



The Old South – Tap Root for Characters of Film?

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Films on the American South over the past century have constantly dealt with the development and the shift from the Old South to the New South through the period of Reconstruction. The characters presented in the films often struggle with the transition between the two eras, mostly because of the strong link they feel with the Old South. In an excerpt from “The Mind of the South” by W.J. Cash in *The Oxford Book of The American South*, Cash compares the South to a tree: “The South, one might say, is a tree with many age rings, with its limbs and trunk bent and twisted by all the winds of the years, but with its tap root in the Old South” (Cash 76). Similarly, many of the characters from films such as *Gone with the Wind*, *Show Boat*, *Birth of a Nation*, and *Places in the Heart* have roots in the Old South which go hand-in-hand with many of their ideals. When they are forced to transition to the New South, they are often reluctant and unwilling, striving to keep at least one foot in the Old South. The argument of characters being stuck between the Old and New South is supported by many critical essays which present common themes linking southern men and women with the ideals of the Old South and the challenges they faced after the Civil War. Characters like Scarlett O’Hara, Mammy, Rhett Butler, Magnolia, Gaylord, the Stonemans, Wayne, Mrs. Spalding, and Will represent the shift in values in the South, and each reflects the strong desire to maintain the principles of the Old South that they call home.

The image of a river is often presented in reference to the Old South, such as in *Show Boat* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, and represents a flowing, cyclical environment

that provides the people who interact with it a great deal of comfort and sense of safety; in other words, it is a metaphor for the Old South. The characters feel attached to the river like some other characters are attached to their farms, essentially serving as the soil in which their tap roots are embedded. In Twain's novel, Huck and Jim build a raft to use to float down the river. "We said there warn't no home like a raft, after all. Other places do seem so cramped up and smothery, but a raft don't. You feel mighty free and easy and comfortable on a raft," Huck reflects after escaping the chaos left in society in the wake of the Civil War (Twain 76).

The use of the raft on the river in *Huckleberry Finn* is a parallel to the Mississippi River in *Show Boat*. The performers travel the river and bring their show to southern towns, where crowds of people are thrilled to see a show that reveals their values. Cheering audiences gather, both white upper-class citizens and African Americans. In a way, the performers are stuck in the Old South because they perform songs and dances which reflect older values. They and so many other individuals are "stuck in history" (Warren 161). The performers on the Show Boat, including Magnolia, Gay, and Julie, are trapped in the ideals of the Old South and are either unwilling to accept the ideals of the New South or simply too ignorant of the changes in the outside world because they are lost in a world of "make-believe," which is the entertainment world of the Old South. When they venture outside of that world, it is as if they are unearthing their tap roots, and they suffer: Julie becomes an alcoholic with abusive relationship after abusive relationship, as seen by her fleeting meeting with Gay as he debates returning to the Show Boat. Magnolia and Gay's marriage begins to fail as Gay succumbs to gambling and leaves his wife. He is shown in dingy, smoky bars, wasting away and wasting money. It is only when Gay returns to Magnolia, the Show Boat, and the river that they are able to forget their suffering and live in the land of make-believe once again. Julie's longing gaze at the end of the

film as they sail away represents her relief that Magnolia is safe in the beauty and romanticism of the Old South. On a similar note, the African American Joe sings “Old Man River” with a choir in the background, suggesting the connection of African Americans to the river as well. The refrain from the chorus plays as the movie ends and reflects the fact that even African Americans, who suffered greatly due to slavery in the Old South, still felt a sense of belonging there—of being home.

The sense of peace that the characters from *Show Boat* and *Huckleberry Finn* and Jim feel on the river reflects the beauty of the natural Old South in contrast to the changing solid land of the New South and how many southerners struggled to adjust. After Reconstruction, the New South was urged to develop its economy in a similar manner to the industrial North. In James Cobb’s book *Away Down South*, he reveals that “The original New South’s proponents vowed to use industrial development to northernize their regions’ economy while doing their best and then to uphold the most definitively ‘southern’ ideals of the Old South, especially its racial, political, and class hierarchies” (68). Cobb argues that the “best tribute” to the memories of the Old South and the heroes of the Lost Cause “was to build a new South: to beat the Yankees at their own game, to build factories and cities and not corrupt the morals of the people or upset the racial, gender, and social balances derived from the vanished civilization” (75). While most southerners rejected the idea of being industrialized because of the implication that industrialization meant “Yankeefication,” the economic benefits of this shift were also evident. This can be seen in *Gone with the Wind* when the carpetbaggers visit Tara; Ashley comments that it might be better to give up the land to save on the debt, and Scarlett refuses to oblige and returns to agriculture as a source of income. Their effort to maintain a strong grasp of the Old South and their land while

gently easing their way into the New South by adjusting to the new economy reflects their attempt to keep their “tap roots” in the Old South.

In D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*, characters from the North and the South are matched against one another to reveal the sharp contrast between their opinions of the South as a region, their opinions regarding the Reconstruction period, and their distinct definitions of home. On one hand, the Cameron family is full of devoted southerners who epitomize the sense of “honor” apparent in much of the South's culture. The youngest sister chooses to jump to her death rather than face the possibility of being raped by a black man, and the brother, Ben, refuses to shake hands with a mulatto. On the other hand, the Stoneman family is thrust into southern society without a full understanding of southern ideals. Elsie Stoneman has no idea of how much the southerners have struggled during the war. While the Cameron sisters try to impress their brother with “Southern Ermine” or cotton, Elsie dresses in silks and frilly lace. She does not realize the depth of the South's impoverished state during Reconstruction until she is almost forced to marry Simon Lynch. The shock of Lynch's proposal makes her faint. In the same spectrum, her father placed Lynch in control of the Reconstruction efforts to ensure the successful transition of the South to a region where African Americans were free of slavery. He, being a northerner, did not realize the toll this would take on southern ideals. *Birth of a Nation's* director, D.W. Griffith, was described as being “deeply immersed” in the “Plantation Illusion,” a southern myth which holds that “the Old South was a place of happiness based on an agrarian life style and a social structure dominated both by tradition and by white aristocrats.” This “illusion” marks the strong connection between southerners and their land (Armour 15), and can be illustrated through Scarlett O'Hara's determination to return Tara to a state where cotton was harvested by “black hands” rather than “white,” and her desire for the Old South rather than the reality of the Post-

Civil War South. Similarly, the Camerons wistfully remember the Old South, when they ran a successful plantation and did not have to deal with the involvement of northerners, who did not appreciate or recognize their values because they had not established roots in the Deep South: they would forever remain foreigners on southern soil, and would never fully understand the concept of the plantation as home.

The connection to agrarian society is present in *Places in the Heart*, as Edna Spalding struggles to maintain her farm and property against the odds with the help of Moses and Will, and reflects her deep connection to the South and her farm, where she has established her tap root because of her family. The dedication and hard work of Edna is reflected in several scenes, including the harvesting of the cotton and the kitchen scene when Moses reveals that their efforts are futile. Edna works as hard as she can to get the cotton to pay the bank, claiming that she'll work until they're all dead to meet the deadline. She works with bandaged hands because of all the cuts and splits in her fingers and has cloth wrapped around her knees. She's so worn out by the effort that she has to crawl through the field in disbelief that they actually accomplished the harvest. A similar dedication is described by Kate Chopin's "Desiree's Baby," in which Madame Valmondé "[loved] her own land too well ever to leave it" (Chopin 219). Edna Spalding refuses to give up her farm, which is her link to the past – to her husband and to the Old South. Her Old South ideals of a sense of her roots, particularly those of home and family, are revealed to Will, who had lost all hope with his blindness due to the war. At the end of the film he is perhaps the most-changed, seeing in a way that no other character could. He is full of admiration for southern pride and finds his southern roots by defending Moses from the KKK simply because Moses is his friend, regardless of his color. Another character "lost" in the Old South is Wayne, Margaret's husband. He is full of romantic ideals and notions which lead to his affair with Viola,

the school teacher. He pursues the affair without any consideration of the ramifications, and when his wife recognizes his infidelity, he is devastated by her response. At the ending of the film, when Margaret reaches for his hand in an effort to reconcile their marriage, the look of relief on his face is extremely touching. I looked at him as the character that represented the Old South and Margaret as the character who represented the New South. To me their reconciliation represented the compromise of southern development. Economics and the southern land changed and warped with time, while the ideals and values of the Old South remained the same.

Perhaps the most crucial characters to the argument that the Old South serves as a tap root to characters are from *Gone with the Wind*. The popular film presents characters such as Mammy, Melanie, Rhett Butler, and Scarlett O'Hara, who collectively represent the changes of the South in the aftermath of the Civil War. The opening line of the film is "There was a land of Cavaliers and cotton fields called the Old South," establishing immediately that the ideals of the Old South are crucial to the film. Presented in *Gone with the Wind* is Mammy, who serves the O'Hara family and acts as a motherly figure toward Scarlett. She is often seen reprimanding the fiery, independent daughter and reprimanding and warning her of her explosive and scandalous mannerisms. Mammy's devotion to the O'Hara family reflects her position as one of the "loyal servants" and creates a sense of acceptance on her part of her position in southern society. If anything, she seems to value the responsibility and wants to make the O'Hara family proud by ensuring that Scarlett is kept in line through her endeavors. Mammy represents one of the roots in the traditional Old South, in which the African American slave is an integral member of the white family. In "Mammy's 'Mules'" Riche Richardson states that "*Gone with the Wind* reveals nostalgia for the Old South and its attendant hierarchical and polarized paternalistic social order grounded in slavery. Yet the film offers, through the interplay of Scarlett and Mammy, in which

Mammy acts as a mother figure and the only adult that Scarlett will obey, a dynamic that unsettles such notions of black inferiority, racial hierarchy, white supremacy, and racial purity, and illustrates the impact of blackness on some aspects of white racial and social identity.” The dynamic between Mammy and Scarlett reveals ideals from the Old South and contrasts with the relationship between Scarlett and Rhett. Rhett Butler serves as a constant reminder of the changing south and does not have a solid tap root in the Old South. He reminds Scarlett over and over again that she is living in the past and that the Old South is gone. She refuses to believe him, though, and only accepts the destructive impact of the war when she returns home to Tara. When they part ways, Rhett claims he was leaving to fight for “honor” for the Lost Cause. He accepted the values of the Old South and his own southern identity just as it was about to fall to pieces. This realization that what the South was fighting for was right reflects his acceptance of his southern roots. Meanwhile, Scarlett accepts the fact that the Old South may be gone physically, but she can still hold her values through her maintenance of Tara. In Margaret Mitchell’s novel, the narrator declares that “Harsh contact with the red earth of Tara had stripped gentility from her and she knew she would never feel like a lady again until her table was weighted with silver and crystal and smoking with rich food, until her own horses and carriages stood in her stables, until black hands and not white took the cotton from Tara.” Her desire to return Tara to its former glory reflects the “plantation illusion” in that she hopes to maintain the Old South in spirit, and she does so by marrying Rhett as to access his fortune and restore Tara. Their honeymoon occurs on a show boat, ironically, and even though the relationship collapses in the end, Scarlett is left with what matters: Tara. Tara is ultimately the symbol of the Old South and her home, her tap root. It is a place to which she can always return, and the thing she works hardest to keep.

One of the most beautiful images from *Gone with the Wind* is when Scarlett stands on the outskirts of Tara beside the dead tree after the Civil War ends, as she declares she will never be hungry again and Tara will be beautiful again. This connection between Tara and the tree and the evolving character of Scarlett reflects her desire for the Old South. All depend upon one another to ensure the survival of the Old South through love and determination. The characters and southern people maintain the values and ideals of the Old South while reaching out to develop in a manner that will create a better economy in the south, as seen by the gradual industrialization of southern farms as the region shifts to the New South. A consistent theme in all of the films and readings is that the characters maintain their belief and trust in the Old South throughout all of their struggles. They cling to what they love in order to survive, and while they might accept that the South is a constantly evolving region, they all seem comfortable in the end with the realization that in their hearts they know exactly who they are and where they feel at home.

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