Cross Age Barrier—On Men’s Image in *Scent of a Woman*

JING Jing  
Changchun University, Changchun, China

The movie *Scent of a Woman* simply and classically illustrates how two different men who are in different ages and have different backgrounds get to change their attitudes towards life. In this paper, the author aims at readers’ in-depth understanding of the cause-and-effect matter of the society, the family, the campus, and the war to the two characters, by a brief study of the behaviors, motions, ideas, and attitudes of Colonel Slade and the youth Charlie in *Scent of a Woman*.

**Keywords:** surrounding, family, characters-analyzing

**Introduction**

The movie *Scent of a Woman* is one of the best movies that vividly depict the characteristics of proponents. Although the name of the movie is *Scent of a Woman*, the movie barely talks about love affairs, and even women seldom show in the movie. It describes how the two men who are in different ages with different experiences, backgrounds, and under various circumstances get to change their attitudes towards life due to each other’s influence. The two characters—Charlie Simms and Colonel Frank Slade—are respectively portrayed by Chris O’Donnell and Al Pacino. The movie itself received lots of international entertaining awards. It won Oscar Award for Best Actor and was nominated for Best Director, Best Picture, and Best Writing, Screenplay, and also many other awards internationally.

The two characters serve as an amplifier of culture and value conflicts. In this paper, the author makes an endeavor to portray the two characters through different surroundings of different times and how these different surroundings influence them. These surroundings include social surroundings and family surroundings, and other surroundings which are not written in the article. They contribute to the two characters’ behaviors and thoughts. Specifically in the movie, the family status of the head of an extended family and the experience of being a soldier in the Vietnam War influence Slade most, which contributes to Slade’s harshness, complexity, straightforwardness, and radical. Being confined to campus ivory tower made Charlie in isolation with the society, inexperienced and well-disciplined. What is more, the family status of a single child of a stepfamily makes him plain, honest, and modest.

**Social Surroundings Affecting the Two Characters**

People are parts of a society and one’s social surroundings play a vital role in influencing him or her. The social surrounding refers to the immediate physical and social setting in which people live or something happens.
Social Surroundings affect people in all aspects. As an external behavior-determining factor, the social surrounding plays a vital role in affecting the characters. It can change people’s lifestyle, set up a behavioral framework, affect people’s thinking patterns, and help to shape one’s outlook on life and world. In the movie *Scent of a Woman*, the author wants to stress two typical social factors—the Vietnam War and the campus culture—which mainly affect the two characters deeply.

### The Vietnam War and Its Impact on Slade

One of the most influential backgrounds behind Colonel Slade is the Vietnam War. As a retired veteran from the war, Colonel Slade experienced sufferings in barracks, lived in solitary abroad, and survived the war in battlefields. What did the Vietnam War leave to Slade, besides the fighting scars?

Frank Slade, a lieutenant colonel veteran from the Vietnam War, His blindness was caused during that war. But his blindness could influence his normal life far less than others. From the first scene of his appearance, the audience doubted that he was not blind.

There is his saying in the last scene of his passionate speech, as is put here,

> There was a time I could see! And I have seen boys like these, younger than these, their arms torn out, their legs ripped off, but there is nothing like the sight of an amputated spirit. There is no prosthetic for that.1

From the words, one can picture how serious situation the soldiers in Vietnam War probably confronted. He described the war that shaped him in the speech.

The vicious appalling war gave Slade fear and solitary. He hated to live with his family and his neighbors. When his grandchild teased him, the blind veteran, he showed extreme unpleasantness and threw things on her. What is more, Colonel Slade was eccentric. He viewed himself as an average person, refusing any other person’s aid. And Colonel was checking out in the airport, pretending to be an average person. And he did not support Charlie’s arm, instead, Charlie supported his, which aroused Slade’s condemnation. That was his intention and expression which could not make him seem different in public places.

Slade’s ultimate goal was to commit suicide, after enjoying what he wanted in his lifetime. It was true that Americans came to view dysfunctional veterans as needing support and medical attention rather than moral condemnation. However, the Veterans Administration in the United States was reluctant to admit the special difficulties faced by these veterans and their need for additional benefits. So the vicious appalling war drove him to go to New York City to enjoy the red wine, perform a spectacular tango with beauty, and drive a Ferrari wildly on the road. These abnormal behaviors to average people were totally normal to these veterans. It was a fact that more veterans committed suicide after the war than those had died in it. The war itself was a crime. Soldiers, after being confronted with the appalling situation of the battlefield, when they got back home, suffered from psychological disorder. This long-suffering disorder made them crash down.

---

The Campus Culture and Its Impact on Charlie

Generally speaking, each school has a unique culture. It shows a great power over the whole campus and keeps the campus in order, makes the school machine running well, and moves the school towards a bright and designed future. Under such campus culture, the school is stable and continuously running.

In the movie *Scent of a Woman*, Charlie studied on a well-disciplined campus which was an old, prestigious, and noble school only for male students. There are sculptures of its renowned people erected on campus, regular bells rang and inscribed mottoes on the stones. It is Baird school spirit. We can feel its school culture permeated in the campus.

However, an event takes place in that school, challenging its traditional culture. The campus event originates from a prank by a group of three students. Charlie and George Willis, Jr., another student at the preparatory school, witness several students setting up a prank for the school’s headmaster Trask. Following the prank, Trask presses Charlie and George to divulge the names of the perpetrators. Trask offers a bribe, a letter of recommendation that would virtually guarantee his acceptance to Harvard. Charlie continues to remain silent. At school, Charlie and George are subjected to a formal inquiry in front of the student body and the student/faculty disciplinary committee. Slade returns to the school, joining Charlie on the auditorium stage for support. For his defense, George has enlisted the help of his wealthy father, and divulges the names of the perpetrators. When pressed for more details, George passes the burden to Charlie. Although struggling with his decision, Charlie gives no information, so Trask recommends Charlie’s expulsion. At this, Slade launches a passionate speech defending Charlie and questioning the integrity of a system. He tells them that Charlie has shown integrity in his actions and for the committee to not expel him because this is what great leaders are made of and he will make them proud in the future. The disciplinary committee decides to place on probation the students named by George, and to give George neither recognition nor commendation for his testimony. They excuse Charlie from any punishment and allow him to have no further say in the inquiries.

In that event, George Willis Jr., Charlie Simms, and the three perpetrators were in one students group. When George and Charlie saw the three perpetrators setting up a prank for the school’s headmaster, they two initially reached a common agreement that none of them would reveal the threes’ names, which their cultural value led them to do so. On the other hand, for the headmaster Trask, he was the target of the prank, but he had the executive power to alter the campus culture. The wise way to deal with this problem was to seek help from the Disciplinary Committee. Therefore, Trask opened the disciplinary meeting to publicly seek help.

However, Trask’s attempt was in vain. Slade at last came to Charlie’s aid with a passionate speech in front of all of the students. His speech was ignited by Trask’s remarks. His intention was to seek students’ support and form a massive powerbase to be against Trask’s control over the campus and change the campus culture to in Charlie’s favor. Finally, the speech won students’ applause and to some extent, changed the campus value. That was to be a person of principle and in the past was to be integrity, which was misused as an excuse or a power to force Charlie to destroy his principles in the movie.

In summary, campus culture is a double-edged sword: It can provide stability and continuity to the school, and it can also be taken advantage of in a group’s favor. The campus culture event in the movie is a typical example to illustrate that phenomenon. And readers can also realize how campus culture affects the characters in the movie.
Family Surroundings Affecting the Two Characters

In human society, a family is a group of people affiliated by affinity, or co-residence. In most societies, it is the principal institution for the socialization of children. Family is the small unit of a society. The moment one was born, he or she is one family member. A family is also an important economic unit. Economic aspects of family are subject of family economic branch within economic field.

The family surrounding also contains large scale of factors. Among those massive dynamic family surroundings factors, I want to stress two typical factors, the family structures and the family social classes. Family structures act as an internal factor affecting the characters. Different family roles in different family structures have a great influence on people. Family role determines what one’s responsibilities for the other members are. What is more, family structures affect how many roles one member has to take and thus it deeply influences one’s characteristic. On the other hand, family social classes are the external factors affecting the characters, which determine where one’s family’s status is in the society. It provides a behavioral principle for different classes in the field of education, working and other activities. Therefore, the author analyzes the two factors for a better understanding of how family surroundings affect the two characters.

Slade’s Family: A Well-Off Extended Family

Slade’s family members consisted of his niece Nancy, Nancy’s husband Donnie and Nancy’s two children. During the Thanksgiving Days holiday, Slade’s family members, except for him, went for journey, which left him with Charlie taking care of him. That was where the story began. Slade’s family was a typical extended family. After retiring, Slade came to live with his niece and his niece’s husband and children, which was a typical nuclear family. Though he was blind, Slade would create a greater sense of security and belonging, as the head of the family. His prestige in the family was prevalent over every family member.

Slade’s thought was radical, confined in a closed dark house after retiring from the army. That was not his true feeling. After Charlie rescued his wounded psyche, Slade restored his true love to his family members. In Slade’s family, each member played multiple roles as the uncle, the children, the niece, the husband, and the wife, etc., which led them to feel responsible for helping and supporting one another, both emotionally and financially. What Slade was responsible for was to create a greater sense of security and belonging. And that was the responsibility and obligation which as the householder, Slade had to take. Although this full-of-love scene came out somewhat late in the movie, it described an actual Slade finally. At the end of the movie, Slade showed a great love to his family members, different from the apathy at the beginning.

Charlie’s Family: A Non-noble Stepfamily

The only clue about Charlie’s family in the movie is through the talks between Charlie and Slade in Slade’s house, when he was interviewed to get the caring job. We knew that Charlie was in a stepfamily with his stepfather and his biological mother who worked hard for their own in a grocery store, and they lived a modest life together. However, they could not afford to Charlie’s further study too much. So Charlie made his own way through his study with scholarship. Charlie was an easy-going and kind-hearted young man.

Charlie’s family resided in Oregon State, far away from New England. One can deduce from the movie that Charlie’s warm hearts and delicate feelings were derived from his biological mother. Because it is commonly
said that women’s inner feelings are delicate and Charlie’s biological mother has greater impact on Charlie than anyone else, including his stepfather. As a stepchild, Charlie needed the family love very much. He treated Slade as his father. Their relationships were friendship and sometimes kinship.

Charlie’s family operated a grocery store, which merely financially supported his studying in a noble school. As such a low or middle class family, it was a wonder that they would prefer and support Charlie to be educated in a noble school, despite their financial difficulty. Charlie’s family had a higher expectation for him. They hoped that he could acknowledge the nobility which came from one’s quality, not one’s social class, or the amount of money one’s family owns. Charlie’s family’s social status did not match the noble school but Charlie’s quality, his discipline, honesty, principle, and warm heart exceeded the spirit of Baird School. His family education must be superior and offer him such valuable qualities. Charlie also had the ambition and desire through his school by scholarship, awards, and doing part-time jobs. That Charlie was able to get well along with other students in the noble school proved that there was no distinction among different social classes.

**Conclusion**

Many attempts have been tried to illustrate how different surroundings of different times influence the two characters-Charlie and Slade. And in this paper, the author selects two factors, social surroundings and family surroundings to analyze how the Vietnam War, campus culture, family values, and family structures influence them. Although Charlie and Slade come from different times and different surroundings, they can still cross the barrier of different ages to become friends and influence each other deeply.

**References**


