writings. Today, the novel has been absorbed into American popular culture.

Scholars have already done immense researches on this novel, in the aspect of background, history and so on. In the previous studies, scholars tended to research on the female protagonists instead of the male ones. However, the peculiarities of two leading male characters in this book are attractive, too. Ashley Wilkes was a handsome, well-mannered gentleman, while Rhett Butler was an adventurous, disreputable businessman. Both of them have a number of bright spots and dark sides. In this thesis, I chose Ashley Wilkes and Rhett Butler to compare their similarities and differences from their personage, Scarlett O'Hara's different love towards them and the social distinctions between the south and the north reflected by them.

2. A Comparison between Ashley and Rhett

2.1. Personage Introduction

Blond, dressy and decent, Ashley was an adorable gentle man who lived in the magnificent white-columned house . He married his cousin Melanie before the civil war broke out. Scarlett O'Hara is his close friend since they were young, as a man of honor, Ashley joined the army and devoted himself selflessly during the war. When the tragic time has passed, Ashley survived to Tara to help Scarlett with farm works and before he went to Atlanta to manage Scarlett's mill at her request and finally bought her mills in the help of Rhett.

Rhett is approximately 17 years older than Scarlett; he was tall and powerfully built. With a dark and scornful face, he was born in Charleston and used to study in West Point. In his early years, he was expelled by his father for rebelling southern customs and earned his own living by gambling. Spending the rest of his life as a businessman, he made a fortune during the war by tricks. What surprised everyone is that in the end of the war, he joined the army and made great contribution, too. He was sent to jail after the war for several days because of financial issues.

2.2. A Comparison of Hobbies and Social Status

Everyone in the Wilkes was of high education. Born and raised in this environment, Ashley was proficient as many other young men in the usual country diversions. Like hunting, gambling, dancing and politics, he was the best rider of them all. Nonetheless, he differed from others in that these pleasant activities were not the end and aim of life to him. He stood alone in his interest in books, music and fondness for writing poetry. He spent his leisure time on thinking instead of doing, on spinning brightly colored dreams without touch of reality. Besides, Ashley was a compassionate person. He took off his shoes and give them to comrade-in-arms despite suffering from the cold. Ashley is a popular gentleman among people and always complies with local customs. Nothing is more significant than fame and dignity for him.

Rhett's father is a gentleman. However, he didn't choose to follow his father but his intrepid grandfather who was a pirate. He excelled in drinking and gambling, too. The difference between him and Ashley is that he is kind of addicted to alcohol; he tended to drink a lot when he was depressed. Unlike others in the south, Rhett looked down upon almost every custom here. The south once threw him out and he maliciously hoped that this kind of system will die out. Rhett is vile and mercenary. During the war, Rhett and other blockaders manipulated the financial market. They sold necessities at unheard-of prices to make money. He was always a scoundrel who masqueraded under the cloak of the block for his own selfish gains. For the sake of benefit, he ganged up with cads who are hated by southern residents. In Rhett's eyes, there is no difference between evil and kind and profit is the most important. (Qian ZhengQiang, 2016) As a consequence, Rhett had a scandalous reputation in the south. However, his role as a speculator and profiteer flourished in the bad environment .

2.3. A Comparison of Characters

Needless to say that Rhett was a wicked man; but there were soft places in his inner heart,too. He was fond of little kids who are innocent and pure. He cherished them very much. In order to give his daughter Bonnie the best things like education and social situation, he was willing to sacrifice everything. His role as a father was faultless.

Rhett was a best lover to Scarlett. No matter how bad she treated him, he never gave up his love and tried his best to be a good husband. His language was his tool and he used it to release Scarlett from pathetic life. Without his help, Scarlett would never embrace the freedom.

It's worth mentioning that there was a shining point in Rhett's traits: brave. It not only emerged in the war that he combined speculative knowledge he studied in West Point with practical

situation and performed outstandingly, but also in the aspect of social contact and relationships. He was not afraid of being awkward to try hard to please citizens in Atlanta despite knowing that they hate him; he was not afraid of having disagreements to present his ideas; he was not afraid of being expelled from home and bearing inseparable rumors and slanders, on the contrary, he faced the obstacles directly and overcame them and eventually got his freedom. Rhett was brave to be different. When people were easily affected by others, he insisted on being himself, which is such an uncommon trait!

Ashley was poor-spirited in the aspect of self-inspect. His body is brought into the new society, while the soul is still in the past days. Ashley failed to accept the changes happened during and after the war and stubbornly thought that he was no longer belonged to anywhere. It never occurred to him that it is always human beings to adapt to a new situation and a new era. Under the circumstances, Ashley was too depressed to be able to accomplish anything. Although with his best endeavors to study farming and managing, he can't satisfy anyone. When Scarlett filled her heart with hope to ask his help, Ashley can find no way out. Mental state interacted with facts, Ashley can't face the reality and wanted to escape. He clinged to the perspective that he is nothing and can not deal with any obstacles. It is pathetic and melodramatic that Ashley was afraid of getting along with people and situation which are too alive. For this reason, he was unable to refuse vigorous and young Scarlett. He made himself a remote dream for Scarlett and kept her puzzled for years. There were little aims for Ashley. What he wanted is to escape from this authentic and cruel world and returning to his old era.

2.4. Common Points

Ashley and Rhett held the view that they are alike for several reasons. First of all, the majority of Southerners were unlettered. As men who obtained high education, books opened a million of doors for them, through which they entered museums where all man-made wonders and unique dreams were available for them to appreciate. These museums were contrary to their living environment. They are like a round peg in a square hole. Finding a people who shared similar opinions and taste is a delighting thing. As a consequence, they treasure each other. When everyone felt fevered about the coming war, Ashley argued that wars are cruel and dreadful. Rhett even directly pointed out southern weakness and defects. They didn't follow the crowd blindly. Conversely, they maintained their ability of thinking and judging independently and they can see the essence of things rather than captivated by public opinions. They didn't believe wars, but their personal peculiarities led them to two totally different life.

3. The Differences between Scarlett O'Hara's Love towards Ashley Wilkes and Rhett Butler

3.1. Scarlett O'Hara's Love towards Ashley

The cruelest thing was that Ashley never fell in love with Scarlett; however, Scarlett didn't realize it for years. Every time Ashley's inappropriate behavior and his hesitation encouraged her.

Scarlett rarely read books and wouldn't be able to distinguish so many things. It was Ashley's distinct-different character that attracted her. And it was her desire for exploration and to be in possession that driven her to chase him for years. She never understood Ashley's trait and she mistook it for mystery. At the same time, spoiled Scarlett took it for granted that all the men were supposed to love her. The marriage of Ashley and Melanie drove her crazy. It looks like a spoiled child's desire for a beautiful dress that doesn't fit her. Scarlett O'Hara's infatuation with Ashley was her own fantasy. The Ashley in her dream is unreal and the real Ashley is a person she will never understand. It is a pity that Scarlett hasn't been aware of it for a long time.

It is lucky that she finally woke up and stopped being stupid. But would she forget and leave Rhett? The answer is definitely no. "At the mention of Ashley's name, sudden pain went through her, sudden hot tears stung her lids. Fade? The memory of Ashley would never fade, not if he were dead a thousand years." (Mitchell Margaret, 1936)

There was a connection between Scarlett and Ashley: responsibility. Melanie Hamilton was Scarlett's loyal friend and Ashley's virtuous wife. She asked Scarlett to take care of her husband Ashley when she was dying. After she died, this became an irrevocable commitment. There were a crowd of changes happened after the war. When Scarlett was quite young, she was beautiful, attractive and accompanied with a big family and numerous fortune, but all of this gone with the war, only leaving Scarlett pieces of memory. Ashley grew up with Scarlett. They shared the same memory and Ashley was kind of a representative of the old south and southern nostalgia for the prewar days for Scarlett. As long as Ashley accompanied with her, it seems like that old days exist still in another way.

3.2. Scarlett O'Hara's Love towards Rhett

As by a common consent, only when like marries like can there be any happiness. (Margaret Mitchell, 1936) That is to say, couples have to be alike in some aspects of personality like hobbies, life goals and so on. After the civil war, Scarlett put away reputation for the sake of benefit, which violated Ashley's principle. From this point we can see even if they get married, they wouldn't be happy and blessed.

One of Scarlett's most valuable characters was that she is brave. She was strong enough to say and do what she wants to. This is a character just the same with Rhett and it attracted him deeply. They were a couple who share little differences. It is obvious that they were meant for each other and Rhett was the only man of her acquaintance who could love her after knowing her as she really is. (Li JingLin, 2015) It is heartbreaking that Scarlett ignored Rhett's affection all the time and did so many things that hurt him so seriously. It is Rhett's deeply love that supported him to treat Scarlett like a child and waited her to grow up to realize everything. There's no obligation between them but the purest love. Although there's constant friction between them, Rhett treated Scarlett with his sincere heart. It is the essential difference between Scarlett's love towards Ashley and her love towards Rhett

Scarlett's character changed a lot after the war. The reasons can be mostly attributed to Rhett. Since their reunion in the bazaar, Rhett has exerted himself to do everything to help Scarlett to release her nature. It is Rhett's company, support and protect that encouraged her to break through the secular shackles and got her precious freedom. If we hold the view that Scarlett is a successful woman, then Rhett was the man behind her success and the man who always support her. He knew how to cherish her beauty. (Yao ChangHong, 2012) Rhett was a positive inspiration to her, on the contrary, Ashley slowed Scarlett down as he can never adapt to new situations.

4. The Social Distinctions between the South and the North Reflected through Ashley Wilkes and Rhett Butler

4.1. The View of Stratum and Classes in the South Reflected through Ashley

Ashley was a respectable gentleman. In the south, there existed a sea of factors to consider when judging whether a man deserves to be respected. The first requirement is bloodlines, one who is high-blooded always has a good-looking appearance and his ancestors are respected by the public. The whole Wilkes were quite qualified. Meanwhile, the public tends to attach great importance to formality, interpersonal communication and an ocean of customs here, as well as the skills of dancing, riding and other entertainment projects. Ashley was extraordinarily

outstanding in these respects. With the addition of his judicious and courteous attitude, there seemed no doubt that he was one of the most popular men in Georgia.

In the southern United States, the measure of a white man's wealth was not how much money he possessed, but the number of black slaves he owned. (Yang DeHong, 2013) Almost every family in the south had Negro slaves. They completed all kinds of housework over multiple division of labor. Hence created a hierarchy that the slaves working in the house were more noble than the ones working in yards, and the black people working in the fields were the lowest rank. Every rank can not enter the other person's territory as the hierarchy is exceedingly strict. A wealthy and influential family took good care of their slaves, at least their slaves wouldn't suffer hunger and illness and as a result, their slaves even looked down upon the white people who had difficulty getting enough for eating and living. These reflected a rough situation about the degree to which people were respected in the south.

What's more, moral quality; capacity and magnanimity were decisive elements. Look at Ashley's friend Abel, for example. He was shrewd, grave giant, illiterate and kind of heart; being the best shot and a wildness survival expert in the Troop, he bore the honor gravely and with no untoward conceit. The troop bowed to real worth and liked him disregarding his poor family. At the same time, from Rhett, it can be conducted that whether comply with the Southerner's customs mattered a lot.

The view of stratum and classes reflected in all aspects. In the south, everyone hold the view that being in the war is honorable. In the beginning, the Troop had been recruited exclusively from the sons of planters, gentleman's outfit. When Mr. Wilkes held barbecue treating his guests, the house servants and the coachmen and maid of the guests had only their own feast of hoecakes and yams and chitterlings, better than normal, but still terrible. The slaves served their masters considerately and thoughtfully in their daily life but there was no equality exists.

4.2. The Backwardness of Education in the South Reflected through Ashley

Ashley lived in north Georgia, a place where there remained great advantages in farming. The main means of livelihood was planting cotton. With slave's help, masters made great fortune by exporting it. Very few people were willing to receive literary education under this circumstance that farming will bring them numerous fortunes and the Wilkes was a different species by all accounts. They all have deep love for reading and thinking, people would hear them talking about "palaeodendron", "the Borgias" and other topics that they don't understand. However, this can't arouse the enthusiastic of others to learn, most citizen's culture and education were extremely backward such as Ashley's friends Stuart and Brent Tarleton, they were expelled from four universities in two years. While nobody thought it is regrettable, people considered it as a fine joke and soon it was passed into silence.

"A lack of the niceties of classical education carried no shame, provided a man was smart in the thing that mattered. Raising good cotton, riding well, shooting straight, dancing lightly, squiring the ladies elegance and carrying one's liquor like a gentleman were the things that mattered." (Mitchell Margaret, 1936)

As the proverb goes, there are houses of gold in books. The distinction between people in the house and out of it is irreconcilable. Though Ashley was generally respected, except his family, very few understood him. Scarlett's father Gerald said the Wilkes is moonstruck and they are queer folk. Even Scarlett herself understood Ashley little after loved him so long.

Despite the threat of war, the Southerners felt no fear but excited because of lacking of understandings of wars. They regarded the coming war as an amusing entertainment, a chance to show their valor and loyalty to the Confederacy and they can tout themselves for the rest of their life. Performing what they imagined to be cavalry maneuvers in the fields, those were unarmed illiterate man who knew nothing about what they were going to confront. Lacking of education was one of the reasons accounting for why the south was defeated in the civil war.

4.3. The Advanced Thoughts and Open Mind in the North Reflected through Rhett

Rhett used to live in Charleston. It was in the South, only more intensified. So many things that one must do because they've always been done. So many things, quite harmless, that one must not do for the same reason. (Mitchell Margaret, 1936)

Rhett's life was radical but pathetic. The reason why Rhett was the black sheep of the Butler family is that he did a harmless thing. On the contrary, marrying an unknown woman simply because an accident prevented him from getting her home before dark is ridiculous and insane in his view. "So many things that annoyed me by their senselessness," Mitchell said. (Mitchell Margaret, 1936)

At that time, the South was partial to arrange marriage and the North married for love which is unacceptable in many Southerner's view. Rhett can not bare the system and he broke it courageously, from then on he was no longer a gentleman but he was free. No matter what obstacles he would go through in the future days, finding his true meaning of life, happiness will always be around the corner waiting for him.

Rhett really didn't fit the southerners' standards for gentle man. (Zhang RuoXin, 2011) He was then lived in the North for several years. It is obviously that there weren't an antiquated way of the living like the feudal system of middle Ages, the North manifested advanced thoughts and open mind. Thousands of immigrants worked in the North, and the culture there was mixed. The northerners threw away what is narrow, unfair and dated; their new culture was enlightened, active and advanced. The strength of the United States lies in the heart of people and the rich multiculturalism. (Jimmy Carter, 1980)

The South valued farming, and they looked down on businessman. The Northerners didn't think so, so as Rhett. With his brilliant head Rhett made his fortune during the war by cooperating mostly with northerners. Rhett was totally different from most stubborn southerners, for he was always ready to change. When it came to his time, Rhett always tightly grasped every possible opportunity to do his utmost.

5. Conclusion

Ashley was supposed to live in a stable and comfortable environment which allows him to do what he wants to, like reading, thinking and spinning fantasy dreams. He went for nothing but a simple life. When his dreams were invaded, because of lacking a passion for life and a tough heart, he was defeated in the depths of his heart. Life needs supports. As for Ashley, his support was the Utopia in his dream. The civil war invaded his dream and from then on his energy gone with his Utopia. Ashley and Scarlett's years of entanglement were more of a farce. Ashley was not brave enough to refuse and leave her and Scarlett cost a dozen years to finger out what she wanted and needed before finally broke through the dilemma. The life in south reflected by Ashley is torpid and lack of modern civilization. Time proves that the laggards in history will always be eliminated, therefore, Ashley and the old south gone as time goes on.

Rhett was full of youthful spirit, not a thing would beat him. Overcoming all the difficulties he became better. Until the end of this novel, Rhett was 45 years old; he has accumulated a great deal of money and wanted to return Charleston to build a better relationship with his family. Scarlett realized her love for Rhett and the Atlanta was friendly to him. After suffered so much, Rhett began to enjoy his life and there were reasons to believe that nothing will catch him in trouble. Rhett had a merchant's brain, he was always ready to change and study new things. He seized every possible opportunity and took good advantage of them.

Today what the world needs are brave soldiers like Rhett, together with Ashley's good qualities and his noble characters, an actual Utopia will be built up in the real life. As well as the famous line in *Gone with the Wind*, Tomorrow is another day. (Mitchell Margaret, 1936)

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