19TH C. NORTHERN VS. SOUTHERN WOMAN IN AMERICAN MOVIES

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MOTTO:

"In a world of tradition. In an age of innocence. They dared to break the rules." ('The Age of Innocence')
"As God is my witness. I'll never be hungry again." ('Gone with the Wind')

Abstract

The paper tries to highlight the differences between the Northern woman as represented in 'The Age of Innocence' and the Southern Woman as represented in 'Gone with the Wind'. The two women, Ellen and Scarlett are seen as conventional and unconventional representatives of the 19th century Cult of True Womanhood.

Introduction

Movies offer a great variety of sources for studying the image of woman and feminity, expectations and fears, may they be acknowledged or subconscious. The question this paper tries to answer is: "In what way was the 19th c Northern woman different from the Southern one?"

In order to answer the question I have analyzed two movies. The first one (representative of the Northern woman) is Martin Scorsese's 'The Age of Innocence' (1993), an accurate adaptation of Edith Wharton's novel with the same title, starring Michelle Pfeiffer (Countess Ellen Olenska), Daniel-Day Lewis (Newland Archer) and Wynona Ryder (May Welland). The second one (representative of the Southern woman) is David Selznick's 'Gone with the Wind' (1939), one of the most famous movies in cinematography history, the classic adaptation of Margaret Mitchell's single, ever-written novel with the same title, starring probably the most famous couple on the big screen: Vivien Leigh (Scarlett O'Hara), and Clark Gable (Rhett Butler) seconded by, but not less famous, Olivia de Havilland (Melanie Hamilton).

A general glimpse into the 19th c Northern and Southern society will reveal some of the woman's status in the American society of those times.

The Northern woman (mostly around New York and Boston) was imbued with strong Puritan beliefs. The wife was subordinated to her husband. The Puritan code included 4 (four) basic virtues known as the Cult of True Womanhood. The four virtues required from a woman to be: submissive, pure, domestic, and pious. She was expected to abide by the conventional code of behavior, i.e. to be the moral pillar of the home, a good wife and a child rearer. Divorce was out of the question until the end of the 18th c. Marriage had economic and social reasons at their base; it was not based on love.

The Cult of True Womanhood or the Cult of Domesticity emphasized woman's 'softer' nature: her innocence, vulnerability, passivity, and tenderness. Consequently,

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women were encouraged to cultivate 'feminine' qualities and to be moral examples to society.

It wasn't until the late 18th c and early 19th centuries that feelings became to be considered important in American family life and society in general. Courtship became more elaborate and couples had more freedom. Love and sincerity were promoted. However, economic considerations did not disappear entirely. Wealthy women married wealthy men; poorer men married poorer woman. While men became breadwinners, women's only 'acceptable' jobs were those related to sewing, gardening, or teaching.

In the South, the majority continued to live on farms or plantations. The conditions from the South were a bit different; the reasons might be several, but The Civil War is one of the most important. The Southern Belle, a woman as strong as she is manipulative, has endured in both literature and cinema as a pop symbol. According to the movies, the Southern woman is deceptively changeable and hysterical, but also strong and open. She says what she means and says it in a way that women in any other geographic area might hesitate to try. She gets what she wants, but in indirect ways. She is put on a pedestal by her men, but she chooses the wrong man. She is resistant and defeats rivals – even when she had to stitch up the curtains to make herself a new gown. All those subterfuges make her the strongest of all women. But jus as often, she pays for her strength in the end.

'The Age of Innocence' and the Northern Woman

'The Age of Innocence' focuses on Newland Archer, a young member of a rich and famous family of New York's society of the 19th c and his oscillation between the conventional May Welland, his fiancée, and May's unconventional, recently divorced cousin, Countless Ellen Olenska. Her status of a divorcée turns Ellen into a social outcast in the restrictive and narrow-minded high society of the late 19th c New York. Although Newland criticizes her in the beginning, he ends by submitting to society's expectations and marries pure and innocent May. Despite the feelings for each other, despite being an unconventional woman, Countless Olenska will finally return to Europe refusing to turn the man she loves into a social outcast as well. Thus, her decision has double meaning: on the one hand, we have to admit she is a failure as she leaves her place to the much weaker May, and, on the other hand, she proves to be the stronger one by her choice of self-sacrificing for her lover.

The times' society is accurately described. For instance, Newland's answer to Ellen about his true feelings for his future wife, May, is highly evocative: "In our country, we don't allow our marriages to be arranged." However, economic, and social reasons were not excluded as Mrs. Mingott (May and Ellen's aunt) confesses referring to May and Newland: "In them, two of New York's best families would finally and momentously be joined."

The courtship was indeed elaborate ("The Chivers were engaged for a year and a half, the Lefferts for two. Mama [May tells Newland] expects something customary") but couples enjoyed more freedom – we can see in the movie that Newland and May could spend much time together, just the two of them. They attended balls, parties, different social events, such as Opera concerts, thus becoming more and more familiar with each other. After the wedding, they went on honeymoon to Europe to have a romantic time before settling down to daily life. A truly conventional woman, raising children and be a

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good wife became the most important jobs for May. She actually died while nursing one of her children.

From the very first scene of the film (at the opera), we have a very clear glimpse into the upper class representatives of New York society of the late nineteenth century, a bunch of false, snobbish, hypocritical fellows, who have nothing to do than gossip, criticize the others, and pretend what they are not, e.g. a conversation between Jackson and Lefferts: "'Well, I didn't think the Mingotts would have tried it on'. ' Parading her at the opera. Sitting her next to May Welland! It's very odd.' 'Well, she's had such an odd life'. 'Will they bring her to the Beauforts' ball?' 'If they do, the talk will be of little else.'" It's like a 'warning' of what comes, the consequences you have to face for daring to defy carefully established customs and traditions in that snobbish, hypocritical society. All what follows becomes thus more touching and devastating.

So, given the circumstances, which is the place of a woman in such a world? Which are her chances to submit to the society's rules or to ignore them? Ellen Olenska is brought up in Europe, where she marries a womanizer Polish aristocrat, Count Olenska. She leaves her unhappy marriage and returns to New York. Though she wants to be accepted by the New York society, her behavior is much too unconventional. She has a passionate nature and also artistic and intellectual interests. Newly arrived, she is invited to a high society reunion where she arrives later and seems unaware of the impact the red dress she is wearing has on the guests. She seeks the company of Newland, although "it was not the custom in New York for a lady to get up and walk away from one gentleman in order to seek the company of another. But the countess did not observe this rule." Her need for disrespecting conventional things is also proved by the shock she produces on others with her strong desire to get her independence again through divorce. The unwritten but told laws of the time forbade a woman to seek independence: "Our legislation favors divorce, but our social customs don't. Well, not if the woman…has appearances… in the least degree against her, has exposed herself… by any unconventional behavior…to offensive insinuations and…."

Despite being so disillusioned by that society ("Does no one here want to know the truth, Mr. Archer? The real loneliness is living among all these kind people, who only ask you to pretend."), she tries hard to make herself a more "acceptable" person for the high-class standards, but she totally fails. She cannot separate what seemed the 'perfect' couple in that seemingly 'perfect' society. And because she truly loves Newland, she refuses to take him out from the society in which he fits so perfectly: "Newland, you couldn't be happy if it meant being cruel. If we act any other way, you'll act against what I love in you most. And I can't go back to that way of thinking. Don't you see? I can't love you unless I give you up."

Unlike Ellen, May Welland seems to be the perfect representation of the ideal of true womanhood. She is innocent in the sense that she is conventional, unimaginative, and apparently does not think of herself, wanting only to conform to society and her family's expectations. A controversial character, we never know if she really loves Newland or simply wants him for her image within that hypocritical society. Is she really innocent or is she the best manipulator? She goes through all states of mind: from deeply loving Archer, to the extend that she even is on the point of sacrificing her love for Newland's happiness with another woman, to her final victory of getting full grasp of Newland through marriage. And Newland falls into the trap, he has no courage to react, although he is fully aware he is manipulated. So, eventually, May is not the naïve, submissive woman she seems, but a woman who follows a clear-set goal which she actually fulfills. And this is definitely what makes her a strong character as well.

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'Gone with the Wind' and the Southern Woman

'Gone with the Wind' focuses on Scarlett O'Hara, the eldest of three daughters of Irish immigrants. The action takes place in rural Georgia during the American Civil War (1861-1865) on a large cotton plantation named Tara. She is beautiful, attractive, and aware of the effects her charm has over men. She attracts every young man in the neighborhood, except for Ashley Wilkes, whom Scarlett believes to be in love with. However, at the end of the movie, she confesses that her love for Ashley was in fact his need to be protected by a strong woman. A strong woman could love only a strong man. And that was Rhett Butler, handsome, and unscrupulous man, a perfect match for Scarlett. This compatibility is obvious from the very first scenes of the movie when Scarlett accuses Ashley for misleading her and making her believe he loved her. She becomes angry when she notices Rhett has overheard the whole conversation: "Sir, you are no gentleman!" she protests, to which he replies, "And you miss, are no lady!"

The war breaks up and the idle life style on the plantation gets to a full stop. The war brings changes in everybody's life. From the very beginning, before encountering life's hardships, Scarlett shows signs of unscrupulous character. She marries Melanie's shy, young brother Charles, although she does not love him. She is quickly widowed when Charles dies, not in battle, but of pneumonia. She goes to a charity ball in Atlanta, where, although still in mourning, accepts Rhett Butler's bid for a dance.

Her strength of character also appears later on when she brilliantly copes with Melanie's premature and difficult labor. When the city of Atlanta is attacked, Rhett Butler helps Scarlett and Melanie to escape the city. He leaves her and the sick Melanie (who has just given birth to a child) at the outskirts of the city, trustful that she has the ability to survive and face her enemies: "Heaven help the Yankees if they capture you!"

When she reaches home after a long and stressful journey, she proves a skillful 'manager', able to face the difficult situation she finds at Tara: her mother has just died, her father has lost his mind, and Twelve Oaks (Ashley's property) burned out and deserted.

Scarlett becomes stronger and stronger in her stubborn desire not to lose Tara. When she is refused tax money on Tara by Rhett she marries Frank Kennedy, her sister's fiancé, a successful store and lumber mill owner. She becomes a tough businesswoman, willing to trade with the despised Yankees and to use prison workers in her mill. After she loses her second husband in a night raid, just barely after his funeral, although shocked at his poor taste, Scarlett accepts Rhett's marriage proposal. After a honeymoon in New Orleans Rhett promises to restore Tara, while Scarlet builds the biggest house in Atlanta. They have a daughter, Bonnie, who dies at a young age falling from her pony. After several failed attempts to reconcile because of too much selfishness on both sides, at Melanie's deathbed, Scarlett becomes for the first time aware that she never really loved Ashley, that she had loved a chimera. As Rhett walks out the door, she begs him: "Rhett, if you go, where shall I go? What shall I do?" He answers: "Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn," and turns away. She sits on her stairs and weeps in despair, until her face brightens up with hope and strength: "Tara! Home. I'll go home, and I'll think of some way to get him back. After all, tomorrow is another day!" And in the final scene, Scarlett stands once more before Tara offering the image of a woman who never gives up fighting and who cannot be defeated.

The female protagonist of "Gone with the Wind", Scarlett, is a Southern beauty who struggles through the hardships of the Civil War and Reconstruction. From a certain

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point of view the Southern society is not different from the Northern one: the same tribal order based on the same so-called moral principles, the same snobbism and stupidity and the same expectations from a woman to honor the ideal of true womanhood. Mammy always teaches Scarlett to care about what folks say about the family, and to behave like a lady should, i.e. "eat like a bird … [and not] like a field hand and gobble like a hog". When Mammy teases her about Ashley's lack of intention to marry her, she stuffs food into her mouth, not caring about her behavior, at the same time exclaiming: "Why does a girl have to be so silly to catch a husband?"

So here again there is Scarlett who does not act according to the society's expectations. She dares to defy the unspoken rules. However, the circumstances are a bit different because of the war. The struggle to survive offers the characters a chance to become more active and aggressive in their struggle to obtain what they want. Scarlett shows off more of her father's hard-headedness than of her mother's refined Southern manners. Although she initially tries to behave according to the true woman stereotype, her instincts burst out against social restrictions. Stubborn determination is what drives her to achieve everything she desires by any means: "As God is my witness, as God they're not going to lick me. I'm going to live through this and when it's all over, I'll never be hungry again." So she manages to transcend that image of the submissive, pure, innocent and domestic true woman, by developing some qualities which were not considered proper for a woman, e.g. when she is in danger of starvation and even death she picks cotton, runs her entire plantation, develops a successful business, proving to be remarkably talented for business and leadership, and even kills a man. She recovers her father's plantation, Tara, after the war leaves it destroyed, and she achieves great success with her sawmill in Atlanta. Despite her sharp intelligence, however, she is almost unable to understand other people's feelings. Honor and kindness are not words included in her vocabulary.

Scarlett's development is in relation somehow with the changes in the Southern world. She changes from a spoiled teenager to a hard-working widow and then to a wealthy opportunist, suggesting the South's change from a society inclined to leisure to an attacked nation and then to a compromised survivor. Scarlett represents both the Old and the New South. She hangs on to Ashley, who symbolizes the Old South, that idealized lost world of chivalry and manners, but she adapts perfectly to the harsh and opportunistic world of the New South, eventually falling in love with Rhett, who, like Scarlett, is symbolical of both the Old and the New. Rhett falls in love with only one woman, Scarlett, and he tells her the reason: "Because we're alike. Bad lots, both of us. Selfish and shrewd. But able to look things in the eyes as we call them by their right names." Both are attractive, exciting and scandalous; both defy social customs; both are 'rejected' for dishonorable behavior; both with an acute sense of reality and change, they detect people's hypocrisy and react as such. Their relationship fails because both of them are too proud to express their feelings. To acknowledge being in love seems an act of weakness on either side.

Paradoxically, Rhett develops true friendly feelings for Melanie, although she embodies the values of the Old South. A lucid observer of human nature, Rhett recognizes her good nature as being authentic, and not a fake result of some idiot social expectations. A true woman, he says about Melanie that: "she was the only completely kind person I ever knew. A great lady. A very great lady."

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Conclusions

If we compare the Northern May with the Southern Melanie, at first sight, we see two authentic representatives of the Cult of True Womanhood. However, while Melanie's True Womanhood and good-hearted nature are natural and innate, not dictated by some social conventions, May is the pure product of a proper education dictated by the social expectations. While Melanie proves to be physically weak, she has surprising inner strength. May, on the other hand, seems to enjoy the role she has to act according to society's rules and even more, although she seems rather silly, she proves herself the finest manipulator.

The image of the unconventional woman is represented by both Ellen Olenska and Scarlett O'Hara. They both have a passionate nature and challenge the social conventions that turn them into outcasts. But, while Ellen tries to integrate into the society, Scarlett is not concerned at all about what the "respectable" ladies think about her. Ellen does not care about money, while Scarlett believes in the power of money and does everything to become wealthy again after the war is over.

Even the relationship true woman – outcast woman is somehow different. Although Scarlett hates Melanie in the beginning, she finally sees Melanie as a source of strength for her; Melanie supports Scarlett from the beginning to the end. Ellen and May seem to be in good terms, but appearances are finally deceivable, and reality will show two manipulating women, although one will fail, and the other will succeed.

On the whole, Ellen and Scarlett are very much alike, embodying the unconventional, independent woman, but while Ellen is weak and passive, and willing to sacrifice herself, Scarlett is strong, active, and quite selfish. Anyway, both represent new types of women, in search of true inner self and freedom.

Ellen Olenska in 'The Age of Innocence' saved her lover from being a social outcast by sacrificing her love. A woman of quick wit sharpened by experience, still, she could neither adapt to and/or be accepted by the New York upper-class society, nor could prove enough inner strength to fight for her beliefs; unconventional, strong, in many cases, still, she turned out to be conventional, weak, to a greater extent.

Scarlett O'Hara in 'Gone With the Wind' saved Tara, resisted the Yankees and made her lumber business profitable but, in the end, she lost the man she loved; however, there are signs she will suceed in the end. Author Margaret Mitchell wrote that ``there was the usual masculine disillusionment in discovering that a woman has a brain."

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