Summary
This activity enhances a discussion of the historical novel *Gone with the Wind*, by Margaret Mitchell, by including details on the theme regarding the importance of land.

Learning Objectives/Outcomes
- To understand the role that land, and the tangible presence of fertile soil, holds for Scarlett O’Hara and her family.
- To explore the use of land as a metaphor and its connections to other themes in the book.

**Soils in Your Book Club**

*Gone with the Wind*

**Ages of Audience**
Adults

**Where could you offer this?**
Library or Book Club/Reading Group

**What type of room do you need?**
Classroom, community room, or living room

**Type of Lesson** (may be more than one)
1. Small group exercise/discussion
critical thinking
2. Video (optional)

**Time Needed**
1. Scientist prep time: time to read the almost 1000 page book
2. Participant time: about 1 hour to discuss the land theme in the novel

**Soil and Land in *Gone with the Wind***

There are many works of literature that use the powerful symbolism of soil or land. Authors have included the metaphor of the fertility or lack of productivity of soil in their writings since the Bible. This activity shows how the novel *Gone with the Wind*, along with a few movie clips, can stimulate a discussion of the symbolism of land and the importance of soil to people and societies. This could be equally useful in the classroom or for a book club or reading group.

*Gone with the Wind* by Margaret Mitchell was published in 1936. This Pulitzer Prize-winning historical novel covers the Civil War and Reconstruction from a Southern point of view. Numerous themes emerge during the course of the story, from the role of women to the lost cause of the South, to survival, to the importance of land. It remains one of the best-selling books of the 20th century. It is ranked as the eighth most-read book in the world (see right).

There are several critical scenes that highlight the significance of the land to Scarlett’s spirit and her very survival. In some cases, touching the soil itself is what inspires her, while at other times it is the potential that her family’s land holds that is illustrated in these scenes.

Tara is the plantation estate of Scarlett O’Hara’s family, and its importance and beauty are showcased throughout the book and the Oscar-winning movie. Her father, Gerald O’Hara, is even described near the beginning of the book as “vital and earthy and coarse.” In another early scene, he tells Scarlett, “land is the only thing in the world worth workin’ for, worth fightin’ for, worth dyin’ for, because it’s the only thing that lasts.” As Scarlett matures throughout the course of the novel, she evolves from dismissing her father’s declaration to appreciating the value of the land. In Chapter XXV, when she returns to...
Tara physically and emotionally defeated, she notes that the soil in her garden feels as “soft and comfortable as a pillow.” Despite the fact their plantation was destroyed by the Yankee army, Scarlett pulls some vegetables from the soil and gains inspiration from her family’s land and knows that she can move forward, vowing to “never be hungry again.”

Love stories mingle with the survival and historical stories, and in Chapter XXXI, Ashley and Scarlett embrace until he places some of Tara’s red clay soil in Scarlett’s hand. He explains to her that as he loves honor more than he loves her, she loves Tara more than she loves him. Looking at that soil and all it represents, Scarlett knows that she must continue to manage the plantation and forget about Ashley. The last chapter recaptures many of the themes of the novel. After Rhett Butler has left Scarlett with the iconic line, “Frankly, my dear, I don’t give a damn,” she does not give up. She repeats her mantra about thinking of problems “tomorrow” and she remembers what her father said to her about Tara and how “land is the only thing that matters.” She decides to return to Tara for comfort and to solve her problems surrounded by her land.

Incorporating the Movie

The movie version of Gone with the Wind won several 1939 Academy Awards, including Best Picture, Best Director for Victor Fleming, Best Actress for Vivien Leigh’s portrayal of Scarlett, and Best Supporting Actress for the portrayal of Mammy by Hattie McDaniel, the first black actor or actress to win an Oscar. The U.S. Library of Congress has named the movie to its National Film Registry for its role as a culturally, historically or aesthetically significant film.

If you don’t have time to watch the entire movie, here is a selection of movie clips available on You Tube that bring to life the scenes discussed above.

Discussion Questions

1. Why does Gerard O’Hara say that land is the only thing that matters?
2. How does the meaning of land change for Scarlett throughout the course of the book? Why do you think this happens?
3. What kind of soil is found in Georgia? What role does this soil play, historically and even today, to agriculture there?
4. Some critics say that the plantation and life at Tara is portrayed too romantically. Do you agree? What could a literary analyst say about the significance of Tara being depicted in this light?
5. When Scarlett most needs strength and resolve, where does she find it? Why?
6. What do you think happens to Scarlett after the last scene?

Additional Resources

For additional information on using Gone with the Wind in the classroom, see these sources:


For additional information on using Gone with the Wind in your book club, see this source: