

THE WIND
An Opera in Three Acts
Adapted from the Movie and the Novel
by Patricia Herzog
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Summary and Synopsis

The Wind was Lillian Gish's last silent movie. It came out in 1928 just as the talkies were coming in. *The Wind* is also one of her greatest. She got the idea from Dorothy Scarborough's recently published novel of the same name and brought it to Irving Thalberg, then head of production at MGM, along with her choice of screenwriter Frances Marion, director Victor Sjöström (Seastrom) and leading man Lars Hanson, the team she had asked for and got to work with two years before in making *The Scarlet Letter*. Gish later described *The Wind* as having been the most unpleasant movie-making experience of her long and distinguished career: 120-degree weather in the Mojave desert with airplane propellers blowing sand in her face. She feared she might go blind.

Set in Sweetwater, Texas during an historic drought in the 1880's, *The Wind* is, in Scarborough's words, a "study in obsession and the tyranny of fear." The menacing winds of the wide-open prairie take hold of a young woman's imagination and drive her mad. Scarborough painted so grim picture of Sweetwater in the 1880's that the year the book came out (1925) the West Texas Historical Association published a detailed refutation. Not long afterwards Scarborough's depiction was substantiated, and the book is now regarded as a regional classic.

Letty Mason, whose mother has just died, goes to live with cousin Bev, a cowboy whose hardscrabble existence on the West Texas plains is not at all what she had been imagining. Things go from bad to worse when Bev's jealous wife Cora kicks her out of the house. With nowhere to go and no one else to depend on, she marries Bev's fellow cowboy Lige, a decent guy and self-described galoot whom she doesn't love and can't bear to go near. Things get even worse when Letty is left alone in a terrible "norther" storm, goes half out of her mind and winds up killing a man who tries to rape her.

The book ends with Letty, dazed and crazed with guilt, venturing outside and perishing in the wind. The movie ended that way, too, but was changed because studio execs on the east coast feared it wouldn't go over well with audiences. The movie we have ends with Letty bravely facing the wind and embracing life with Lige. It's a love story. And it works.

The Wind is no ordinary love story, however. The prominence and predominance of the wind, menacing, manifold, ever-shifting, is a voice that

speaks no less for being wordless. What better way to give this voice its due than as a role, indeed, the principal role, in an opera?

ACT I

Scene 1. Letty arrives at cousin Bev's and is shocked to see how he lives. She meets wife Cora, who greets her coldly, and their three children, who are excited to see her. Three men accompany Letty to the house: Wirt Roddy from Fort Worth, who eagerly made her acquaintance on the train, and Bev's fellow cowboys, Lige Hightower and Sourdough. Cora invites them all to stay for supper and they get to talking about the wind, especially Wirt and Sourdough, who regale Letty with scary stories about the wind ruining women's looks and eventually driving them crazy. The seed is planted and Letty is distracted with fear. Wirt leaves and the other men warn her off his seductive charm.

Scene 2. A sunny Sunday. Cora is preparing for a family picnic. Letty thinks she's going, too, but Cora tells her Sundays are for "callin' and courtin'": someone has to stay home. After they leave, Letty determines to go out and enjoy herself when Lige appears at the door. Remembering Cora's admonition, she invites him in. One thing leads to another until Lige finally screws up the courage to ask for her hand. Thinking his proposal preposterous, Letty bursts out laughing. Lige gets the message and leaves.

Scene 3. The wind is blowing hard outside. Inside, Letty is playing with the children and Cora is carving a side of beef hanging from a hook. She tells Letty to come help her, but Letty refuses, saying that where she comes from it's a man's job to carve the beef. Cora angrily lectures Letty about pioneer virtues, then she asks about Lige. Letty realizes that Cora knew all along and was expecting Letty would have accepted his proposal. When Letty tells her she refused, Cora screams at her to get out. Terrified, Letty runs out of the house and disappears into the raging wind.

ACT II

Scene 1. An evening some time later. Lige's modest one-room house. Sourdough and Lige are drinking and singing cowboy songs in celebration of Lige's marriage. Behind a screen, Letty changes out of her wedding dress. Sourdough is about to leave but she begs him to stay longer and sing about spring. When he finally leaves, Lige tries to kiss Letty but she evades him. He tries again with greater force and she violently rejects him. He backs off with dignity, saying that love will come in time. The scene ends with Letty retreating to Lige's bed and Lige preparing to sleep in a chair near the stove.

Scene 2

Some days later. A fine, clear windless night. Letty is washing the dishes with gritty sand. Lige sets up the screen and prepares his improvised bed. A coyote's howl pierces the stillness. Lige says it's fine weather for coyotes. Letty shudders and retreats to her bed behind the screen.

Scene 3

Later that same night. The house is dark. We hear Lige snoring and someone fumbling about. The door opens and Letty steps out into the moonless night under an immensity of stars. She walks some ways, stops, gets down on her knees and surveys the barren prairie around her. Imagining it's spring in Virginia, she sings lovingly of all the flowers. She lies down and looks up at the stars, imagining she sees a luxuriant canopy of trees. Coyotes circle around her. She doesn't notice until one of them howls. Letty wakes from her blissful reverie. Terrified, she cries out for Lige. The barely-clad Lige runs outside and is shocked to find Letty in such a state of confusion. He takes her back to the house. Still confused, she thinks they are going back to Virginia. Lige promises to find a way for her to go home. Letty thinks he'll be coming with her, but he has said no such thing.

ACT III

Scene 1. Lige's house, some days later. Men are preparing to drive the cattle south where there's water so they won't die from the drought. Lige is preparing to go with them. The situation is so dire, he tells her, that even Wirt Roddy has come all the way from Fort Worth. The temperature drops dramatically and the wind is whipping up. The dreadful norther is upon them and Letty begs Lige to take her with him. She says she'll go crazy if she's left alone. He tries to reassure her when Cora bursts in and says that Bev can't breathe. Lige goes for the doctor, Cora goes back to Bev and the children, and Letty is left alone.

Scene 2. The storm is raging. Letty is out of her mind with fear. She falls into a trance and passes out, knocking over a lamp and starting a fire. She startles awake and snuffs out the fire. The house is completely dark now. Letty imagines the demon horse of the wind galloping towards her. She hears loud banging at the door and rushes to open it, flinging herself into the arms of the man she thinks is Lige. He tries to kiss her and she realizes it's Wirt Roddy. He undoes his belt and comes towards her. She reaches for the gun Lige left her and warns him off, but Wirt continues to press forward. When he is finally upon her, she shoots him dead. Stunned and still in a daze, Letty drags Wirt's body outside, leaving behind a trail of bloody sand.

Scene 3. The sky is lightening but the wind is still howling. Letty is outside, struggling to bury Wirt's body under the shifting sands, which keep threatening to uncover it. Exhausted, she returns to the house.

Scene 4. Inside the house. The storm clouds have dissipated and the winds have mostly died down. The front door is wide open and the house is in utter disarray. The gun still lies on the floor and the bloody sand has not been swept away. There are piles of sand everywhere. Letty is kneeling before the blackened embers of the fireplace with her back to the door. Lige appears in the doorway. Sensing that she is disturbed, he calls to her softly. She swings around and looks at him in terror. He slowly approaches but she backs away. With a look of terror, she tells him she has killed Wirt Roddy. He looks down and sees the bloody trail, then she leads him to the door and points to where she buried the body. Wirt's nose and belly have emerged from the eroded pile of sand. Lige turns to Letty and tells her nothing's there. They look again and Wirt's body really does seem to be gone. Letty looks up at Lige and tells him she's not afraid anymore. He tells her she's a match for any wind. They hear a distant rumbling, which Letty imagines is yet another kind of wind. The rumbling gets louder and closer. An enormous bolt of lightening, a deafening clap of thunder and then comes the torrential rain. Lige is mad with joy. He dashes out and dances about like a crazy man. He grabs Letty by the hands and leads her out of the house. They both dance for joy. Finally, they embrace, fully and passionately, as the rain continues pouring down in torrents.