

# **Two Sisters: A Novel in the Form of a Memoir Short Guide**

## **Two Sisters: A Novel in the Form of a Memoir by Gore Vidal**

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# Contents

<a href="#">Two Sisters: A Novel in the Form of a Memoir Short Guide.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Characters.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>
<a href="#">Social Concerns.....</a>	<a href="#">4</a>
<a href="#">Techniques.....</a>	<a href="#">5</a>
<a href="#">Themes.....</a>	<a href="#">6</a>
<a href="#">Literary Precedents.....</a>	<a href="#">7</a>
<a href="#">Related Titles.....</a>	<a href="#">8</a>
<a href="#">Copyright Information.....</a>	<a href="#">9</a>



# Characters

The main narrative is in the form of musings on the passing scene by a character named Gore Vidal. Despite this persona's disclaimer that "he" invents everything in "his" novels, Vidal uses the persona not only to express his own views on life and art but also to make a number of daring personal revelations about his sex life.

Interesting minor characters who pass through this portion of the work include Marietta Donegal, largely a caricature of Anais Nin, and Fryer Andrews, to some extent a caricature of Norman Mailer. Vidal deftly diffuses possible accusations of defamation of character in the traditional way of the author of a roman a clef by including a number of references to Nin and Mailer under their own names.

In the sections of the novel presented as excerpts from the twenty-year-old diary of Eric Van Damm, the illusive Eric is himself the main character, but the novel's chief weakness is the characterization of Eric. Vidal the character (or V. as Eric calls him) is in the process of discovering that the great (unrequited) love of his life was not the person he thought he was. The trouble is that Vidal the author has made Eric into very much the Vidal of twenty years earlier and left the book with more witty satire but less variety of characterization than most readers need and expect, but *Two Sisters* is the triumph of style over characterization, so this is a minor quibble. The other major character in the passages from Eric's diary is a fly-by-night film producer named Murray Morris who has aesthetic and sexual tastes that suggest a caricature of Louis B. Mayer. Drifting through these two narrative portions of the book (the Vidal and Eric first-person narrations) is the character of Eric's twin sister Erika, a genuinely illusive portrait of an archetypal lost love of another sort.

Among the characters in a screenplay written by Eric at the same time as his diary and included in its entirety are Helena, widow of the Emperor of Persia, and her sister Artemisa, wife of the King of Caria. These are in some sense satirical portraits of Jacqueline Lee Bouvier Kennedy Onassis and her sister Princess Radizwell, who are stepsisters to the author Vidal's half-sister N. A. Steers. The relationship of Helena and Artemisa to their half-brother Herostratus also provides analogies for Eric's relationship to Erika — the relationship to Helena representing the incestuous feelings — and the relationship to Artemisa representing the alienation. The character of the eunuch Bogoas in the screenplay provides a further layering since the character Vidal recognized this as a caricature of Murray Morris. The screenplay also includes a wealthy but social-climbing Egyptian merchant named Achoris who is at some level a satirical portrait of Aristotle Onassis. This labyrinth of roman a clef naturally leaves little room for fully rounded character development, but the virtues of the book lie elsewhere.

## Social Concerns

Vidal uses himself as one of the main narrators of this unusual book and shows himself finding the artistic and moral freedom in Europe that is denied to him in conventionbound America. The book is also a kind of potpourri of such fashionable modern sexual practices as incest, autoerotic asphyxia, pederasty, and nymphomania. It takes such a genial, casual view of these practices that it immediately identifies itself as peculiarly modern in outlook, making the point that the time has passed to view such matters with anything more than ennui.

# Techniques

Two Sisters is, in fact, Vidal's most successful tour de force in the radical use of point of view. In this work of the first rank, Vidal proves himself to be a dazzling and audacious ventriloquist. Built around an unproduced screenplay from the 1940s, Two Sisters combines alternating past and present first-person narrators with very different perspectives on the nature of this work.

## Themes

Two Sisters is a series of permutations on the theme that one cannot recapture the lost loves of youth because they were not the loves one thought them to be. The plot, especially in light of the complicated technique, is ever so slight, but the numerous pieces of material for a plot (including additional autobiographical elements in Eric's screenplay) are brought together in the last few pages of the book as the character Vidal learns almost inadvertently that he is not, after all, the father of Erika's child.

The son Vidal had lacked the courage to acknowledge is revealed as the fruit of Eric's incestuous liaison with his sister. The tenuous thread tying Vidal to an unseen and unacknowledged replication of himself snaps, and no connection remains between him and either the Erika or the Eric of twenty years earlier.

## Literary Precedents

Unlike more traditional autobiographical novels — works in which an author reshapes the materials of his own life to give them form and closure (for example, *David Copperfield* by Charles Dickens [1850] or *The Naked and the Dead* by Norman Mailer [1948]) — and in distinction from the biographical novel (such as Vidal's *Burr*, 1973), the sort of autobiographical novel Vidal is writing in *Two Sisters* fuses fact and invention by remaining true to the psychology of the author while inventing a fictional world for him to observe. In classic illustrations of this point of view, like *The Moon and Sixpence* (1919) and *The Razor's Edge* (1944) by W. Somerset Maugham or *The Berlin Stories* (1946) by Christopher Isherwood, the narrator participates only intermittently in the action. By encouraging the reader to confuse the thirdperson observer narrator with the author as a real person, works in this mode carry a greater sense of conviction than works using other sorts of first-person narrators. The point of view of *Two Sisters* also owes something to the documentary novel and to the roman à clef as practiced by such contemporary writers as Harold Robbins and Jacqueline Susann and also seen in *The Moon and Sixpence* and *The Sun Also Rises* (1926) and various novels of Evelyn Waugh.

## Related Titles

In *The Season of Comfort* (1949), Vidal made his first significant stylistic experiments — involving elaborate but not completely successful use of stream of consciousness and including a chapter in which two characters are followed simultaneously on facing pages.

*Messiah* (1954, revised 1965) is an earlier use by Vidal of the pseudomemoir, the most congenial mode for his style — strong on wit and weak on character development. *Messiah* is an intense work describing a religious visionary with the satanic plan of seducing the world into mass suicide. *The Judgment of Paris* (1952) is another earlier stylistic experiment, this one combining (as Ray Lewis White has pointed out) the all-dialogue technique of Thomas Love Peacock and I. Compton-Burnett with the direct address to the reader familiar from Anthony Trollope and Henry Fielding.





# Copyright Information

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