



DRAMA · WAR · ROMANCE

Gone with the Wind

1939 · Directed by Victor Fleming

Classical Hollywood

Historical Epic

Melodrama

War Film

Scarlett O'Hara, the headstrong daughter of a Georgia plantation owner, is used to getting her own way. As the Civil War breaks over the South, her world is stripped away, and she meets Rhett Butler, a man who sees through her. A four-hour Technicolor epic of romance and survival.

DIRECTOR	Victor Fleming
----------	----------------

YEAR	1939
------	------

RUNTIME	3h 58m (238 min)
---------	------------------

COUNTRY	USA
---------	-----

GENRES	Drama, War, Romance
--------	---------------------

CAST	Vivien Leigh, Clark Gable, Olivia de Havilland, Leslie Howard, Hattie McDaniel
------	--

MUSIC	Max Steiner
-------	-------------

IMDB	8.2 / 10 (354,268 votes)
------	--------------------------

ROTTEN TOMATOES	90% (critics)
--------------------	---------------

METACRITIC	97 / 100
------------	----------

TMDB SCORE	7.9 / 10 (4,499 votes)
------------	------------------------

WHERE TO WATCH	Stream (US): HBO Max Amazon Channel, YouTube TV, HBO Max Rent: Amazon Video, Apple TV Store, Google Play Movies, Fandango At Home, Spectrum On Demand, Plex Buy: Amazon Video, Apple TV Store, Google Play Movies, Fandango At Home
-------------------	---

Part one is spoiler-free. Part two, "After watching", reveals the story, scenes and ending.

Before watching

Spoiler-free

WHY WATCH THIS?

1 The defining Hollywood studio-system epic

Produced by David O. Selznick and released in 1939, it won eight competitive Academy Awards and sums up what the studio era could do with money, colour and stars at maximum scale.

2 One of the great star performances

Vivien Leigh carries almost every scene as Scarlett, a heroine who is charming, selfish and determined all at once. Clark Gable and Hattie McDaniel give her equally strong opposition.

3 A landmark you must also read critically

Its Technicolor spectacle is extraordinary, but its picture of the Old South is a romanticised, contested one. Watching it well means admiring the craft while questioning the history it presents.

WHY IT MATTERS IN CINEMA HISTORY

A culmination of the 1930s studio system and its early Technicolor era, it set the template for the prestige roadshow epic and shows how Hollywood shaped popular memory of American history.

WATCH WITH INTENTION

YOUR LENS

Watch it as a star-driven melodrama built on a complicated, often unlikable heroine, and notice how the film's picture of history is made to feel natural.

THREE THINGS TO NOTICE

- How colour is used: costume, skies and firelight are designed to signal mood and change, not just to decorate the frame.
- How Vivien Leigh's face and posture register shifts of calculation and feeling, often within a single shot.
- Whose point of view the film adopts, and whose lives stay in the background of the frame.

ONE QUESTION TO CARRY WITH YOU

Is Scarlett someone you are meant to admire, or merely someone you cannot look away from, and does the film seem to know the difference?

CINEMA AT THE TIME

- **Technology:** Three-strip Technicolor was still new and expensive, used mainly for cartoons, musicals and a few features. Using it for a long, serious drama of this size was a major commitment.
- **Industry:** Producer David O. Selznick, not the director, was the controlling creative force. Backed by MGM distribution, he ran a publicised casting hunt for Scarlett and a famously troubled, multi-director production.
- **Dominant styles:** Classical Hollywood storytelling favoured clear continuity, big stars and emotional melodrama. Literary best-sellers were prized source material, and Margaret Mitchell's 1936 novel was a publishing phenomenon.
- **Audience:** Audiences in 1939 had lived through the Depression and expected war in Europe. A story of ruin, endurance and rebuilding spoke to those anxieties, and the film was sold as a major event.

WHERE IT CAME FROM

FILM

The Birth of a Nation (1915)

An earlier epic that set a template for large-scale Civil War and Reconstruction drama, and for a sympathetic view of the white South.



TRADITION

Plantation romance and the Lost Cause

A literary and cultural tradition, drawn on by Mitchell's novel, that remembered the antebellum South as a vanished gracious order.



FILM

Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs (1937)

Showed that Technicolor and a very long feature could draw a mass audience, helping make colour a viable bet for big productions.



THIS FILM

Gone with the Wind (1939)

NEW AT THE TIME *Few films had tried this scale: a four-hour running time with an intermission, full Technicolor, and enormous crowd and set-piece spectacle in service of a melodrama.*

SOCIAL CONTEXT

Made as the US emerged from the Depression and war began in Europe, adapting a bestselling novel about the Civil War South for a huge, expectant audience.

- **Country and moment:** Shot in 1938–39 and released in December 1939, after years of Depression hardship and just as war broke out in Europe. A story of a society upended and rebuilt spoke to an anxious public.

- **A national phenomenon:** Margaret Mitchell's 1936 novel sold in vast numbers and won the Pulitzer Prize. The casting of Scarlett became a nationwide guessing game, so expectations were enormous before filming began.
- **Race and the Lost Cause:** The film romanticises the antebellum South, a view widely shared in white America then. Black critics and press objected to its portrayal of slavery. Segregation also kept Black cast members from the Atlanta premiere.
- **Politics and censorship:** Producer David O. Selznick had to negotiate with the Hollywood Production Code office over the novel's sexual content and language. He also toned down some of its racial material after protests.

WHAT TO EXPECT

- **Pace:** Unhurried and episodic: it plays like a serialised novel, with an intermission roughly midway. Plan it as two sittings if needed.
- **Style:** Lavish studio-era melodrama: sweeping orchestral score, painted backdrops, large sets, heightened emotion and theatrical dialogue.
- **Colour:** Rich three-strip Technicolor with saturated reds and golds, in the standard 1.37:1 frame.
- **Content:** Contains a romanticised view of slavery and the Confederacy, with racial stereotypes and dated attitudes. Many viewers read it alongside historical context.
- **Performance:** Large, stagey gestures typical of 1939, balanced by close-ups that let Leigh and Gable play real nuance.
- **Format:** Originally a roadshow release with an overture and intermission music. Restored versions keep them.

WATCH WITH KIDS?

12+ SUGGESTED AGE

US G and French TP allow all ages, GB says PG and Germany 12; 12 suits the length, adult themes and the need to discuss its view of slavery.

Official ratings: US G · UK PG · Germany 12 · France TP

- **Good for:** Older children and teens who enjoy sweeping Technicolor epics, lavish costumes and a headstrong, flawed heroine. It's a good way into classic Hollywood melodrama and into discussing how films present history.
- **May unsettle, dated attitudes:** Slavery and the Old South are shown in a romanticised way, with demeaning racial stereotypes and period language. This is the most significant concern and needs context.
- **May unsettle, war aftermath:** Scenes of wounded and dying soldiers, chaos and fire during wartime. Little graphic detail, but some sequences are distressing.
- **May unsettle, mature themes:** Troubled marriages, obsessive love, grief and some coercive behaviour between adults. These are implied rather than shown explicitly.

- **May unsettle, intensity:** Long stretches of emotional hardship and loss, plus a grim, bleak tone in places, may weigh on sensitive viewers.
- **Explain first:** The film shows the Civil War South from the planters' point of view and glosses over the cruelty of slavery. Tell children that this is a distorted picture.
- **Explain first:** It runs nearly four hours with an intermission, so plan two sittings with younger teens.
- **Explain first:** It's a 1939 melodrama, so the acting is theatrical and the pace is slow compared with modern films.

Talk about it after: *Whose experiences does the film put at the centre, and whose are pushed to the edges? How might the story feel different told from another character's point of view?*

Cinespective's own guidance, a draft. Check it against the official ratings and your own judgement.

After watching

CONTAINS SPOILERS

THE FILM, UNPACKED

CENTRAL IDEA

The film is about survival and the price of it: a woman who clings to a vanished way of life and to a man she imagines she loves. It can be read as a story of will against history, told with sympathy for the losing side.

THEMES

- **Survival and self-reinvention:** Scarlett's defining trait is her willingness to do whatever it takes to endure. The film admires that drive while showing what it costs in love and conscience.
- **Illusion versus reality in love:** Scarlett pursues a romantic ideal and misreads the people who actually love her. Much of the drama comes from recognition arriving too late.
- **Nostalgia for a lost world:** The film mourns the antebellum South as gracious and gone. It can be read as a myth-making work, since that grace depended on slavery, which it largely softens.
- **Land and belonging:** Tara, the family plantation, anchors Scarlett's identity and gives her strength. The land is treated as the one lasting thing in a collapsing order.
- **Women's agency and its limits:** Scarlett takes on business, money and household headship in a society that expects her to be decorative. The film admires her ability yet judges her for it.

Key scenes

The burning of Atlanta

The spectacle matches Technicolor to catastrophe, and it is the point where Scarlett and Rhett's partnership shows its character. It also demonstrates the scale of production, as it was filmed before Scarlett was cast.

Scarlett's vow at Tara

The film's turning point: Scarlett, hungry and alone against a blazing sky, defines herself in a few lines. It shows how a close-up and a silhouette can turn a woman's resolve into an image of national endurance.

The staircase and the Butler marriage

Interiors, red tones and framing carry the unspoken dynamics of Scarlett and Rhett's marriage. The scenes show the film's melodrama working through design as much as dialogue.

The final parting

The closing exchange refuses a conventional happy ending. It rewards the long build-up by setting Rhett's exhaustion against Scarlett's reflex of persistence, and the last line reframes the whole story as a heroine's refusal to quit.

Filmmaking

- **Colour and design:** William Cameron Menzies' production design and Ernest Haller's cinematography use Technicolor dramatically: skies glow with fire or sunset, and costume colours mark each stage of Scarlett's life.
- **Direction by committee:** Victor Fleming gets the credit, but George Cukor began the film and Sam Wood filled in during Fleming's absence. Selznick's control gives a unified look despite changing hands.
- **Performance:** Vivien Leigh's Scarlett holds the long film together through changes from coquette to hardened survivor. Hattie McDaniel's Mammy is the film's most complex supporting performance, within a limited role.
- **Music:** Max Steiner's sweeping score and the Tara theme give the film an operatic, leitmotif-driven emotional frame. The music tells you how to feel and also helps the film's length feel like grandeur.
- **Scale and spectacle:** Thousands of extras, painted matte backgrounds and the burning set make the war feel immense. Wide shots of the wounded in Atlanta are among the film's best-remembered compositions.

THE FULL STORY

The full plot, including the ending.

Scarlett O'Hara, the pampered daughter of a Georgia plantation owner, is devastated when Ashley Wilkes, the man she loves, announces his engagement to his gentle cousin Melanie. Out of spite she marries Melanie's brother Charles, who dies of illness in the early days of the Civil War. A young widow, she moves to Atlanta, where she is drawn into a sparring relationship with the roguish blockade runner Rhett Butler. As Union forces approach Atlanta, Rhett helps Scarlett and Melanie, who has just given birth, to flee, then leaves them to join the Confederate cause. Scarlett makes her own way home to Tara and finds her mother dead, her father broken, and the land devastated. Hungry and defiant, she swears she will never go hungry again.

In the Reconstruction years, she marries her sister's fiancé Frank Kennedy to save Tara from taxes, and after his death marries Rhett, now wealthy. Their marriage is passionate but strained by her lingering fixation on Ashley. Their daughter Bonnie is the one thing they share, and her death in a riding accident destroys what is left between them.

When Melanie dies, Scarlett realises that Ashley was a dream and that she truly loves Rhett. But Rhett, worn out, leaves her. Alone, Scarlett resolves to return to Tara and begin again, saying that tomorrow is another day.

BEHIND THE FILM

- **The search for Scarlett:** Selznick publicised a long, nationwide hunt for Scarlett, testing many well-known and unknown actresses. Vivien Leigh, a British actress, was chosen only after filming of the Atlanta fire had begun, which was shot with a stand-in.

- **Directors came and went:** George Cukor began the film but was replaced early by Victor Fleming after disputes with Selznick. Fleming's later exhaustion brought in Sam Wood for a stretch. Selznick, with many writers revising the script, shaped the whole.
- **Burning old sets:** The Atlanta fire sequence was shot first, using old studio sets that were cleared by burning, including the large wall left from King Kong. Multiple Technicolor cameras recorded the one-time event.
- **Hattie McDaniel's Oscar:** McDaniel became the first African American to win an Academy Award, for Best Supporting Actress. At the ceremony, she was seated at a segregated table, and segregation laws also kept her from the Atlanta premiere.
- **A censored word:** Rhett's final line used a mild profanity that the Production Code frowned on. After debate, the censors allowed it, a small but famous loosening of the rules.
- **Myth:** Victor Fleming directed the whole film alone. **Reality:** George Cukor worked on early preparation and shooting before being replaced, and Sam Wood directed for a period when Fleming was ill. Fleming gets sole credit and the Oscar.
- **Myth:** The film is an accurate picture of the Civil War South. **Reality:** It follows the 'Lost Cause' tradition of Mitchell's novel, which minimises slavery's brutality and presents plantation life as a lost gracious world. Historians widely criticise this view.
- **Myth:** Hattie McDaniel was celebrated and fully included at the film's biggest events. **Reality:** Although she won an Oscar, segregation limited her treatment: she sat apart at the ceremony and could not attend the Atlanta premiere.

LEGACY AND CONNECTIONS

Its place in the lineage before → after

FILM

The Birth of a Nation (1915)

An earlier epic that set a template for large-scale Civil War and Reconstruction drama, and for a sympathetic view of the white South.



TRADITION

Plantation romance and the Lost Cause

A literary and cultural tradition, drawn on by Mitchell's novel, that remembered the antebellum South as a vanished gracious order.



FILM

Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs (1937)

Showed that Technicolor and a very long feature could draw a mass audience, helping make colour a viable bet for big productions.



THIS FILM

Gone with the Wind (1939)



FILM

Ben-Hur (1959)

A later MGM roadshow epic using the format of overture, intermission and enormous scale that *Gone with the Wind* helped define.



FILM

Doctor Zhivago (1965)

Another long romantic saga in which love is tested by war and revolution, and a seasoned lineage descendant of the Selznick-style epic.



TRADITION

Revisionist depictions of slavery and the South

Later filmmakers and critics have responded to its myths with works that centre enslaved and Black perspectives, making this film a reference point.

Reception and reputation

The film opened in December 1939 as a major event, with a splashy Atlanta premiere and long lines for its roadshow engagements. Audiences flocked to it, and most critics praised its scale, colour and performances, while some noted its length and sentimentality. Criticism of its portrayal of race existed from the start, though it was a minority view in mainstream coverage.

For decades it was regarded as the commercial high point of classical Hollywood, and it remains one of the most-seen American films. Since the later twentieth century its racial politics have been central to its reputation, and it is now usually discussed both as a cinematic achievement and as a problematic historical myth. It is often shown with context.

Awards Oscars and Cannes

Academy Awards: 13 nominations, 8 competitive wins (Best Picture, Director, Actress, Supporting Actress, Adapted Screenplay, Cinematography in colour, Art Direction, Film Editing), plus two special awards for technical and colour achievement.

Cultural impact beyond cinema

- **Lost Cause mythology:** The film is widely seen as a powerful popularizer of the romanticized Old South and "Lost Cause" image of plantation life. Its depiction of slavery and Reconstruction has made it a central case in debates over how Hollywood shaped public memory of the Civil War.
- **Hattie McDaniel's Oscar:** Hattie McDaniel became the first African American to win an Academy Award, for Best Supporting Actress as Mammy. She was seated at a segregated table at the ceremony, and her win is often cited in discussions of Black performers' constrained roles in Hollywood.
- **Quotable lines:** "Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn" and "Tomorrow is another day" became everyday phrases. Scarlett's vow "As God is my witness, I'll never be hungry again" is a frequent target of parody, including the Carol Burnett Show's curtain-rod dress sketch.

- **Modern reappraisal:** In 2020 HBO Max temporarily pulled the film, then restored it with an introduction by scholar Jacqueline Stewart placing it in historical context. Its screenings and use in teaching now often pair enjoyment of the craft with critique of its racial politics.

Its lasting influence

It established the long, event-style roadshow epic as a Hollywood prestige format, which later epics like *Ben-Hur* and *Doctor Zhivago* followed. Its heroine and its romance-against-history template shaped many later sagas, while its myths of the South became a lasting target of revisionist cinema.

WHAT NEXT?

CONTINUE THE DIRECTOR

The Wizard of Oz (1939)

Victor Fleming directed this in the same year, partly in the same period of work. It shows the same studio-era Technicolor craft in a very different, fantastical register.

SEE WHAT INFLUENCED IT

The Birth of a Nation (1915) **COMING SOON**

The film that created the Civil War epic and its troubling racial vision. Seeing it shows what *Gone with the Wind* inherited and softened.

FOLLOW THE IDEA

Doctor Zhivago (1965)

A later epic romance set against national upheaval, with a similar emphasis on long runtime, scenery and a swelling score.

EXPLORE THE ERA OR MOVEMENT

Stagecoach (1939)

Another landmark of 1939, a banner year for Hollywood, showing the era's confident, classical style in a leaner western form.

COMPARE ANOTHER APPROACH

The Grapes of Wrath (1940)

A different view of American hardship and survival, set in the Depression, grounded in realism and sympathetic to the dispossessed.

FULL CAST AND CREW



Victor Fleming
DIRECTOR



Vivien Leigh
ACTOR
as Scarlett O'Hara



Clark Gable
ACTOR
as Rhett Butler



Olivia de Havilland
ACTOR
as Melanie Hamilton



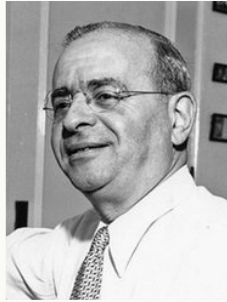
Leslie Howard
ACTOR
as Ashley Wilkes



Hattie McDaniel

ACTOR

as Mammy



Max Steiner

COMPOSER

Draft content generated for Cinespective and subject to review; awards and dates should be verified before being relied upon. This product uses the TMDB API but is not endorsed or certified by TMDB. Streaming availability by JustWatch via TMDB.