



# TEN FILMS THAT SHOOK THE WORLD



# GONE WITH THE WIND

STUDY GUIDE

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OSCAR WINNER 1939:

Best Picture

Best Director

Best Actress

Best Supporting Actress

Best Screenplay

Best Colour Cinematography

Best Art Direction

Best Editing

## TEACHERS' NOTES

The text of *Gone With the Wind* provides an ideal vehicle with which to address the principal areas of study and key concepts relevant to Media Studies syllabuses at GCSE, A Level and GNO Media; Communication and Production (Intermediate and Advanced) as well as studies in popular culture in general.

This study guide is structured to focus on institutional context, the text itself and its audiences.

*Gone With the Wind*: Certificate U. Running Time 217 mins.

## MAJOR CREDITS FOR GONE WITH THE WIND

*Gone With the Wind* 1939 (Selznick)

Producer:

David O Selznick

Director:

Victor Fleming

[George Cukor, Sam Wood, B Reeves Eason]

Screenplay:

Sidney Howard

Directors of Photography: Ernest Haller, Ray Rennahan, Wilfred N Cline

Editors:

Hal C Kern, James E Newcom

Music:

Max Steiner

Art Directors:

Lyle Wheeler, William Cameron Menzies

Cast:

Vivien Leigh, Clark Gable, Olivia de Havilland,

Leslie Howard, Hattie McDaniel,

Thomas Mitchell (Selznick)

Oscars 1939:

Best Picture

Best Director

Best Actress (Vivien Leigh)

Best Supporting Actress (Hattie McDaniel)

Best Screenplay

Best Colour Cinematography

Best Art Direction

Best Editing

There was also a Special Award to William Cameron Menzies for outstanding achievement in the use of colour for the enhancement of dramatic mood.

David Selznick was also awarded the Irving G Thalberg Memorial Award.

Oscar Nominations 1939:

Best Actor (Clark Gable)

Best Supporting Actress (Olivia de Havilland)

Best Original Score

Best Sound

Best Special Effects



## INTRODUCTION BY DEREK MALCOLM

Many filmmakers would say that there's no such thing as a movie capable of shaking the world. But some still attempt to make them. Those who succeed are rare, and the strange thing is that even the lucky ones don't appear to know they are doing it at the time. In fact, it sometimes takes years to realise what really is a great film or what may have looked wonderful at the time but was just a momentary flourish.

Most of the films on this particular list didn't so much shake the world as become memorable because, when you look back on them, they seem so much better than we may have thought at the time. But memories are short and the opportunity to see the full flowering of cinema history is denied to all but a few. So the list looks a little unbalanced to me, who has been luckier than most in looking further into the past and at world cinema rather than just Hollywood.

What we get here are films which were certainly important in their time, and still look good today – movies that have remained in people's affections ever since they first saw them. If there aren't really enough from the first two-thirds of cinema history, no matter. It's good at least to know that some of the greatest directors in the world are represented and that their artistry, often the equivalent of any great playwright, painter, author or composer of the twentieth century, continues to be appreciated. Most of these films will live longer than we do.

## GONE WITH THE WIND

You could say that, along with *The Wizard of Oz*, *Casablanca* and maybe a Disney or two, this is the film people look at again and again with the most affection. Of course, it was based on Margaret Mitchell's much-loved novel, but that can't entirely explain why it stays in people's sub-conscious. What probably does is the way Hollywood, in its golden years of the late thirties and forties, could make a convincing mountain out of a molehill. Was it the combination of Vivien Leigh and Clark Gable that did it, set as they were against the epic Civil War background? Yes, but the obsessional producer David O Selznick, the careful Victor Fleming, really only a skillful jobbing director (who had a nervous breakdown halfway through and had several other more talented filmmakers giving him a helping hand, like George Cukor) and a host of first class professionals, combined to manufacture its apparently timeless appeal. They really can't make films like this nowadays. They haven't the confidence nor the tenacity to tell a good story so well, and to hell with history.

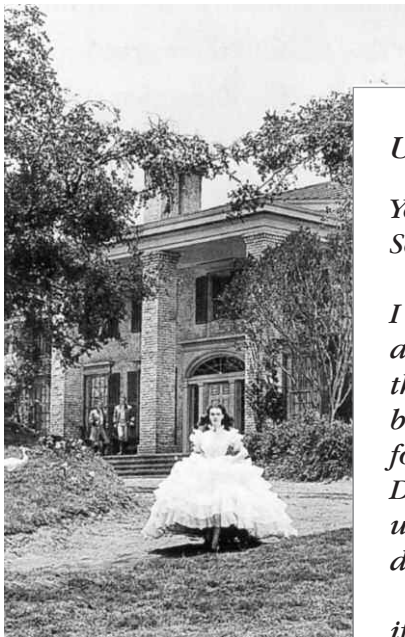
## ☆ INTRODUCTION ☆

*'Forget it, Louis, no Civil War picture ever made a nickel.'*

Irving Thalberg to Louis B Mayer, 1936

Could any movie mogul ever have been more wrong? If the total income for *Gone With the Wind* were to be adjusted for inflation, it would be considered the most successful film of all time. Its characters, story, music and catch-phrases must surely be the best known of any film. Generations of film and video audiences re-invent *Gone With the Wind* and make it their own. There can be few films that are openly enjoyed by children, parents and grandparents alike. Who does not know that Rhett Butler says, *'Frankly my dear, I don't give a damn!'* and that Scarlett ends the film with the immortal words *'Tomorrow is another day'*?

It is no accident that, in the original designs for the Museum of the Moving Image a central feature was to be the huge red staircase up which Rhett carries Scarlett in their Atlanta mansion. The idea was ultimately rejected as being too costly, but it is significant that this was a film set considered to be recognisable to virtually everyone.



*A review of Gone With the Wind by Elspeth Grant in the Daily Sketch Wednesday 24th April, 1940:*

*UNDOUBTEDLY THE GREATEST FILM THE CINEMA HAS GIVEN US*

*Yesterday I saw the longest film ever made – David O Selznick's immense picture of Margaret Mitchell's best seller.*

*It was an experience I shall never forget. For 220 minutes I was spellbound. Acting and presentation combine to give an almost unbelievable impression of reality. The drama of the plot and the beauty of colour hold the attention from beginning to end, and when it is all over you will be hungry for more. Gone With the Wind will make cinema history. David O Selznick's production is a masterpiece. This is undoubtedly the greatest film the cinema has given us to date.*

*I doubt if it will ever be able to give us a finer one. And if ever an actress deserved the undying gratitude of an author, that actress is Vivien Leigh. Never was a heroine of fiction brought more vividly to life than is Scarlett O'Hara in the person of this lovely young English actress. Vivien Leigh gives a performance of unrivalled distinction. All Scarlett's fascination – fire and ruthlessness, and all of her redeeming indomitable courage are here. This, in fact, is Scarlett O'Hara. Clark Gable is fine as Rhett Butler, and Leslie Howard brings all his quiet charm to the part of Ashley Wilkes – how exquisitely it is played! Gone With the Wind cost £1,000,000 to make. In my opinion, it is worth every penny of that million.*

## ☆ INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT ☆

## THE GOLDEN AGE OF THE HOLLYWOOD STUDIO SYSTEM

Throughout the 1930s, 1940s and early 1950s, American film production was dominated by a handful of Hollywood studios. The Big Five, or the ‘majors’, were Paramount, MGM, Warner Bros, Twentieth Century Fox and RKO. They were not just production companies and international distributors of films, but had also developed their own chain of theatres. They dominated the first-run movie market – the film palaces and deluxe downtown theatres in major urban centres where most of the box-office revenues were generated. They controlled the entire movie business, from filmmaking to exhibition, a system referred to as ‘vertical integration’.

Universal, Columbia and United Artists were in the second division of the studio league although, strictly speaking, United Artists was not a studio in its own right, but a distribution company formed in 1919 by Mary Pickford, Douglas Fairbanks, Charlie Chaplin and D W Griffiths to enable them to have greater control over the marketing of their films.

Finally, there was a group of minor studios, known collectively as ‘Poverty Row’, that specialised in B pictures. Of these, only Republic and Monogram (later, Allied Artists) lasted for any length of time or made any real impression on film history.

A fundamental premise of the Hollywood studio system was the need to plan a whole year’s output. A film was not an individual artistic and commercial enterprise, but one part of a whole year’s product. Like any factory, the studio’s goal was to produce a large number of goods of a consistent, dependable quality. The organising principle was ‘division of labour’ – separate departments, each contributing its piece to the whole.



David Oliver Selznick was considered a ‘major independent’ producer in the age of the big studios and often saw his position in terms of an epic drama: he was truly a David amongst a gathering of Goliaths. The making of his films was often rife with conflict, thanks to Selznick’s ego and unconventional working methods. He had climbed the executive ranks at MGM, Paramount and RKO, before creating Selznick International Pictures in 1935. While the big studios emphasised efficiency and productivity, Selznick and other major independents, like Samuel Goldwyn and Walt Disney, produced only a few films annually. They were in a class of their own, making prestige pictures that often tested the economic restrictions and creative limits of the studio system which has been frequently criticised for bowing to the demands of quickly produced, formula-bound products.

The independent producers also challenged the usual division of labour and hierarchy of authority in the studios. But the so-called independents were closely tied to the studio system, and especially to the integrated majors. They had to borrow principal actors and other personnel, lease production facilities and relied heavily on first-run cinemas. The dependence was not one-sided, however. The studio system needed the flair of the independent producer to cultivate the cultural high ground in film and keep their cinemas supplied with ‘quality product’.

After the birth of Selznick International Pictures (SIP), its founder stated forcefully, *‘In the making of good pictures it is essential for a producer to collaborate on every inch of script, to be available for every conference and to go over all details of production so that it is physically impossible for him to give his best efforts to more than a limited number of pictures.’* It took SIP five years to deliver ten pictures, but although productivity was down, profits were up. Selznick recognised that by working as an independent in the late 1930s, more money could be made producing one or two big hits each year rather than ten or so A class features and supporting B pictures.

This fact was proven clearly enough with *Gone With the Wind* which retained the title of the biggest blockbuster in movie history for over quarter of a century until toppled by *The Sound of Music* in 1965. It also monopolised the top slot again for 1971 to 1972 after a hugely successful re-release.

### ☆ THE STAR SYSTEM ☆

From the 1920s to the early 1950s the major studios exerted extremely tight control over the star system, each carefully grooming a stable of stars, strategically placing them in film roles, controlling their 'private' lives and creating the publicity necessary to maintain their popularity and keep them in the public gaze. The studio system offered stars, in the words of Bette Davis, '*...the security of a prison*' because although they were extremely well paid, they were penned in by long-term contracts. Many of the actors resented the fact that they were virtually owned by their studio. Suspension was one of the most cruel punishments that the studio bosses meted out to their stars. It meant that anyone who refused to play a particular role was obliged to wait, unpaid, whilst that film was shot and then half that time again. This time penalty was then added to the end of their contract so actors could be trapped for ten or fifteen years working off what was originally only a seven-year contract.



*Gone With the Wind* produced the catalyst for the event which many saw as the beginning of the decline of the power of the major Hollywood studios. This event was the de Havilland lawsuit of 1945. Jack Warner had loaned Olivia de Havilland to David O Selznick for *Gone With the Wind* (in which she played Melanie Wilkes), but after she returned to Warners, he kept offering her insignificant roles. She turned them down, so Warner suspended her. She felt that the persistent extension of her contract was unfair practice and she challenged this in the Courts – and won. As a direct result, all future studio contracts were limited to a maximum of seven consecutive years regardless of any suspensions, and contracts were frequently re-negotiated on a regular basis. Although

absent from the screen for the three years of the court case, Olivia de Havilland celebrated her return to the screen – and her new found freedom – with an Oscar-winning performance for Paramount in '*To Each His Own*'.

#### Task

*Imagine that you are David O Selznick's manager of promotions. He has asked you to come up with a detailed campaign to promote the stars of *Gone With the Wind* in either the United States or England. How would you go about it? What differences do you think the campaign could face in either country?*

*The studio system was never so rigid as to justify the criticism of being totally a factory production line: there strengths as well as weaknesses in the system. In the chart below write down, the points that you consider to be positive elements that contributed to the success of the Hollywood studio system; in the second column write down its weaknesses and suggestions as to what contributed to its essential decline.*

Strengths of the studio system	Weaknesses and reasons for decline

★ GONE WITH THE WIND – THE FILM TEXT ★

Films are often pigeon-holed into specific genres, seen as particular types of film which can be identified through having a number of common and recognisable elements. These typical characteristics (or conventions, as they are more accurately termed) include settings, characters, situations, dress, decor, locale, themes and values.

### ROMANTIC MELODRAMA

A working definition of what constitutes melodrama is that it is characterised by sensational and romantic plots, strong and often violent appeals to the audience's emotions, exaggerated characters and happy endings. They frequently have highly polarised moral dimensions and social and moral concepts are personalised. There are distinctive visual modes of expression and the music creates strong emotional effects – it is not just used as background, but is an essential part of the whole structure. Melodrama is considered to be aimed more particularly at a female audience as it presents female desire and a female point of view. The heroines are often the equal of, and at times superior to, the male characters and are active rather than passive.



Gone With the Wind could be considered the epitome of the genre of romantic melodrama. In the space below, list the characteristics of the film that you think distinguish it as a typical romantic melodrama. In the left-hand column, a few conventions have been included. Add your own ideas in the spaces that remain.

Convention	Distinguishing characteristics
Settings	
Characters	
Situations	

**Discussion Points**

- ☆ *Choose another romantic melodrama that you have seen and consider how it compares with Gone With the Wind as an example of the genre. What are the similarities amid differences?*
- ☆ *Most melodramas conclude with a happy ending, but Gone With The Wind ends inconclusively. What effect do you think that this has on an audience's enjoyment of the film as a whole?*
- ☆ *A sequel to the novel of Gone With the Wind called Scarlett, written by Alexandra Ripley, was published in 1991 and has subsequently been turned into a TV miniseries. Neither has had the popular appeal that was expected. Why do you think this is so?*



## ☆ TEXTUAL ANALYSIS ☆

## MISE EN SCÈNE

This term, in the original French, means 'placing in the scene' or, in theatrical terms, 'staging the action'. It was first applied to directing stage plays, and then film scholars, extending the term to film direction, used it to describe the control that a director has over what appears in the film frame. This would include the setting, lighting, costume and actions and reactions of the characters.

*Task 1*

*Look closely at the opening scene of the film where we see Tara, to the point where Scarlett says, 'No! I'm going to wait for Pa to come home from the Wilkeses.'*

*Explain how mise en scène is used to present the character of Scarlett. You should include references to the relative positions of the characters in the frame, Scarlett's costume, the actions and reactions of the characters, body language and tone of voice.*

*Task 2*

*Choose two short scenes from other parts of the film amid, using the same form of analysis, show how they reflect different aspects of Scarlett's character. You may wish to use:*

- ☆ *Scarlett's arrival at Tara after the siege of Atlanta*
- ☆ *Scarlett's declaration of love to Rhett at the end of the film*

*Task 3*

*At the Academy Awards in 1959, Gone With the Wind won an unprecedented nine Oscars, including a first for colour cinematography. A special award was given to William Cameron Menzies for outstanding achievement in the use of colour for the enhancement of dramatic mood.*

*Select four different scenes where you feel that the use of colour is most effective in enhancing the mood and explain how the effects are created. You may wish to use:*

- ☆ *The desolation of Tara on Scarlett's return, including the scene where you see her dead mother*
- ☆ *The final sequence of the film, from Rhett's parting to the end*

## ☆ REPRESENTATION ☆

In remaining true to Margaret Mitchell's novel, *Gone With the Wind* has been criticised for representing out-dated views. The lines that appear over the rolling title of the film referring to Cavaliers, Gallantry, Knights, Ladies fair, Master and Slave and a Civilisation Gone With the Wind, were in fact not Margaret Mitchell's words at all, but were written by Ben Hecht, one of the many scriptwriters. The novel shows us a romanticised view of the Old South, but on the evidence of David O Selznick's published memos, certain views had to be diluted in the translation to the screen:

*'We have actually toned down considerably Miss Mitchell's portrait of the depredations of the Northern invaders.'*

David O Selznick's *Gone With the Wind*, Ronald Haver, 1986

There was also a risk, before the final casting of Scarlett, that if a 'Yankee' were to play the central lead, then many of the book's staunchest Southern fans would be outraged. This situation was neatly averted: better an Englishwoman than a Yankee.

Resolving the issue of the representation of race was not so easily accommodated. The 1915 D W Griffith film, *The Birth of a Nation*, brought about a significant outcry against its depiction of white supremacy. The Griffith film depicted 'black' characters (actually whites in make-up) as evil but they were central to the action whereas in *Gone With the Wind* they were considered 'background roles' in spite of the praise given to both Hattie McDaniel and Butterfly McQueen for their portrayals. Selznick tried to distance the film from any association with the ideological views in the Griffith film. Bearing in mind the fascism in Europe at the time, he was keen to avoid references to the Ku Klux Klan, stressing that he was not producing a film that was in any way anti-Negro.

Much was eventually made of the fact that Hattie McDaniel was the first black actress to win an Oscar. Even so, she was criticised by some contemporary critics for accepting her prize. It was said that she should have protested against the stereotypical roles that she was trapped into playing. She reportedly replied, somewhat tersely, *'Why should I complain about making \$7,000 a week playing a maid? If I didn't, I'd be making \$7 a week actually being one.'*



The racism in the novel was toned down in the film partly because of gentle pressure from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. The most significant change was that, in the film, Scarlett was attacked by 'white trash' and not a black (although the attacker was helped by a black). She was, of course, rescued by one of her loyal ex-slaves, Big Sam.

Although the film was briefly picketed by blacks in several cities, including Washington DC and Chicago, the general reaction was calm and even supportive. Opinions in the black weekly newspapers, which had national distributions, were divided. The Chicago-based paper, *Defender*, said that the film, 'Distorted and twisted the history of an era', and was 'crude propaganda' as well as 'subversive'. The *Pittsburgh Courier*, praised Miss McDaniel for 'stealing the show' and thought that the film in many ways 'glorified many great qualities of the race.' The editor, in his review, saw no reason why blacks should not want to see the film.

Although *Gone With the Wind* was still criticised in the January 1940 issue of *The Crisis* for portraying all blacks as ‘happy house servants and unthinking, hapless clods’, the official N.A.A.C.P journal said that it contained ‘little material, directly affecting Negroes as a race, to which objection can be made.’ This was in strong contrast to the comments in the same journal in May 1915 concerning *The Birth of a Nation* which it condemned for showing the black as an ‘ignorant fool, a vicious rapist, a venal and unscrupulous politician, or a faithful but doddering idiot.’



All the newspapers published long articles full of praise for Miss McDaniel’s role and the winning of an Oscar. They were, however, faced with a dilemma because, although she was the first of her race to win an Oscar, she had won it for the role of ‘Mammy’, the epitome of all black stereotypes.



On March 9th 1940, the Baltimore-based newspaper, *Afro Caribbean*, carried four photographs of picketers at the Washington DC premiere, but these were offset by reviews by two columnists in the same *Journal*. Ralph Matthews said that the blacks of the District of Columbia were too ready to feel sorry for themselves and defended the integrity of any author to present his or her view of reality. Lillian Johnson, in the same issue, said that the pickets were either uninformed about the film’s content or were trying to mislead customers. She said that *Gone With the Wind* was ‘a true representation of the period’ even if members of her race did not like that representation. She continued to defend the film for the next two weeks. On the occasions when *The Birth of a Nation* is shown, it still draws pickets and protests, but, in contrast *Gone With the Wind* returns and returns with not a whisper of protest.

*\*The references to specific journals in this section are drawn from a chapter in the Journal of Popular Film, Autumn 1975 entitled The Black Reaction to Gone With the Wind by John Stevens.*

*Task*

*In the space below list four black characters in Gone With the Wind and in the spaces to the right write down what you consider to be positive and negative elements of the way in which they are represented.*

Character's Name	Positive	Negative

*Discussion points*

- ★ *How far do you think that the criticisms of the representation of race in Gone With the Wind are justified?*
- ★ *What evidence can you find of other forms of negative and/or positive stereotyping in the film? Can stereotyping offer advantages to the audiences of the film? You do not have to restrict your answer to the representation of race. You may wish to consider the representation of gender, comparing the characters of Scarlett and her sisters, Melanie and Belle, or a study of the representation of the 'hero' in relation to Rhett and Ashley Wilkes.*

## ☆ THE AUDIENCES ☆

*'People do not escape into something they cannot relate to. The movies [of the Depression] were meaningful because they depicted things lost or things desired. What is 'fantastic' in fantasy is an extension of something real.'*

We're in the Money: Depression America and Its Films, Andrew Bergman, 1971

The 'dreams' demanded by audiences and provided by Hollywood were not simply fanciful illusions. There was little money to spare and paying customers at the movies required, exciting, imaginative articulations of their aspirations, fears, doubts and securely held beliefs. On December 15th 1939, the first of countless audiences was presented with all this and much more at the premiere of *Gone With the Wind* in Atlanta, Georgia.



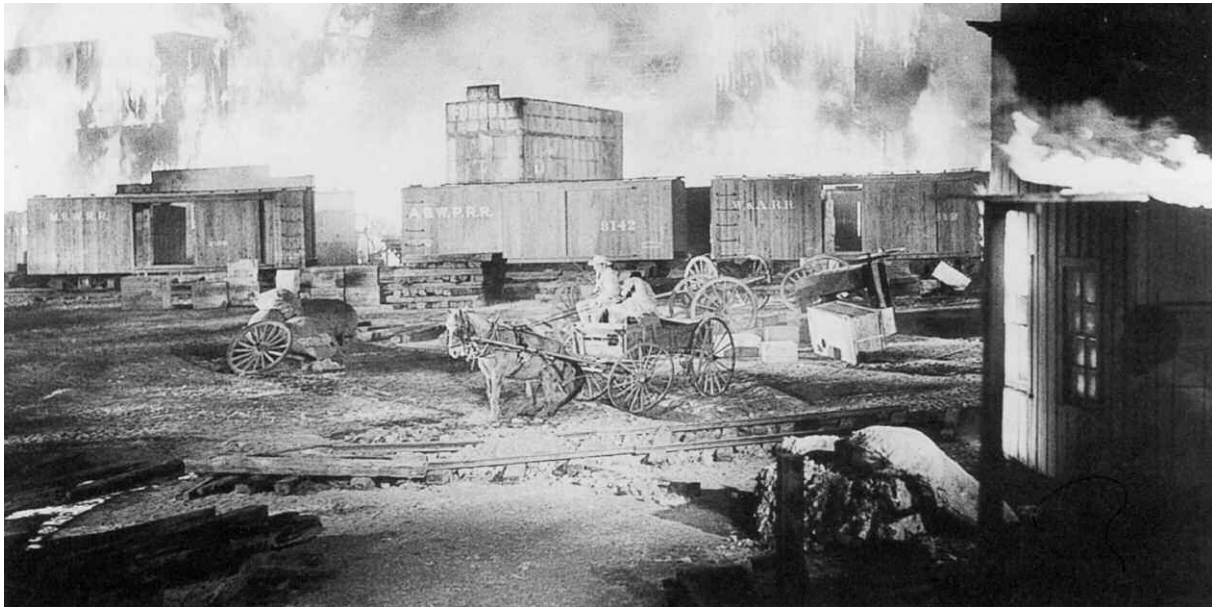
One of the most detailed investigations into the audiences of the film was undertaken by

Helen Taylor and published in *Scarlett's Women: Gone With the Wind and Its Female Fans* (1989). The book was published to coincide with the 50th anniversary of the release of the film. In an open letter in hundreds of magazines and newspapers she asked people with memories of, or strong views about, the film to write to her. The research revealed that *Gone With the Wind* was revered, re-read, reviewed and treasured in individual ways by a wide range of people of different generations, nationalities, class and race, although evidence suggested more by whites than blacks and Asians, and less by men than women. There is a wide variety of satisfactions that it has offered individual cinema-goers and readers alike. There are also different responses to seeing the film at the cinema or in a well-lit sitting room.

Helen Taylor's correspondence uncovered a rich variety of meanings, associations and interpretations brought to, or taken from, the film. Many had seen the film at different times since its first release – some at grand urban movie theatres, some on video, some once only, many dozens – and a few, hundreds – of times, some with a love of the novel and considerable knowledge of the Civil War, others for whom Margaret Mitchell and Southern history were unknown and irrelevant.

The film was received with undiluted adulation on its release in London in April 1940. It was easily the longest film that the audiences had seen, and often they were paying more than usual for their seats which, sometimes, even had to be booked. There was also the novelty of an intermission which was more associated with the theatre. This was a time of national austerity and Gladys Millman, one of Helen Taylor's correspondents, said that *'Gone With the Wind provided much relief from the grey days, bombs and so many horrific casualties.'* She also described the most memorable scene when Scarlett used the green velvet to make her dress. A few viewers followed Scarlett's example as curtain material, unlike dress fabric, was not on ration.

During the Second World War, *Gone With the Wind* made a particularly strong impact: it reflected the theme of people enduring the horrors of a great war. The burning of Atlanta had a particular poignancy for those who emerged from the cinema to see London itself in flames during the blitz. Such memories and associations relate to a specific generation of audience, especially women, for whom this film came close to home in so many ways.



Molly Haskell, an American Southerner and film critic wrote of the generation of the 1940s and 1950s: *'Those of us who were ambitious would use our femininity like Scarlett O'Hara used hers: would flirt, tease, withhold sex, to get what we wanted.'*

Later generations would rarely discuss the war theme but would more closely identify with the central love triangle of Rhett, Ashley and Scarlett. The advent of video gave rise to an even wider range of viewers. For women growing up in the 1960s and 1970s the focus became the trials and tribulations of Scarlett. She became the model of the active heroine in a world that was making new demands on its young women. Audiences of the 1980s and 1990s rediscovered Scarlett, seeing her as not merely the heroine, but the prime mover of the story, mistress of her own fate, exuding a gritty independence. How the individual filmgoer relates to *Gone With the Wind* depends greatly upon his or her generation, race, sex and nationality.

#### Discussion Points

- ☆ *Christine Geraghty in her book Women and Soap Opera (1991) argues that there are four elements which characterised the appeal of 'women's fiction' – a label which embraces romantic melodrama:*
  - An emphasis on a central woman whom the audience is invited to support.
  - A division between the public and private sphere, with women understanding and controlling the private space. An emphasis on building and maintaining relationships.
  - An element of fantasy in which values linked to the personal private sphere are privileged.
- How far do you think that *Gone With the Wind* fulfil the requirements to be classed as a woman's film?
- ☆ *Why do you think that *Gone With the Wind* has continued to sustain such large and varied audiences through the years?*

#### Task

1996 was the sixtieth anniversary of the publication of Margaret Mitchell's novel. You are to design a marketing campaign to promote a combined re-release of both book and DVD.

## ☆ POST SCRIPT ☆

The film of *Gone With the Wind* has been blessed. Derived from a best-selling book, it had a producer with a brilliant flare for publicity, casting and innovatory techniques, and it reached the cinemas at just the right time. The two-year search for Scarlett O'Hara; the inspired casting; its open ending; its premiere at the end of the Depression and in the first year of World War Two when survival and endurance gave it special resonances, all set it on course for fifty years of worldwide acclaim.

These years have cast fresh social and political lights on this nostalgic and, in some ways, deeply reactionary film and *Gone With the Wind* has survived as the supreme achievement and icon of Hollywood's greatest decade.

Who knows, what new associations it will gather? For, as we all know, tomorrow is...

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***Gone With the Wind*** and a two-hour documentary ***The Making of a Legend*** are both available through MGM/UA Home Video

**4 DVD Collector's Set with digital re-mastering for 70th anniversary**. Includes original reproduction souvenir programme, special features and a documentary

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