

"BAD" MOTHERS: A COMPARISON OF
SCARLETT O'HARA IN MARGARET MITCHELL'S *GONE WITH THE WIND*
AND SETHE IN TONI MORRISON'S *BELOVED*

by

Sandra Brooke Ross

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Sandra Brooke Ross

Greenville, NC

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Approved by:



Margaret D. Bauer, Professor of English

Rives Chair of Southern Literature

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Scarlett of *Gone with the Wind* by Margaret Mitchell and Sethe from Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* at first seem like two starkly different characters, aside from living during the same period. Scarlett is a white Southern belle, while Sethe, a black woman, is a slave, but both women live in a society that restricts them because of their gender. And both are judged by their peers for their mothering choices. Although they both have three children and mother outside their society’s ideas on how to raise them, Sethe’s act of infanticide receives attention from both her peers and critics, while Scarlett’s reserve towards her children is judged harshly by society and receives little attention from critics. Examining these two novels together, focusing on these characters as mothers, the reader realizes that these characters’ maternal instincts are only a reflection of what both women have been taught by their own mothers. Scarlett is criticized by her peers in society as a selfish woman, but throughout the novel she is the central provider for her children and often other members of her family. Certainly Sethe’s community judges her for committing infanticide, but she acted out of love and the desire to protect her children from slavery. Scarlett, influenced by her conservative mother Ellen, raised her children as she was raised, while Sethe had little maternal guidance and suffered from a lack of motherly love in her life and raised her children from those experiences. These two untraditional mothers, when compared, show that

regardless of social status, they were both oppressed and then unfairly judged for raising their children in unconventional ways.

Scarlett is raised on Tara, a plantation, by her mother, Ellen; her father, Gerald; and a house slave, Mammy. Scarlett is born a Southern belle and therefore is afforded many advantages. She wants for little, but is restricted socially in almost every way. She is forced to obey Mammy and Ellen on what clothes to wear, when and what to eat, and also what social gatherings she can go to. The two women in her life whom she looks to as “loving mentors,” consistently try to conceal her personality and hide what they consider are her “damaging qualities” (73). Scarlett has to rebel against even those she loves to behave the way she wants and therefore doesn’t fit into Southern norms. Her rebellious nature doesn’t change once she has children.

Ellen O’Hara is the ideal Southern lady to Scarlett. She runs the household, nurses those around her, and always is patient with her husband. Ellen’s importance in Scarlett’s life is explained best by Elizabeth Fox-Genovese in her book *Within the Plantation Household*:

Slaveholding daughters grew up in their mothers’ shadows and under their tutelage. They learned the fundamentals of adult responsibilities from their mothers rather than from teachers, even when they had governesses or went away to school. Their mothers afforded the primary models of how to conduct oneself in a world that merged a woman’s most important responsibilities of doing and being. (113)

Although Ellen seems to be the perfect Southern woman, she is quite reserved in showing love. Scarlett frequently describes Ellen as “truthful and tender and unselfish” (74), but Ellen never is described as loving. Scarlett herself says the traits she inherited from her parents are “the easily stirred passions of her Irish father and nothing except the thinnest veneer of her mother’s unselfish and forbearing nature” (73). Scarlett idolizes Ellen because of her patience and unselfishness, but as a mother, Ellen is not affectionate.

Ellen, who is the actual ruler of Tara for most of Scarlett’s childhood, wants her daughters to marry gentlemen and be respectable wives and mothers. However, Ellen has led a hard life and bears the burden women must, and knows her daughters will as well:

Ellen’s life was not easy, nor was it happy, but she did not expect life to be easy, and if it was not happy, that was woman's lot. It was a man's world, and she accepted it as such. . . . She had been reared in the tradition of great ladies, which had taught her how to carry her burden and still retain her charm, and she intended that her three daughters should be great ladies also. (71)

Anne Goodwyn Jones highlights this passage and argues in *Tomorrow Is Another Day*: “The tone of anger is not Ellen's; it is the narrator's, and it rarely reappears in the novel. Instead, Mitchell created a woman whose ladyhood was only a veneer and then observed what happened to her” (341). Jones goes on to note that Scarlett successfully finds these traditional female roles a “trap” (341), but it is the only way Ellen knows to raise her daughters. Ellen shows her love for her children by raising

them in the tradition of bellehood, which is to train them for marriage. However, Ellen also indirectly influenced Scarlett on how to mother her own children, which is to work hard and bear the burdens women must.

Scarlett reveres Ellen, even confusing her with the Virgin Mary as a child: “Ellen O’ Hara was different, and Scarlett regarded her as something holy and apart from all the rest of human-kind” (74). Scarlett is fine with setting Ellen up on this pedestal and finds comfort in Ellen’s mere presence, frequently seeking her out in times of duress. On the way to Tara from Atlanta, after the city had been burned down all around Scarlett and her family, Scarlett murmurs for Ellen when she feels she won’t make it back to the plantation: “Mother! Mother!’ she whispered. If she could only run to Ellen! If she could only reach the kind arms of Tara and Ellen and lay down her burdens” (402-403). Scarlett looks to her mother because her mother has always been a pillar of strength. When Scarlett is ready to “lay down her burdens” back home at Tara, though, she finds that Ellen has died. Instead of getting rid of her troubles, Scarlett has lost her mother and maternal guidance and must take on the role of caretaker of Tara at the tender age of twenty.

Scarlett has a second maternal influence, Mammy, whom she doesn’t revere like Ellen, but still respects. As Scarlett grew up, Mammy provided guidance for her, frequently reiterating Ellen’s ideas, just in a less subtle manner: “Mammy was greatly perturbed that Ellen’s daughter should display such traits and frequently adjured her to ‘ack lak a lil lady’. But Ellen took a more tolerant and long-sighted view of the matter” (72). Mammy was the strong, sharp-eyed servant who voiced the same concerns Ellen softly told Scarlett as a child. Scarlett seeks Mammy for

strength when Melanie is going into labor, finding comfort in the fact Mammy is connected to her mother: “Soon Mammy would be with her—Ellen’s Mammy, her Mammy” (418). Although Mammy doesn’t arrive to help Melanie, Scarlett’s desire for Mammy’s presence shows the importance of Mammy in her life.

Once Ellen dies, Scarlett comes to rely on Mammy more as a maternal guide. Mammy is there for Scarlett and does not have to be the Southern lady that Ellen was required to be. Scarlett becomes closer with Mammy when she realizes that Mammy sides with her when she decides to trick Frank Kennedy into marrying her: “No explanations were asked, no reproaches made. Mammy understood and was silent. In Mammy, Scarlett had found a realist more uncompromising than herself. . . . Scarlett was her baby and what her baby wanted, even though it belonged to another, Mammy was willing to help her obtain” (599). Mammy, who has always been able to see through Scarlett’s lies to Ellen, is still able to see Scarlett’s schemes, but understands why Scarlett makes the choices she does. Mammy helps Scarlett because Scarlett is “her baby and what her baby wanted, even though it belonged to another, Mammy was willing to help her obtain” (599). Unlike Ellen, Mammy can support Scarlett without fear of societal repercussion because of her status. After returning to Tara, Mammy also takes care of Scarlett’s children and has a close relationship with them. Mammy, always a servant to the O’Hara family, is a fully maternal figure once Ellen dies. Mammy is someone Scarlett looks to for help and the rest of the family goes to as well. Scarlett depended on Ellen to unload her burdens and learned to reserve her love from Ellen, and Mammy showed her understanding that Ellen did not. While Scarlett thinks that Mammy will reprimand

her for being unladylike, Mammy understands, perhaps most out of anyone in the novel, the hard choices that Scarlett has to make, and supports her through them.

Once Scarlett has her own children, she raises them in the same manner Ellen showed her and reserves her love. The only way Scarlett even shows her love and affection for her father Gerald is with friendly banter and to keep their inappropriate behavior (i.e. jumping fences) from Ellen, and Gerald is one of the few characters Scarlett shows affection for. Later on in life, Scarlett still keeps her love reserved, even for her children. When it comes to her first child, Scarlett is distressed to know Wade fears her: "Scarlett couldn't help noticing that the child was beginning to avoid her and, in the rare moments when her unending duties gave her time to think about it, it bothered her a great deal. It was even worse than having him at her skirts all the time" (434). Scarlett, although not outwardly showing it, does notice that her child is avoiding her and she is bothered by it.

Scarlett's own husbands do not recognize her hard work as a form of love, but instead criticize her for it. Going against social norms, Scarlett works in the fields at Tara to feed her family and then later on at Frank Kennedy's lumber mill, two things that women of her class are not supposed to do. Scarlett's peers start to shun her family as she continues working at the mill and do not invite her children to parties. Rhett, her third husband and father of her third child, condemns her for ruining her children's chance at being "received" socially: "You're a damned poor manager. You've wrecked whatever chances Ella and Wade had, but I won't permit you to do Bonnie that way. Do you think I'd let her marry any of this runagate gang you spend your time with?" (895). Rhett is concerned about Bonnie's chance at

being invited to parties when she is older and of her future marriage and believes that Scarlett's reputation within Atlanta has ruined Bonnie's future in the social sphere. Rhett, who encourages Scarlett's high spirits throughout the novel, is now criticizing her for them. He later on condemns her motherhood even more saying, "why, a cat's a better mother than you! What have you ever done for the children? Wade and Ella are frightened to death of you" (937). Though he may be right that Wade and Ella are frightened of Scarlett, he doesn't realize that Wade relies on his mother for security. Wade has learned that he can always seek his mother's skirts out for comfort when he is frightened and when he thinks Scarlett may die in labor with Bonnie, Wade is upset and wrought with worry. Rhett is criticizing Scarlett as a mother, but she has always taken care of her children and has simply learned from her own mother to be emotionally reserved.

What Rhett fails to notice is that Scarlett shows her love for her children through hard work, just as Ellen did. Her love for her family is there, as seen through the tireless effort she goes through to feed not only herself but her family and close friends as well. She doesn't display any outwardly affection towards Wade, and even considers him troublesome at times, but she makes sure he is always fed. When a group of Sherman's men come to pilfer what they can out of Tara, she refuses to let them take Wade's birthright, his grandfather's sword, left to him by his deceased father: "Scarlett could endure seeing her own possessions going out of the house in hateful alien hands but this—not her little boy's pride" (467). She can't stand the idea of the Yankees taking her son's inheritance. Scarlett knows that she isn't as good with children as Melanie is, reflecting that, "Yes, Melanie had a way with

children that Scarlett could never fathom" (950). However, she still loves her children and tries to show love for them the only way she has been taught to, not with affection, but by taking care of them.

Once Scarlett is comfortable and settled financially with Rhett, she has time to reflect on the upbringing of her first two children, Wade and Ella. She realizes that she had too many other matters to worry with when she had the children such as saving Tara and running the lumber mill, and now that Rhett is threatening to take Bonnie away, Scarlett realizes she can start over with her youngest: "She missed the child more than she had thought possible. . . . During the babyhood of each child she had been too busy, too worried with money matters, too sharp and easily vexed, to win either their confidence or affection" (948). With Bonnie, Scarlett has the chance to redeem herself as a mother and take care of her daughter as she wanted to take care of her previous two children. Scarlett knows that she wasn't able to care for her first two children as she wanted during the war and the economic hard times following, but she tries to rectify this once she has achieved financial comfort. She is even excited when she finds out she is pregnant with another baby because she knows she can devote her attention, and money, to this child: "And for the first time she was glad she was going to have a child. If it were only a boy! How she would care for him! Now that she had the leisure to devote to a baby and the money to smooth his path" (950). However, Rhett crushes any chance, or hope, Scarlett had of raising this unborn baby, by accidentally causing her to fall down a flight of stairs and have a miscarriage. With no chance of raising her new son, Scarlett instead focuses most of her energy and affection on Bonnie, raising her similarly to how her mother raised

her: "As Bonnie grew older Scarlett tried to discipline her, tried to keep her from becoming too head-strong and spoiled, but with little success" (980). Scarlett showers Bonnie with her attention, trying to be the good mother she felt she couldn't be with her first two children. However, after Bonnie dies, Scarlett is no longer interested in mothering. She is no longer invited to Rhett's bedroom and has sworn off inviting him to hers. Scarlett decides to return to Tara and Mammy with the attitude that "tomorrow is another day" (1028), and perhaps she will there, with Mammy, learn to love her two living children as she had hoped to love Bonnie and her unborn son.

Toni Morrison's Sethe is also very much constrained throughout much of her life, not only as a female but also as an African American slave in the South. Unlike Scarlett, Sethe's maternal love is formed by her lack of maternal presence. Andrea O'Reilly explains in her book *Toni Morrison and Motherhood* how Sethe is affected by the absence of her mother. Sethe remembers very little about her mother except that her mother worked every day and mother and daughter didn't live in the same cabin. Sethe didn't even learn her mother's name, but instead her mother showed Sethe a branding on her body and told her daughter, "If something happens to me and you can't tell me by my face, you can know me by my mark" (62). However, when her mother is hanged and Sethe goes to look for the mark, she can't find it. O'Reilly explains how this death affects Sethe later in life: "Sethe is also the archetypal motherless child, emotionally and physically orphaned, with no family or history to call her own. . . . The adult Sethe is haunted by the possibility that her mother abandoned her as a child" (89). O'Reilly goes on to argue that mothers can't

learn to love if they aren't loved as daughters, and that Sethe overcompensates by loving her children too much (90). Sethe does have other females in her life growing up, such as Nan who raised her once her mother died and later her mother-in-law, Baby Suggs. When Sethe remembers her mother and Nan she says they spoke a language she doesn't understand: "What Nan told her she had forgotten, along with the language she told it in. The same language her ma'am spoke, and which would never come back" (63). Sethe's problem remembering "the language" her mother spoke, O'Reilly argues, is symbolic of Sethe's desire for a mother and the absence she still feels (89).

The maternal models that Sethe has to turn to growing up taught her that violence was a way of dealing with and showing maternal love. Amanda Putnam argues that Sethe's relationship with her own mother first taught maternal violence to Sethe. Putnam argues that Sethe's "Ma'am" instilled the belief in her that motherhood meant choosing life or death for your children: "Known only as 'Ma'am,' Sethe's mother works in the rice fields and is a stranger to Sethe, but she is the only child of Ma'am's that is encouraged to live and thus indoctrinates into Sethe the concept of mothers choosing life or death for their children" (Putnam). Putnam is referring to a story Sethe was told by her Nan about her mother choosing Sethe after birth: "She threw them all away but you. The one from the crew she threw away on the island. The others from more whites she also threw away. Without names, she threw them. You she gave the name of the black man. She put her arms around him. The others she did not put her arms around" (63). Putnam explains that this story, although "unimpressive" to Sethe as a child, would have instilled the "power of

maternal choice.” Putnam points out that more importantly Sethe’s “Ma’am” taught her maternal violence and possession:

Second, and perhaps even more importantly, Sethe learns that maternal violence—hitting the child to express your point—can be an expression of possession and even love. Sethe learns from this poignant memory that violence can mark the relationship of mother to child, so readers should not be surprised when she turns to violence later to protect and show her possession of her own children.

Sethe also learned other forms of “maternal violence” from Baby Suggs, as Putnam also points out. At Sweet Home, Baby Suggs is one of the only women Sethe has to turn to as a maternal model, and Baby Suggs deals with the pain of losing her children by not loving them, a form of “maternal violence” in itself. Baby Suggs hasn’t allowed herself to love after she learns that “the nastiness of life” was that all slaves were sold, even if they were her children (28). Baby Suggs says that Halle was given to her too late. She was able to keep him the longest to make up for all the other the children that were taken from her, and so she reflects, “That child she could not love and the rest she would not” (27-28). Baby Suggs, although revered by the community as “Baby Suggs holy,” influences Sethe negatively as a maternal figure by teaching her another form of maternal violence, not loving one’s own children. Sethe, feeling abandoned by her own mother and a desperate desire for maternal affection, loves her children fiercely and makes sure they are always taken care of. She shows her children love the only she has been taught by her elders, through violence and possession.

In contrast to Scarlett, Sethe is actually criticized by loved ones for caring about her children too much. Sethe struggles to love her own children in a culture that tells her she should not. As O'Reilly points out, "With the children who were not traded, sold, or killed, the slave woman had to struggle against her society's denial of her maternal feelings" (129). Sethe feels this denial from the moment she has her children. At Sweet Home, she is forced to leave her children during the day and tend to her master's children. Once she escapes from Sweet Home she is still told to neglect her feelings. The day after Sethe has just given birth to Denver en route to Ohio, Ella, a former slave, gives her the advice "Don't love nothing" (108). Years later, Paul D, a former slave himself and Sethe's lover, points out to Sethe that her "love is too thick" (159) because she chose to kill her baby rather than be taken by Schoolteacher back to Sweet Home and slavery. She responds, "Love is or it ain't. Thin love ain't love at all" (159). As Putnam points out, Sethe is a contrast to the other slaves in her life in regards to children:

Unlike some other of Morrison's mothers who deny their mother love (like Baby Suggs), Sethe revels in it, both in times of happiness and in despair. According to Christopher Peterson, Orlando Patterson argues that 'slavery destroys slave kinship structures' (Peterson 2006, 549). Sethe actually shows abundant connections to her children, risking everything for them to escape and celebrating their life together afterward.

Sethe does not care about having a "thin love" or keeping her emotions reserved. She doesn't want to be like the other slaves and not care for her children. Instead,

she would rather defy her culture and not let her children feel the absence of love she felt as a child.

Sethe's fierce love, however, comes with consequences. She has a love so strong, that in her mind it is better for her baby to die than go back to Sweet Home. Paul D judges her decision to kill her baby as cruel and rash, but she defends it as motherly protection: "It ain't my job to know what's worse. It's my job to know what is and to keep them away from what I know is terrible. I did that" (159). Sethe's actions and love do negatively affect her children though. Her love scares her two sons, Howard and Buglar, who are so horrified by their mother's actions that they run away. Denver, the youngest of her children, the last child left at 124, has to deal with the consequences of her mother's infanticide. She is eighteen years old during the novel, but behaves much younger because she hasn't been exposed to society and only had the "ghost" of the baby as a playmate. Sethe doesn't see anything wrong with Denver, though, and insists to Paul D that she's a "charmed child" (45). Sethe knows her brutal act against the baby has affected Denver, but Sethe stands behind her decision as an act of motherly love. O' Reilly points out that through her violent act Sethe is claiming her children and exerting her role as a mother:

Sethe claims, through her act of infanticide, the right to decide what is best for her children. The nineteenth-century cult of moral motherhood said that women were born with a maternal instinct, which rendered motherhood natural to them. . . . She demands that she, and not schoolteacher, will determine the fate of her children.

(135)

Fox-Genovese reinforces this point, noting that infanticide was not uncommon among slave mothers: "Slave mothers knew that if their infanticide were discovered, it would be recognized as a crime against their master's property. Perhaps that knowledge led some of the more desperate to feel that, by killing an infant they loved, they would be in some way reclaiming it as their own" (324) For slave mothers, infanticide may not have been uncommon according to Fox-Genovese but Sethe is a freed slave when she commits her act of infanticide. Sethe uses infanticide to claim her baby and also does so out loud, proclaiming: "Beloved, she my daughter. She mine" (188). For Sethe, there is no model on how to mother and instead she loves her children as she believes and feels is best, even if it defies cultural norms. Sethe is criticized for loving too much, but for her it was the only way she feels she can love her children.

Like Scarlett, Sethe is given a second chance to redeem herself as a mother. When Beloved shows up at 124, Sethe doesn't question that it is the reincarnation of her dead daughter. Readers may see Beloved as different lives embodied in one girl, according to Jean Wyatt: "On the personal level, Beloved is the nursing baby that Sethe killed. But in the social dimension that always doubles the personal in *Beloved*, the ghost represents—as generic name Beloved suggests—all the loved ones lost through slavery, beginning with the Africans who died on the slave ships" (479) However, this multi-level history Beloved presents is not important to Sethe. She sees Beloved's arrival as a second chance to love her baby and ask for forgiveness. Sethe is constantly looking to make sure that Beloved is okay with her, noting Beloved's reaction about the shed where the baby was killed: "She even looked

straight at the shed, smiling, smiling at the things she would not have to remember now. Thinking, She ain't even mad with me. Not a bit" (173).

Although Sethe is using Beloved as a second chance, a substitute for the baby she killed, the relationship she tries to form with Beloved isn't healthy. Her relationship with Beloved becomes closer and closer, until it is so intimate it is dangerous. Sethe consistently tells Beloved that she is "mine," and saying no one was going to harm her: "Not you, not none of mine, and when I tell you you mine, I also mean I'm yours" (191). Sethe is again asserting ownership of Beloved, just as she did with her act of infanticide, and also giving herself up to Beloved. Beloved also claims Sethe in her stream of consciousness, claiming: "I am Beloved and she is mine. . . . I see her face which is mine. . . . I hear the laughter that it belongs to me" (198). Beloved is completely possessive of Sethe. However, Sethe's claim of Beloved comes out of guilt, as seen by her need to "explain to her, even though I don't have to. Why I did it" (188). Sethe is feeling anxiety over killing Beloved. She is trying to make up for the infanticide by committing herself to Beloved completely and be a "good mother" by claiming her child.

Sethe and Beloved's possessive relationship of one another gradually changes to a more volatile one: "Then the mood changed and the arguments began. Slowly at first. A complaint from Beloved, an apology from Sethe" (222). Sethe looks at this relationship as a chance to redeem herself in the eyes of her baby, but Beloved, the adult, has no interest it seems in forgiving Sethe, and instead punishes her: "Beloved accused her of leaving her behind. Of not being nice to her, not smiling at her. And Sethe cried, saying she never did, or meant to—that she had to get them

out, away, that she had the milk all the time" (222). The only way she is able to get rid of Beloved, and the guilt, is when Denver invites in the townspeople and Paul D. Once Beloved leaves, Sethe can start to heal and move past the infanticide she committed eighteen years earlier. From here, Sethe may be able to mother Denver in less violent way that allows Denver to develop as a growing woman.

It is apparent that Sethe and Scarlett differ in how they outwardly express their love for their children. But both women struggle against oppressive forces in their lives to make choices for their families that previously would have fallen to a male provider or owner. The two fictional characters lived through the Civil War and came from significantly different social spheres, but as women share an interesting characteristic: both women are oppressed and mother their children outside of social expectations. Even though they come from opposite social standings, both women raise their children in response to the maternal influences in their lives. Although Scarlett, a white woman, is born into a wealthy family in Georgia, she has fewer choices as a mother than one may think an upper-middle class woman would. Conversely, Sethe, who is born into slavery, makes her own path up to Ohio to become free and mother her children on her terms. Scarlett is on the path of a Southern belle and is not supposed to be the main provider for the family. She is forced to take care of her family, but is simultaneously criticized by others for not being a good mother. Sethe, as a slave, is restricted from how much she can take care of her children but is also told by her fellow slaves how much she can love them. Both women were also influenced by external maternal influences that helped develop their own mothering roles, and their maternal guides were not

positive. Scarlett learns to reserve her love from her mother but shows her love for her children through hard work and feeding her family. Sethe has various maternal models who all teach her violence as a form of love, which she goes on to use against her own children in an attempt to save them from slavery. Both Scarlett and Sethe raise their children against society's expectations because that is how they were raised themselves, and although life is not easy or happy, just as it wasn't for their mothers, they make their own choices and provide for their children.

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