

Rhett Butler's personality is that of a cynical, charming, and mocking philanderer. He frequently declares that he has no honor, though he respects those he considers true gentlemen or ladies. He often thinks the worst of Scarlett, even as he admires and loves her. During their first meeting, he says she is no lady, just as he is no gentleman. He often mocks her attempts to be gentle, kind, or ladylike, believing it doesn't suit her, and encourages her scheming ways, even as he despises them. He presents a fickle and dapper front, saying things he doesn't mean and causing Scarlett to misunderstand him. His constant, defensive teasing causes her to distrust his true intentions, even when she manages to perceive them. In turn, he does not recognize that Scarlett uses charm and acid to protect herself, rather than out of malicious intent.

As the novel begins, Rhett is first mentioned at the Twelve Oaks Plantation barbecue, the home of John Wilkes and his son Ashley and daughters Honey and India Wilkes. The novel describes Rhett as "a visitor from Charleston", a black sheep who was expelled from West Point and is not received by any family with a reputation in the whole of Charleston, and perhaps all of South Carolina. He is considerably older than the 16-year-old Scarlett, being about 32-33 at the time, and has made a name for himself as a wealthy scoundrel and professional gambler. Rhett witnesses Scarlett's young confession to Ashley at the plantation barbecue and is immediately attracted to her boldness in breaking social conventions and her beauty. Rhett mocks Scarlett over her confession, which causes a lasting negative impression.

After Scarlett is widowed for the first time, Rhett makes significant headway in gaining her favor by showering a depressed and isolated-in-mourning Scarlett with attention, though he tells her he isn't going to marry her and keeps her flirtatious advances at arm's length. She requests that he help her return to Tara with her family in order to wait out the war. However, partway on the dangerous journey, his convoluted convictions lead him to give her a kiss and a gun before he abandons her on the road in order to enlist in the doomed American Civil war. Following, Scarlett undergoes one of the most significant and traumatizing times in her life without support, facing starvation, disease, and violence as she becomes the sole support for her family.

During the war, Rhett's wealth and influence balloon as he acts as a smuggler and blockade runner, often in and out of prison. Southern society marks him as an outsider, though they are occasionally charmed by him. An impoverished and desperate Scarlett seeks him out to request a loan of \$300 to save Tara, and after

leading her in circles to see how much she'd be willing to debase herself for the funds, including her offering to be his mistress (to which he replies she wouldn't be worth that much) reveals he was never going to lend her the money, lacking sufficient liquid assets. Scarlett is furious and humiliated. In response, Scarlett convinces Frank Kennedy, her sister Suellen's beau, to marry her instead in order to save her family, since her sister intended to abandon the family and enjoy Frank's wealth.

Rhett is upset, since he actually was going to lend her the money once out of prison, and later praises her scheming and ability to steal her newest husband from under her sister's nose. During this time, Rhett admires that Scarlett makes ventures as a businesswoman, running and expanding Frank's businesses, but deplores her hard-nosed and miserly tactics, which earn her few fans, and does not understand her all-consuming need to hoard money.

Her unladylike and brutal business behavior causes Scarlett to be attacked in shanty town, and when her husband, Frank, dies during a retaliatory Ku Klux Klan raid, Rhett saves Ashley Wilkes and several others by alibiing them to the Yankee captain, a man with whom he has played cards on several occasions. Though he blames her for the death of her husband, Rhett laughs at Scarlett's sincere fears that she's going to hell for her role in Frank's life and death, and proposes to the newly-widowed Scarlett, saying he always knew he'd have her, one way or another, and she should marry him for fun and their physical compatibility.

Scarlett agrees, though only for his money. In the novel, Rhett's fortune is estimated at \$50,000,000 (equivalent to \$974 million in 2023) Rhett secretly hopes that Scarlett will eventually return the love he's had since the day he saw her at Twelve Oaks. But, Rhett is also determined not to show Scarlett he loves her, believing those who love Scarlett become wretched, and the pair have volcanic arguments from the start of their marriage.

Rhett's jealousy over Scarlett's continuing affection for Ashley Wilkes becomes a problem for the couple, however, as well as their low opinions of each other. Scarlett does not view Rhett as a gentleman or good person and resents that he does not see her as a lady. She does not believe or trust that he loves her, and often uses her idealized infatuation with the gentlemanly Ashley Wilkes to comfort herself from the worldly, and frequently flippant, Rhett. Rhett views her money-grubbiness as tacky, loathes the position Ashley continues to play in her heart, and is unable to

sway her hardened affections with his sardonic teasing. Still, Rhett completely adores their daughter, Bonnie. Rhett is an infatuated and doting father, showering his daughter with the affection Scarlett will not accept from him, which further isolates him from his wife.

In contrast with his wife, Rhett forms a genuinely warm and fond friendship with Melanie Wilkes, Ashley Wilke's wife, and Scarlett's only friend, whom he considers a rare, true 'lady', and often performs acts of service for her and relies on her for consolation. He also continues his shadier associations, much to Scarlett's displeasure and suspicion.

The Butlers' marriage becomes tattered and eventually wrecked by scandal, the death of their daughter, an accident where Rhett causes Scarlett to tumble down the stairs and miscarry, and the final nail in the coffin, the death of Melanie, Ashley's wife. Melanie makes Scarlett promise to care for Ashley after she's gone and speaks of how much Rhett loves Scarlett. Rhett, believing Scarlett has never loved him and will jump at the chance to marry the now free and receptive Ashley, becomes apathetic to Scarlett's declarations to the contrary. Tired of it all, Rhett walks out of his marriage, seeking to abandon everything to find something left of "charm and grace" in the world.