

# The City and the Pillar Short Guide

## The City and the Pillar by Gore Vidal

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# Characters

The hero of this novel, Jim Willard, is accurately enough described as a "dumb bunny" by one of the characters in *Two Sisters* (1970). He is an incarnation of a certain brand of typically American innocence — a descendant of Billy Budd and Huck Finn and a slightly older brother to Holden Caulfield.

Vidal has shrewdly exploited the effect of placing this traditional character in a milieu never before revealed in mainstream fiction, and he has made Jim a sympathetic character by the slowness with which he comes to act on the feelings that he has had from the time of his junior year in high school, when the book begins. Bob Ford, his love object, is an idea rather than a developed character, but the way he overlooks the implications of boyhood sexual experimentation while drifting into a conventional adulthood is realistically presented. Ronald Shaw is a closeted movie star who keeps Jim for a while. Paul Sullivan is a bitter, second-rate novelist with whom Jim also has an affair. These portraits are not well rounded, but like Vidal's portrait of Jim they are important for the suggestion they carry that homosexuals can escape detection — even when they are conspicuous public figures.

Through Sullivan, Jim meets Maria Verlaine, an exotic, sympathetic woman. Although he tries, Jim is unable to consummate an affair with her.

## Social Concerns

Although Vidal's two earlier novels had homosexual characters, *The City and the Pillar* was the first major mainstream novel to present a full realistic picture of homosexuality in America. In light of the standards of the day, the book was shocking to many, but despite a certain self-conscious sensationalizing, Vidal managed to demonstrate a compassion and firsthand knowledge of the subject that other readers found compelling. One of the things that most outraged readers of conventional sensibility was the fact that the hero was so normal: Flamboyant homosexuality was then more acceptable than the idea that homosexuals might be able to circulate among ordinary people undetected. The book's success changed the extent to which homosexuality and all sexual matters could be discussed in work written for a mass audience.

## Techniques

The City and the Pillar is written in the same terse Hemingwayesque prose as Vidal's first two novels. This fact may have contributed to the scandal caused by the appearance of the work because many readers of the time felt the style to be uncomfortably inconsistent with the subject. On the other hand, the novel is written from a thirdperson restricted point of view with the focal character usually Jim. This fact led other readers to misapprehend the work as autobiography. Vidal's prose always carries a conviction of deep interest in his subject no matter what it is. While he has disavowed the naive autobiographical interpretation of this work and all of his works (he is not an untutored tennis bum, and he was never kept by another man), it is sometimes difficult to distinguish his personal life from his professional persona. In Two Sisters, he has the character bearing his name claim to make up everything in his novels and to copy nothing from life, but this statement occurs in what must be the most suspect of contexts.

# Themes

The City and the Pillar is the story of a man who never outgrows the homoerotic longings of his first schoolboy crush. Bernard Dick has pointed out how neatly the book extrapolates the recursive themes of American literature seen in Cooper, Melville, and Twain, including the boyhood idyll, the mysterious call of the sea, the quest for the unattainable, and the taming of the frontier — in this case a cultural frontier. More specifically, the book is on the surface the familiar tale from the romance tradition of a search for something that is not really there at all. It is not so much that Bob fails to reciprocate Jim's feelings when the two finally meet again, nor even that he has neglected to pursue a parallel quest (although Jim has always thought of Bob as a twin who must inevitably be sharing his feelings). The fact is that Bob has genuinely forgotten the boyhood idyll and its moment of forbidden erotic pleasure. It never meant anything special to him. This discovery is what causes Jim to turn on him so viciously (in a different way in each version of the book).



## Literary Precedents

At this point in Vidal's career, the main influence on his style is clearly Ernest Hemingway. Not only the terse prose but the artless, almost plotless, narrative structure also owes much to Hemingway in a novel like *The Sun Also Rises* (1926). Only the melodramatic ending (either version of it) seems to suggest other antecedents.

James M. Cain or hard-boiled detective fiction like Raymond Chandler's might have been an influence here. While there is no precedent for discussion of this particular subject in mainstream fiction, there are many instances in literary history of authors expanding the range of subject matter available for literature. Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1857) is a case in point. It was damned as obscene yet went on to become a best seller for its day and is now recognized as a literary classic at least in part because of the originality of its presentation of sexual longing in a woman. Generically, *The City and the Pillar* belongs to the class of the Bildungsroman, or novel of growing up.

## Related Titles

The sympathetic portrait of homosexuality in the first version of the book, published in 1948, was not at all explicit. By 1968, however, public sensibility had changed so much — at least in part because of Vidal's work — that he found this early work of his to be conventionally melodramatic. As a result, he published *The City and the Pillar Revised*. The style and narrative remain substantially the same, but the ending is altered. Again Jim finds Bob, but he no longer murders him; this time he rapes him. This change is inimitable Vidal; while the ending is still melodramatic, it is both far more likely and far more threatening to readers unacquainted with the homosexual subculture. As a result, Vidal scandalized and disturbed a whole new generation of readers and made them see homosexuality as part of the real world. He did this, of course, without sentimentalizing, in fact while brutally rejecting a sentimental view of Jim's unrequited love.





# Copyright Information

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