

A Journey into the Classics: Rethinking Literary Value through *Gone with the Wind* and *The Wind Done Gone*

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Abstract

This comparative literary study examines Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* (1936) and Alice Randall's *The Wind Done Gone* (2001) to reconsider the practice of judging literature through the binary categories of "high" and "popular" literature. The study uses comparative textual analysis, informed by cultural sociology, feminist aesthetics, Black feminist criticism, theories of parody, and intertextuality. It compares the novels' genre, narrative perspective, language, characterization, treatment of race and gender, historical imagination, and cultural significance. Rather than regarding Randall's novel as artistically inferior because it rewrites a canonical predecessor, the study reads it as a revisionary narrative that questions the racial silences and plantation nostalgia of Mitchell's novel. The analysis finds that *Gone with the Wind* remains culturally influential but constructs the US South through a white-centered narrative that minimizes the violence and structural realities of slavery. In contrast, *The Wind Done Gone* shifts narrative authority to Cynara, a formerly enslaved Black woman, and uses parody, diary form, and intertextual revision to challenge the assumptions of the source text. The study argues that literary value should not be determined by canonization, commercial popularity, or an assumption that originality means independence from earlier texts. Instead, literary evaluation should consider formal craft, historical awareness, ethical accountability, cultural location, interpretive richness, and a work's capacity to generate critical reflection. Comparative reading is most productive when it moves beyond ranking texts and examines how literature shapes, preserves, and contests cultural memory.

Keywords: comparative literature, literary value, popular literature, parody, intertextuality, race, gender, *Gone with the Wind*, *The Wind Done Gone*

1. Introduction

Literary study has often distinguished between canonical and popular texts, or between "high" and "low" literature. These categories may describe differences in institutional recognition, publication history,

readership, market circulation, and classroom use. However, they are inadequate when treated as fixed measures of artistic or ethical worth. Literary value is produced through reading communities, schools, universities, publishers, reviewers, prizes, libraries, and other cultural institutions. Bourdieu (1984) argues that taste is socially shaped and connected to cultural capital. Thus, what is considered refined, prestigious, or “great” cannot be separated from questions of class, education, and access to cultural authority.

Recent scholarship similarly treats the popular not as an inferior residue of literary culture but as an important category of literary analysis. Zubov (2022) explains that popularity involves the interaction of textual forms, audiences, institutions, and cultural hierarchies. Contemporary reading cultures also complicate any strict division between literary prestige and mass readership. For example, BookTok has influenced book discovery, reviewing, reading communities, and publishing visibility, showing how readers actively participate in the circulation and valuation of literature (Dera, 2024). These developments make it necessary to examine how literary value is assigned and whose perspectives are centered when texts are classified as canonical or popular.

This paper compares Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone with the Wind* and Alice Randall’s *The Wind Done Gone*. Mitchell’s novel has held a prominent place in US popular and canonical culture because of its commercial success, Pulitzer Prize, film adaptation, and continuing cultural presence. Yet the novel has also been criticized for its nostalgic construction of the Old South, its idealization of the plantation household, and its racial stereotypes. Randall’s novel responds directly to this legacy. Through the diary of Cynara, a formerly enslaved Black woman and the half-sister of Randall’s counterpart to Scarlett O’Hara, *The Wind Done Gone* revisits the fictional world of Tara from a perspective made marginal in Mitchell’s narrative.

The purpose of the study is not to decide permanently which novel is superior. Rather, it investigates how each novel constructs race, gender, memory, and narrative authority. It asks: (1) How do the novels differ in their representations of the antebellum and Reconstruction South? (2) How does Randall’s use of parody and intertextuality challenge Mitchell’s narrative? (3) What criteria can support a more ethical and critically responsible evaluation of canonical and popular literature?

2. Theoretical Framework

The study brings together five perspectives on literary evaluation. First, Kant’s account of aesthetic judgment remains important to discussions of originality, artistic imagination, and disinterested appreciation. Kant (2000) associates genius with originality and exemplary creative production. However, this approach becomes limited if originality is understood as creating without relation to prior texts.

Literature is inherently dialogic: writers work within genres, traditions, languages, conventions, and cultural memories.

Second, Bourdieu's (1984) cultural sociology provides a framework for questioning the social processes through which certain works become canonical while others are dismissed as popular, commercial, or derivative. Standards of taste do not emerge outside history and power. They are affected by educational institutions, publishing systems, class locations, and dominant assumptions about whose stories deserve prestige.

Third, feminist aesthetics challenges apparently universal standards by asking how gender shapes ideas about art, authorship, value, and authority (Battersby, 1989). A feminist approach is especially relevant to both novels because each centers women, but the women's possibilities are structured differently by race, class, and legal status. Scarlett O'Hara's agency is enabled by white privilege and property relations, while Cynara's experiences are shaped by enslavement, sexual vulnerability, color hierarchy, and restricted mobility.

Fourth, Gates's (1988) theory of Signifyin(g) is useful for reading Randall's rewriting. Signifyin(g) names a Black rhetorical practice of repetition with revision: a text may repeat elements of another text while altering their meanings and challenging their authority. Randall's novel does not simply borrow Mitchell's characters and settings. It exposes the ideological costs of the original narrative by making a marginalized character its central consciousness.

Finally, theories of parody and intertextuality explain how a later text can both depend on and critique an earlier one. Hutcheon (2000) defines parody as repetition with critical distance rather than mere imitation. Recent work also emphasizes intertextuality as an active critical practice through which modern and contemporary literature repositions earlier texts, traditions, and cultural assumptions (Ebury & Mulligan, 2024). From this perspective, *The Wind Done Gone* is not a failed copy of *Gone with the Wind*; it is a purposeful counter-narrative.

3. Methodology

This qualitative study employs comparative textual analysis. The primary texts are Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* (1936/2014) and Randall's *The Wind Done Gone* (2001). The analysis is organized around six dimensions: (1) genre and intertextual relationship; (2) point of view and narrative form; (3) language and voice; (4) representation of race, gender, sexuality, and class; (5) historical imagination; and (6) cultural and ethical significance.

The study does not use numerical ratings. Percentages cannot establish literary value unless the criteria, scoring procedures, and evidence are transparent and replicable. More importantly, numerical rankings can conceal the historical and political assumptions that shape literary judgment. Instead, the study uses close reading to identify how each novel produces meaning, whose experiences it centers, and how readers may interpret its representation of history.

4. Comparative Analysis and Discussion

4.1 Genre, canon, and cultural memory

Gone with the Wind is best described as a historical romance and plantation novel set during the US Civil War and Reconstruction. Its enduring popularity is undeniable, but popularity does not establish neutrality or universal value. The novel's white Southern viewpoint transforms the collapse of the slaveholding order into a story of loss, courage, romance, and survival. This emphasis creates a nostalgic vision of the Old South while reducing slavery's violence and the independent interior lives of enslaved people.

The Wind Done Gone belongs to the tradition of revisionary historical fiction and may also be read alongside neo-slave narratives. Such narratives revisit slavery and its aftermath in order to recover experiences obscured by dominant historical accounts (Smith, 2007; Hutchins, 2022). Randall's text takes the familiar setting of Tara and reveals its racial structure from within. The result is not simply an alternative plot; it is a challenge to the cultural memory made powerful by Mitchell's novel and its adaptations.

The two books therefore demonstrate that canon and popularity are not opposites. *Gone with the Wind* is both a canonical and a mass-cultural text. Randall's novel, though marketed as a contemporary popular novel, performs substantial literary and historical work through its formal and ideological revision of a canonized predecessor.

4.2 Narrative voice and authority

A major difference between the novels is the location of narrative authority. Mitchell's third-person narration largely follows Scarlett O'Hara and presents the world through the assumptions of white Southern society. Black characters are often restricted to roles such as loyal servants, comic figures, caretakers, or threats. Their relationships, desires, grief, strategies of survival, and intellectual lives are seldom granted the same complexity as those of white characters.

Randall transfers narrative authority to Cynara. The diary form allows readers to encounter the plantation world through a woman who has experienced its violence and contradictions from the position of the enslaved. Cynara is not simply an object of description; she interprets people, narrates her experiences, withholds information, makes judgments, and reconstructs the past. This shift illustrates why form matters. The first-person diary creates intimacy, contingency, and partiality. It does not claim to offer an uncomplicated, complete historical truth; rather, it challenges the illusion that Mitchell's familiar narrative is complete.

Randall's strategy is consistent with Black literary traditions that reclaim voice and historical memory. Gates's (1988) concept of Signifyin(g) clarifies how the novel repeats elements of Mitchell's narrative while transforming their meaning. The recognizable names, settings, and plot points enable readers to see what the source text has normalized and what it has omitted.

4.3 Race, gender, and agency

Both novels portray women who attempt to survive restrictive gender systems. Scarlett is ambitious, resourceful, and resistant to conventional femininity. Yet her agency exists within a racial order that gives her protections unavailable to enslaved Black women. Her access to property, social recognition, and protection from certain forms of sexual exploitation is inseparable from her whiteness and class position.

Cynara's agency must be understood under different material and historical conditions. She confronts enslavement, colorism, limited bodily autonomy, sexual violence, family separation, and social exclusion. Her actions cannot be judged by the same standards used for a wealthy white plantation owner's daughter. A comparison of Scarlett and Cynara therefore shows the limitations of describing either character simply as a "strong woman." Feminist analysis must attend to intersecting structures of race, class, gender, and power.

This issue remains relevant to the study of romance fiction. Nankervis (2022) shows that contemporary romance publishing involves continuing questions about the representation of race, sexuality, disability, neurodivergence, and body size. Romance is not a trivial genre. It is a space where cultural expectations about desire, marriage, gender, social belonging, and the possibility of a happy ending are negotiated. The treatment of romance in libraries also reflects persistent hierarchies of literary value; even highly circulated romance works may receive uneven cataloguing and institutional attention (Velasquez & Campbell-Meier, 2024).

4.4 Language, style, and representation

The language of *The Wind Done Gone* should not be treated as artistically inferior because it includes Black speech patterns, vernacular registers, or culturally specific expressions. Such an approach risks equating standardized white English with literary value. Instead, language should be analyzed in relation to voice, characterization, historical location, oral tradition, irony, intimacy, and power.

Randall's linguistic choices support Cynara's authority as a narrator. Shifts in register reveal differences in education, race, class, and social performance. They also challenge the linguistic hierarchy embedded in Mitchell's depiction of Black characters. The issue is not whether one text uses "better" language in an abstract sense, but how language contributes to each novel's representation of human experience and social relations.

4.5 Rethinking literary value

The comparison does not support a conclusion that *Gone with the Wind* is high literature while *The Wind Done Gone* is low literature. Such a ranking would confuse canonical prestige with inherent superiority and treat adaptation as evidence of failed originality. It would also overlook the formal skill required to create a coherent counter-narrative that remains in dialogue with a culturally dominant text.

A more responsible framework for literary evaluation should include the following questions:

- Does the work demonstrate formal coherence and effective use of narrative form?
- Does it generate complex interpretations rather than relying only on predictable assumptions?
- How does it represent historically marginalized people and experiences?
- Does it reproduce, question, or transform dominant cultural myths?
- What ethical consequences may follow from its representation of race, gender, class, and history?
- How does the work position readers: as passive consumers of a familiar myth or as active interpreters of competing perspectives?

This framework does not require readers to reject pleasure, genre fiction, or canonical works. It asks them to recognize that pleasure and value are not politically innocent. Readers may appreciate Mitchell's narrative energy while critically examining its racial nostalgia. Likewise, readers may recognize that Randall's parody derives part of its power from its relation to a famous predecessor.

4.6 Reading fiction and empathy

Earlier research proposed that reading literary fiction may improve theory of mind, or the ability to infer other people's mental states (Kidd & Castano, 2013). This claim should not be presented as settled fact. A subsequent replication study found inconsistent results (Panero et al., 2016), and recent research does not support a simple claim that brief exposure to literary fiction automatically improves empathy or social cognition (Takahashi et al., 2023). A systematic review by Rezende and Shigaef (2023) suggests that fiction may contribute to social cognition under some conditions, but effects vary according to readers, texts, modes of engagement, and research designs.

The educational value of literature, therefore, should not rest on a promise that canonical works are inherently more empathetic than popular works. Literature can offer occasions for perspective-taking, interpretive difficulty, historical reflection, and ethical discussion. These possibilities emerge through attentive reading, dialogue, and contextual understanding rather than from genre labels alone.

5. Conclusion

The comparative study of *Gone with the Wind* and *The Wind Done Gone* shows that literary judgment should move beyond rigid distinctions between classic and popular, original and derivative, or high and low literature. Mitchell's novel remains significant because of its immense cultural influence and its role in shaping popular memory of the US South. However, its canonical status cannot excuse its romanticization of the plantation system or its limited representation of Black interiority.

Randall's novel is significant because it rewrites that influential narrative from a perspective excluded by the source text. Through Cynara's voice, the diary form, and parodic revision, *The Wind Done Gone* makes visible the histories of enslavement, racialized sexuality, family separation, and survival that *Gone with the Wind* minimizes. Its relationship to Mitchell's novel is not evidence of artistic weakness; it is the basis of its critical force.

The study concludes that literature should be evaluated through plural and transparent criteria: formal craft, historical consciousness, ethical accountability, cultural specificity, interpretive complexity, and social significance. Readers do not have to choose between enjoyment and critical thought. The most valuable reading practices allow readers to experience literary pleasure while also asking whose stories are told, whose are silenced, and how inherited narratives may be revised. Such critical flexibility is useful not only in literary study but also in education, public discourse, and everyday life.

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