

**What's a girl to do when her mode of production and the potency of the men who ran it are *Gone With the Wind*? - the historical materialist melodrama of *Scarlett O'Hara*.**

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**Introduction**

The bourgeoisie, wherever it has got the upper hand, has put an end to all feudal, patriarchal, idyllic relations. It has pitilessly torn asunder the motley feudal ties that bound man to his 'natural superiors', and has left no other nexus between people than naked self-interest, than callous 'cash payment'. It has drowned out the most heavenly ecstasies of religious fervor, of chivalrous enthusiasm, of philistine sentimentalism, in the icy water of egotistical calculation. (Communist Manifesto)

The American Civil War is a stark example of the sudden transformation of a semi-feudal slave mode of production to one dominated by capitalist relations of production. *Gone With The Wind* (GWTW) is about that transformation.

Elizabeth Fox-Genovese argues that GWTW (the novel) is 'At once historically more accurate and psychologically more complex than the classic melodrama, it nonetheless approaches the melodrama in that its 'universal moral order validates current social attitudes' (E. F. Genovese, 1981 p. 391).

The main characters in GWTW, Scarlett, Rhett, Ashley and Melanie all represent economic, psychological and social elements of a response to a catastrophic economic and social crisis, a literal collapse of their traditional institutional framework, a mode of production, a way of life in a word, gone with the wind. Under such circumstances changes in the external world of politics and economics inevitably will be interconnected to the internal world of love, sex, family, friendship and alienation. Who will prosper and

who will decline in such circumstances is the all-encompassing subject matter of GWTW. This paper is about how the main protagonists (in particular Scarlet) of GWTW represent critical and interrelated economic and psychological elements of the transition from a slave mode of production to capitalism in the southern United States in the sixth and seventh decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. (The appendix to this paper situates the film historically and provides a sense of its impact and cultural significance as well as a plot description).

The transition from a Feudal-futile past to a bourgeois order ‘lay in the unconscious life of a most disorderly girl’ (E. F. Genovese, 1981 p. 411).

Scarlet was the indigenous carrier of this change, the revolutionary agent-she was economically promiscuous- actively in support of any form of exploitation that she could manage to maintain class privilege and there was only one way to go in the post-bellum US.

### **The historical materialist context.**

Exploitation is inherent in all class societies-the form it takes varies considerably from one mode of production to another. It is the subordinate classes, which do the work for the reproduction of the ruling class and therefore end up working to reproduce the very conditions of their own subordination (Shaikh, 1990, p. 166). In addition to producing the means of production and consumption of the ruling class the surplus pays for the ideology and weaponry necessary to maintain subordination. The exploitation of labor is the extraction of the surplus upon which class society is founded. The US Civil War overthrew a particular kind of exploitation.

Social relations that underlie exploitation are critical factors shaping societal and social consciousness. The mode of control over the social surplus product arises from a system’s property relations. One class appropriates the social surplus product through specific social relations. The ante-bellum slave produced and turned the entire product over to the slave owner. Exploitation was transparent.

Eugene Genovese argues that the slave south developed a special civilization built on the relationship of master to slave. ‘The essential features of Southern particularity as well as

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Southern backwardness can be traced to the relationship of master to slave' (E. Genovese 1965 p.23).

Slave ownership engendered its own aristocratic ruling class with an accompanying social psychology. The slaveholder's dependence on the inferior sensitized them to challenges of the morality and efficiency of slavery.

The slaveholder's power, combined with dependence, made the slaveholder character on the one hand one of strength, graciousness and gentility and on the other impulsive, violent, and unsteady. His 'sense of independence and habit of command developed his poise, grace, and dignity, the sense of dependence on an 'inferior' other made him violently intolerant of anyone and anything threatening to expose the full nature of his relationship to his slave' (E. Genovese 1965 p.33). An attack on slavery was not only an attack on his material interests but as an attack on his self-esteem.

Critical material differences over tariffs, homesteads, and the balance of political power in the United States put the South's economy dependent as it was on slavery on a collision course with Northern businessmen and farmers. For the slaveholder the lure of business for its own sake was a crass and vulgar enterprise. By skill, temperament and because of the material context he was not fit for the world of the bourgeoisie and therefore had to fight to the death –forced to their impulsive, and violent side to preserve their class privilege and its material and psychological power and independence (Eugene Genovese 1965, pp 28-30). A fight to the death was the outcome and the economic backwardness of the South made the outcome all but inevitable.

### **Scarlett's economics**

There was a two-headed specter haunting the anti-bellum South-Northern capitalism and Scarlett. How does one make money, who makes it-how does one survive, adapt, and prosper in the wake of a major social upheaval –historically, socially and economically? As the Slave mode of production collapses around her Scarlett is left to her own devices and she is able to take on the requisite characteristics of the bourgeoisie.

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Each of her three husbands represents a stage in the transformation of the Southern political-economy. She is indifferent to her men-rational, calculating and as instrumental as she needs to be. The first two are southern gentleman and killed off for being impotent with respect to the task at hand of accumulating wealth and ruling class status in an economy torn asunder. As Rhett says of Ashley, Scarlett's unrequited love, who survives but is economically ineffective- 'breed being useless and valueless in an upside down world like ours' (Taylor, 1989, p. 51). Rhett as a cosmopolitan merchant capitalist, is not bound by the insulated social psychology of the plantation owner.

She marries Charles Hamilton as an impulsive response to being jilted by Ashley. Charles dies of measles and pneumonia at a military camp, before he has had the opportunity to even reach a battlefield.

The exchange (in the movie) between Charles and Rhett provides an extraordinary illustration of the E. Genovese characterization of the plantation owner's insulated, violent and impulsive reaction to their historical materialist reality.

RHETT BUTLER: I think it's hard winning a war with words, gentlemen.

CHARLES: What do you mean, sir?

RHETT: I mean, Mr. Hamilton, there's not a cannon factory in the whole South.

MAN: What difference does that make, sir, to a gentleman?

RHETT: I'm afraid it's going to make a great deal of difference to a great many gentlemen, sir.

CHARLES: Are you hinting, Mr. Butler, that the Yankees can lick us?

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RHETT: No, I'm not hinting. I'm saying very plainly that the Yankees are better equipped than we. They've got factories, shipyards, coal-mines... and a fleet to bottle up our harbors and starve us to death. All we've got is cotton, and slaves and ...arrogance.

MAN: That's treacherous!

CHARLES: I refuse to listen to any renegade talk!

RHETT: Well, I'm sorry if the truth offends you.

Charles leaps head first into the dustbin of history as a male representative of his class. Enthusiasm is no match for factories and warships.

The author of the novel Margaret Mitchell kills off the weak men but endows the survivors with the objective view of history ( E. F. Genovese p. 407). As suggested by the dialogue above, Rhett (and later Ashley) are the ones with a grasp of historical process, that is, they are not deluded by the slave owner's insulated and arrogant psychology as to the likely outcome of a war between their stagnant agrarian South and the dynamic industrialized North.

Scarlett steals (charms-seduces) second husband Frank Kennedy from her sister to hold on to Tara, but she went much farther. Frank makes enough money to be able to pay the taxes on Tara but he is committed to his petty bourgeois general store. The 'egoistic calculation' of buying cheap and selling dear has its limits, greater capitalist profit and status is to be found in profit from production. And so she uses Frank's capital to build a lumbar business –using prison labor to gain competitive advantage and a brutal foreman over the 'sentimentalist' objections of Frank and Ashley. She tells Ashley 'I found out that money is the most important thing in the world,' and that she is going to do business with the Yankees in spite of the fact that it will be seen as scandalous. Ashley pleads that our friends continue to behave with 'honor and kindness'. Scarlett responds that they are starving and that she has 'no use for anyone who can't help themselves.' And she becomes wealthy, adopting capitalist means of exploitation, unlike her ante-bellum

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contemporaries she makes the bourgeois transition, even before she marries the wealthy Rhett and attempts to regain the gentility that marks their ascension.

### **The gender context- the id girl?**

For E. F. Genovese the terms 'woman' and 'lady' evoke female identity, but in different forms. 'Woman' suggests at once a more inclusive and more private female nature whereas 'lady' evokes the public representation of that nature' (E. F. Genovese, 1981, pp. 398-399). To be a lady is to have a public presence, to accept a public responsibility. No lady ran the plantation, would admit to being hungry in public or admit to sexual desire or pleasure (E. F. Genovese, 1981, p.399).

For E. F. Genovese no society would survive did not its female members internalize certain standards and responsibilities. In GWTW it is clear Scarlett would have had trouble as a lady with or without the war. Without the war Scarlett's unruly character would have been constrained by Southern structures and norms, with the war that same character had many more degrees of freedom (E. F. Genovese, 1981, p. 399).

How does one remain a lady under new historical conditions –changing times permit and even require new modes of behavior?

Scarlett never internalized Southern female (or male) economic or social standards and responsibilities and is therefore able to thrive in the new world.

She is exquisitely programmed to exploit any and all opportunities in her own interest, and just as people make their own history not under conditions they have made, she uses her inestimable charms, ruthlessness and intuitive savvy to exploit those opportunities. She is resourceful, grasping and commits herself wholeheartedly to becoming a member of the new ruling class.

E. F. Genovese argues that Scarlett is anything but a lady. She appears sweet, charming and giddy, but in reality is vain, self-willed and obstinate with only the 'thinnest veneer of her mother's unselfish and forbearing nature' (E. F. Genovese 1981 p. 395). She has contempt 'for

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the simpering girls who live out the prescriptions of Southern ladyhood', while using its conventions when it suits her attachment to her class aspirations (E. F. Genovese, 1981, p. 395). Dancing while in mourning, offering herself for cash to pay the taxes on Tara, stealing husbands from friends and family alike, risking the lives of her menfolk, including the callous sacrifice of her second husband, flaunting her ruthless talent for business all are outside the rules of the game and amoral (E. F. Genovese 1981 p. 400).

Even when she acquires material security by her own acumen and marrying the very wealthy Rhett she cannot be transformed into a lady. For E. F. Genovese, 'Scarlett lacks any vital understanding of what it takes to be one' (E. F. Genovese 1981 p. 401). She is without superego-she has a nominal sense of their existence and prestige but she cannot internalize them (E. F. Genovese, 1981 p. 403). The splendid businesswoman is 'a 'bad' daughter, sister, wife, mother, friend, and lover' (Taylor, 1989 p.106).

Yet her genuine feeling of loss when her parent's die suggests something else important is going on. She steals Frank from her sister and uses his money to save Tara and builds a business that she uses to ensure her family and Ashley's will prosper.

### **Scarlett's love life**

Rhett asks Scarlett, 'do you never shrink from men you don't love?'

I think that E. F. Genovese assertion (1981, p. 418) that the famous scene that ends with Scarlett's vow 'as God is my witness, I'm never going hungry again.' marks her assumption of womanhood is only half true.

This ascent happens in stages. This moment is clearly the one where Scarlett's adult external economic dedication is established. And she never looks back in her zeal to become wealthy by whatever means history affords her.

Her assumption to womanhood with respect to her internal world awaits other events, built in part on the requisites of establishing economic independence. The death of her parents, the death

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of her daughter, real passionate sex for the first time in her life and the death of Melanie are all stages in her internal evolution.

When Ashley announces his intention to marry Melanie, the young jilted Scarlett is wildly petulant and agrees to marry Charles Hamilton. When he dies soon afterward, her only regret is that proper mourning for her dead husband means she is supposed to dress in black and can't dance. She is utterly indifferent to his death-bored with the customary constraints-relieved that the war and the unbounded Rhett provide her some relief from a cloistered life.

As the South's fate becomes clearer and her own outlook correspondingly bleak, her parents die as second order effects of this social catastrophe. For the first time in the movie Scarlett expresses real empathy, sadness-caring. Left to her own devices, however, she is poised to stoop to conquer, take on the world with ruthless ambition, but not, in E. F. Genovese's words, 'to arrive at a mature female identity-to become a woman' ( E. F. Genovese, 1981 p. 406). Scarlett, is woefully unable 'to fathom her own desires or those of the men in her life.' She fails to integrate her needs and her desires -her longing for romantic love-with her sexual feelings. To this point she disregards 'the codes of her family and community' with respect to the morality of her sex and class taught by her mother, in order to at first meet her immature emotional needs and later as an economic device, because sex was something she used to get what she wanted but could not/need not enjoy. She is equally contemptuous of her second husband who is killed defending her honor after she takes over his business.

### **'The Rape'**

Eaklor (2002) sees the relationship between Rhett and Scarlett as defined by Rhett's need to dominate Scarlett. The infamous (apparent) rape, 'so offensive from a feminist perspective', should be seen as indicative of their relationship (and male-female relationships) where he looks to turn her into his little girl and where she uses sex to deny him his domination. Her (apparent) morning-after bliss supports the myth that woman, 'despite their protests, want and need to be conquered,' 'leading to the logical and dangerous conclusion that romance and rape are indistinguishable.' (Eaklor 2002). Where Rhett's power is institutionalized with his legal rights



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to Scarlett's body (as well as property), her power is personal, limited to denying him what he wants.

As if to confirm the feminist nightmare of self-denigrating women, Taylor (1989, p. 130) and 'by far the majority' of her female respondents view the 'rape scene' as 'mutually pleasurable rough sex, not rape, erotically exciting, emotionally stirring and profoundly memorable.'

One of Taylor's correspondents, Cora Kaplan argued that Scarlett, who had 'lousy sex from two incompetent husbands (Eaklor refers to them as 'sissies' in the 'masculine feminine lexicon') who new nothing about women finds out what good sex feels like *probably because* her first experience takes place in mutual inebriation and a spirit of vengeful anger' (Taylor, 1989 p.133).

Taylor goes on to say that the morning after is the one psychologically false note in the novel and film. Rhett would have been there in the morning having recognized his achievement of at last showing Scarlett sexual ecstasy. Taylor also points to the fact that Rhett is intensely jealous of Scarlett's love for Ashley.

It should not be forgotten that Rhett is in love with Scarlett and she is in love with someone else and flaunts it. Scarlett is much more than not submissive, 'passively' denying him what he wants, she treats Rhett contemptuously and instrumentally, like most everyone else.

None of these observers seem to recognize that it was not their first sexual experience with one another. Acknowledging that the way it came about is certainly controversial, Scarlett into her third marriage and for a considerable time with the worldly and experienced Rhett, for the first time has a real sensual experience-not instrumental but passion for its own sake. After having established herself in the external world she has become free to experience what a man like Rhett could offer, the stirring of an ability to integrate her needs and her desires -her longing for romantic love-with her sexual feelings.

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### **Ashley and Melanie**

For Eaklor (2002), Ashley is a feminine man, what American society would stereotype as a latent homosexual, to be juxtaposed to the masculine Scarlett. The relationship of Ashley and Melanie appears more cerebral than sexual-they understand each other-kindred spirits, whereas Ashley and Rhett are not merely different but opposite ends of the so-called masculine continuum, what Taylor calls the 'king and the wimp', visualized when Rhett carries the wounded Ashley to bed to receive treatment after being wounded.

What can Scarlett, who 'despises stereotypically feminine traits', see in Ashley? After all, according to Eaklor, the film promotes the Scarlett-Rhett pairing which fails because of Scarlett's failure as a woman.

The trouble with this feminine identity for Ashley is that of all the women in the film only two of the ruling class women share any of his primary characteristics. The women of the slave-owning South are portrayed as petty, selfish, grasping, gossipy and narcissistic. Melanie and Scarlett's mother, Ellen, are different.

Ashley is not feminine, but along with Melanie, the conscience, the superego of the story. Ashley (and Melanie) is self-controlled, possesses self-knowledge and acts according to principles that Scarlett cannot fathom (E. F. Genovese, 1981 p. 406), but is attracted to because (in part) he is what her mother would honor. More importantly, Ashley represents what Melanie Klein would see as an attempt at integration for Scarlett whose fear of her own destructive power begs for containment in the arms of the reliable Ashley.

The question is less what Scarlett sees in Ashley than why she treats Melanie and Rhett the way she does. Melanie is goodness in female form and therefore threatens to expose Scarlett for what she is. An attachment to the improper Rhett would also expose Scarlett's character. As she says of him early on: 'You're a low-down, cowardly, nasty thing, you! They were right. Everybody was right, you, you aren't a gentleman.' She can't embrace either of them until she herself evolves enough to stand next to Melanie and Rhett without revealing her own deeply flawed character.

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Ashley is an anachronism—fair, gracious, dignified and gentle. Along with his kindred spirit Melanie—they represent for Mitchell the standard for decent behavior amidst the morally doubtful mayhem that surrounds them. While protesting Scarlett's readiness to torture and starve her mill workers Ashley makes it clear that he intended to free his slaves after his father died if the war had not liberated them first. Melanie embraces Belle (the Madame) because of her courageous behavior in spite of her scandalous profession. Melanie's death is devastating for Ashley. It is clear that neither the slave mode of production nor the evolving capitalism are places for the pure of heart. It is at this moment that Scarlett and Rhett fully recognize their real needs.

### **Rhett**

It is Eaklor's (2002) contention that Scarlett loses Rhett because of her inability and/or unwillingness to do more than feign the role of submissive wife.

'It is tempting to suggest the encoding of a pseudo-Freudian message: Scarlett the girl fell in love with Ashley and Scarlett the woman supposedly loved Rhett, implying that as she reached maturity she recognized and desired him who could dominate her 'properly.' Clearly Charles, Frank nor Ashley will do (Eaklor, 2002).

For Eaklor (2002) the stronger more independent more masculine woman, Scarlett, the more masculine the man, Rhett, required to conquer her. She makes the point that Rhett tells her he's waiting for her to 'grow up' and get Ashley out of her mind.

The trouble with this account of things is that Rhett leaves her at precisely the moment he has 'conquered' her. And Eaklor seems to ignore the fact that Scarlett 'is not merely masculine' but has treated Rhett badly, like everyone else, except her parents and Ashley. It may be that she is warding off a conqueror, but she never gives him nor her other husbands, relatives or friends much in the way of the affection or respect either, including the virtuous Melanie, until Melanie is on her death bed.

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At the end Scarlett professes her love for Rhett, tells him she must have really loved him all along, that she never really loved Ashley and that she was so sorry for everything. Rhett's response is that he tried every way he knew how, 'if you could have just met me half way'. Rhett tells her that saying you are sorry after all that has transpired won't do. She replies that I only know that I love you. This scene, as with Melanie's death, her comforting of Ashley and the accompanying epiphany about her feelings for him, the death of her parents and daughter earlier, are about Scarlett evolving from a 'bad' daughter, sister, wife, mother, friend, and lover (Taylor, 1989, p. 106), into an emotionally reliable sister, wife, friend and lover.

Rhett never interferes with nor discourages Scarlett's economic ambitions. He develops great respect and affection for Melanie, and even an evolving if reluctant regard for his rival Ashley, for their 'uncommon decency.' He too is evolving.

Rhett leaves Scarlett at the end not because he couldn't conquer her-she is his-but because he wants 'peace, charm and grace' instead of the grasping, impulsive, emotionally unreliable life that is the only one that he has known with Scarlett. The Historical Materialist may argue that charm and grace are a cloak to hide the exploitation that provides their privilege, but nonetheless he has tried and failed to turn his private life into a haven filled with the love and adoration he seeks to share and receive.

The real irony at the end is that they might have been able to give each other what they need, but it is too late, too much that is ugly has passed between them. Their history includes, in addition to a powerful attraction to one another, the death of a beloved child, a lifetime of jealousy, years of harsh and insensitive exchange, of attack and withdrawal.

They will both have to find that peace of mind elsewhere or together in another time and place. Both are better equipped to do so and no less in need.

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## **APPENDIX**

### **Playbill -Gone With The Wind**

Gone with the Wind (GWTW) holds the record as being the biggest box-office hit in the history of movies. It has sold more tickets than any other film in history. Adjusting for inflation, the film is the highest grossing of all time. It was the most watched film in the UK as well.

In 1998, the American Film Institute ranked it #4 on its '100 Greatest Movies' list.

Rhett Butler's infamous farewell line to Scarlett O'Hara, 'Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn', was voted in a poll by the American Film Institute in 2005 as the most memorable line in cinema history. It cost the producers \$5000 to use the word 'damn'.

In 2005, the AFI ranked Max Steiner's score for the film the second greatest of all time. The AFI also ranked the film #2 in their list of the greatest romances of all time (100 Years... 100 Passions). Casablanca was #1.

The film premiered in Atlanta, Georgia, on December 15, 1939 as the climax of three days of festivities hosted by the mayor which consisted of a parade of limousines featuring stars from the film, receptions, thousands of Confederate flags, false antebellum fronts on stores and homes, and a costume ball. The governor of Georgia declared December 15 a state holiday. President Jimmy Carter would later recall it as 'the biggest event to happen in the South in my lifetime.'

It was a sensational hit during the Blitz in London, opening in April 1940 and playing continuously for four years.

The film also resulted in an important moment in African-American history: Hattie McDaniel won an Academy Award for Best Supporting Actress, the first time an African-American actor received the award.

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As Georgia was a segregated state, Hattie McDaniel could not have attended the cinema without sitting in the 'colored' section of the movie theater; to avoid troubling Selznick, she thus sent a letter saying she would not be able to attend. When Clark Gable heard that McDaniel did not want to attend because of the racial issue, he threatened to boycott the premiere unless McDaniel was able to attend; he later relented when McDaniel convinced him to go.

At the costume ball during the premiere, local promoters recruited blacks to dress up as slaves and sing in a 'Negro choir' on the steps of a white-columned plantation mansion built for the event. Many black community leaders refused to participate, but prominent Atlanta preacher Martin Luther King, Sr. attended, and he brought his 10-year-old son, Martin Luther King Jr., who sang that night in the choir.

In *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, the former civil rights leader recounted his experience of watching a particular scene as a small boy in Michigan: 'I was the only Negro in the theater, and when Butterfly McQueen went into her act, I felt like crawling under the rug.'

The role of Prissy catapulted Butterfly McQueen's film career, but within ten years, she grew tired of playing black ethnic stereotypes. When she refused to continue being typecast that way, it ended her career.

Author of the Pulitzer Prize winning novel, which sold 30 million copies, Margaret Mitchell, was the president of the Atlantic Historical Society.

### **Plot and characters**

A typical melodramatic description of GWTW found on line

(<http://www.mkvconcerts.com/archive/index.php/thread-787.html>):

This tale of the Old South from the start of the Civil War through to the period of reconstruction focuses on the beautiful Scarlett O'Hara. Before the start of the war life at the O'Hara plantation, Tara, could only be described as genteel. As for the young Scarlett, she is without doubt the most beautiful girl in the area and is always the belle of the ball.

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She is very much looking forward to a barbecue at the nearby Wilkes plantation as she will get to see the man she loves, Ashley Wilkes. She is more than a little dismayed when she hears that he is to marry his cousin Melanie Hamilton and in a fit of anger, she decides to marry Melanie's brother. War is soon declared and as always seems to be the case, men march off to battle thinking that it will only last a few weeks. Now living in Atlanta, Scarlett sees the ravages that war brings. She also becomes re-acquainted with Rhett Butler, whom she had first met at the Wilkes barbecue. Now a widow, she still pines for the married Ashley and dreams of his return. With the war lost however, she returns to Tara and faces the hardship of keeping her family together and Tara from being sold at auction to collect the taxes. She has become hardened and bitter and will do anything, including marrying her sister's beau, to ensure she will never again be poor and hungry. After becoming a widow for the second time, she finally marries the dashing Rhett but they soon find themselves working at cross-purposes, their relationship seemingly doomed from the outset.