United States: Essays 1952-1992 Study Guide

United States: Essays 1952-1992 by Gore Vidal

BOOKRAGS

Contents

United States: Essays 1952-1992 Study Guide....1

Contents....2

Plot Summary....7

"Every Eckermann His Own Man" (1988)....9

"Novelists and Critics of the 1940s" (1953)....10

"A Note on the Novel" (1956)....11

"Satire in the 1950s" (1958)....12

"Norman Mailer's Self-Advertisements" (1960)....13

"Writers and the World" (1965)....14

"Literary Gangsters" (1970)....15

"Love, Love, Love" (1959)....16

"The Top Ten Best-Sellers" (1973)....17

"French Letters: Theories of the New Novel" (1967)....20

"The Hacks of Academe" (1976)....22

"American Plastic: The Matter of Fiction" (1970)....23

"Thomas Love Peacock: The Novel of Ideas" (1980)....25

"Meredith" (1970)....27

"The Bookchat of Henry James" (1986)....28

"The Golden Bowl of Henry James" (1984)....29

"Logan Pearsall Smith Loves the Adverb" (1984)....31

"William Dean Howells" (1983)....32

"Oscar Wilde: On the Skids Again" (1987)....34

"Bernard Shaw's Heartbreak House" (1959)....35

"Maugham's Half & Half" (1990)....36

"Ford's Way" (1990)....38

The Sexus of Henry Miller" (1965).....39
"Pen Pals: Henry Miller and Lawrence Durrell" (1988).....40
"Edmund Wilson: this Critic and this Gin and these Shoes" (1980).....41
"F. Scott Fitzgerald's Case" (1980).....42
"Dawn Powell: the American Writer" (1987).....44
"John O'Hara" (1964).....45
"John Horne Burns" (1965).....46
John Dos Passos at Midcentury" (1961).....47
"Book Report" (1956).....48
"V.S. Pritchett as 'Critic'" (1979).....49
"The Great World and Louis Auchincloss" (1974).....50
"Miss Sontag's New Novel" (1967).....51
"Doris Lessing's Science Fiction" (1979).....52
"Christopher Isherwood's Kind" (1976).....53
"On Prettiness" (1978).....54
"Why I am Eight Years Younger than Anthony Burgess" (1987).....55
"Frederic Prokosch: The European Connection" (1983).....56
"Professor V. Nabakov" (1983).....57
"Paul Bowles's Stories" (1983).....58
"Tennessee Williams: Someone to Laugh at the Squares With" (1985).....59
"The Death of Mishima" (1971).....60
"Sciascia's Italy" (1979).....61
"Calvino's Novels" (1974).....62
"Calvino's Death" (1985).....63
"Montaigne" (1992).....64
"The Twelve Caesars" (1952).....65

"Sex and the Law" (1965)....66
"Sex Is Politics" (1979)....67
"Police Brutality" (1961)....68
"Pornography" (1966)....69
"Doc Reuben" (1970)....70
"Women's Liberation: Feminism and Its Discontents" (1971)....72
"Pink Triangle and Yellow Star" (1981)....73
"The Birds and the Bees" (1991)....75
"How to Find God and Make Money" (1978)....76
"Rich Kids" (1978)....77
"Drugs" (1970)....78
"The Four Generations of the Adams Family" (1976)....79
"First Note on Abraham Lincoln" (1981)....81
"Lincoln, Lincoln, and the Priests of Academe" (1988-91)....82
"Last Note on Lincoln" (1991)....83
"President and Mrs. U.S. Grant (1975)....84
"Theodore Roosevelt: an American Sissy" (1981)....86
"Eleanor Roosevelt" (1971)....87
"H.L. Mencken the Journalist" (1991)....88
"Paranoid Politics" (1967)....89
"What Robert Moses Did to New York City" (1974)....90
"Conglomerates" (1973)....92
"Edmund Wilson, Tax Dodger" (1963)....93
"President Kennedy" (1961)....94
"The Manchester Book" (1967)....95
"The Holy Family" (1967)....96

"Barry Goldwater: a Chat" (1961).....97
"The 29th Republican Convention" (1968).....98
"Political Melodramas" (1973).....99
"The Art and Arts of E. Howard Hunt" (1976).....100
"An American Press Lord" (1970).....102
"H. Hughes" (1972).....104
"Richard Nixon: Not The Best Man's Best Man" (1983).....105
"Homage to Daniel Shays" (1972).....106
"The State of the Union: 1975" (1975).....107
"The State of the Union: 1980" (1980).....108
"The Real Two-Party System" (1980).....109
"The Second American Revolution" (1981).....110
"Ronnie and Nancy: A Life in Pictures" (1983).....112
"Armageddon?" (1987).....114
"The Day the American Empire Ran Out of Gas" (1986).....116
"A Cheerful Response" (1986).....117
"The National Security State" (1988).....118
"Cue the Green God, Ted" (1989).....119
"Gods & Greens" (1989).....120
"Patriotism" (1991).....121
"Monotheism and Its Discontents" (1992).....122
"At Home in Washington, D.C." (1982).....123
"On Flying" (1985).....124
"West Point" (1973).....125
"The Oz Books" (1977).....126
"E. Nesbit's Magic" (1964).....127

"Tarzan Revisited" (1963).....128
"Some Memories of the Glorious Bird and an Earlier Self" (1976).....129
"The Fourth Diary of Anaos Nin" (1971).....130
"Writing Plays for Television" (1956).....131
"Visit to A Small Planet" (1957).....132
"Who Makes the Movies?" (1976).....133
"Gore Vidal" (1968).....134
"Hollywood!" (1982).....135
"Remembering Orson Welles" (1989).....136
"Contagious Self-Love" (1974).....137
"Nasser's Egypt" (1963).....138
"Mongolia!" (1983).....139
"At Home in a Roman Street" (1985).....140
"Reflections on Glory Reflected and Otherwise" (1991).....141
Characters.....142
Objects/Places.....144
Themes.....147
Style.....150
Quotes.....151
Topics for Discussion.....155

Plot Summary

Perhaps best known as an astute political commentator and author of such novels as the gender-bending *Myra Breckenridge* and historical fiction such as *Burr* and *Lincoln*, Gore Vidal is a multi-faceted writer whose works also include plays, screenplays, television dramas and a massive collection of essays published over the last half century. These essays have appeared in a variety of large-circulation magazines including *Esquire, The Nation* and *The New York Review of Books*, as well as other smaller literary magazines in Europe and the United States. This particular collection of essays covers the period of 1952 to 1992 and is divided into three sections. The first section, titled State of the Art, focuses primarily on literature but makes occasional references to other art forms. The second section, State of the Union, includes essays on a wide range of political topics. State of Being, the final section, reprints essays on a variety of topics ranging from Hollywood film making to nation-building in Egypt.

The range and depth of this collection of essays reveals Vidal as a profound thinker with a sense of humor who is—to use one of his favorite adjectives—prescient in many areas of human life. His essays on the Middle East and its connections with America are eerily foreboding; his reflections on the state of literature not only identify disturbing trends toward illiteracy but offer explanations; and his general reflections on the world and life present him as a man of great sensitivity and insight.

Themes that appear frequently include the observation that the United States is more a capitalist empire than a true democracy; the death of a real reading public for the novel; the extent to which American literature is influenced by academia; and his belief that there is no such thing as homosexuality—only homosexual or heterosexual acts. Even when Vidal criticizes America, it is apparent that his comments are meant to be constructive and come out of genuine love and respect.

Gore Vidal was born at West Point, the son of Nina and Gene Vidal—the first aeronautics instructor at the military academy. He enlisted in the army during World War II and wrote *Williwaw*, a war novel, which was published when he was 19. The book was a smash hit and established him, along with Norman Mailer, as a brilliant post-war novelist. His second novel, *The Pillar and the City*, dealt openly with homosexuality and, like his first work, was a sensation. However, after publication of *The Pillar and the City*, Vidal seems to have been blacklisted by literary critics in New York, some of whom even refused to review his works. He spent time in Hollywood as a screenwriter where, among other projects, he wrote the film adaptation of "Suddenly Last Summer" by his friend Tennessee Williams. Vidal also worked as a writer in the early days of live television drama, a format he briefly considered a bright hope for spreading cultural awareness to the general public.

Vidal has written several successful stage dramas, including Visit to a Small Planet, and more than 16 novels. He also ran for the U.S. Senate from California in 1982 but was not elected. His maternal grandfather was Sen. Thomas Gore of Oklahoma, and politics was steeped in his blood from his earliest days growing up in Washington, D.C. Vidal's

political, familial, and literary connections and experiences give him a unique perspective on American life that is expressed with sometimes biting, sometimes humorous, but always rewarding prose.

"Every Eckermann His Own Man" (1988)

"Every Eckermann His Own Man" (1988) Summary and Analysis

A sly send-up of the ingrown literary world, this essay employs the device of using literary masks, or personas, to expose and attack those who use literary masks and personas. It is written in the form of an interview between a "visitor" from the *New York Review of Books* and Eckermann, whose real identity is difficult to nail down. The interviewer tells his subject there is nothing in the back issues of the *Review* by anyone named Eckermann, although there was a self-interview 25 years ago by the critic Edmund Wilson called "Every Man His Own Eckermann," which discusses music and painting—subjects Wilson confesses he knows little about.

Trying to unravel the mask and the man, the interviewer asks Eckermann/Wilson whether he can still contribute to the Review because of the identity confusion. Eckermann answers that whenever he writes art criticism, he signs himself as Susan Sontag. The interview subject inserts German and French phrases in his speech to show condescension toward the English language as he launches into an attack on book review and literary publications, authors and reviewers. The reader gets to see in a very amusing style the put-downs that are a part of status seeking in the art world.

Eckermann voices the opinion that Gore Vidal, in a review of a John Hersey collection of pieces, pointed out the "wondrously dull style, chockablock with lots of well-checked little facts" of *The New Yorker*. He says, however, that Vidal was too kind to the magazine and too harsh on the writer. Eckermann goes off on a political tangent, saying, "Dwight Macdonald, in the first issue of the *NYR*, had figured out that we had all been had by the Kennedys." When the interviewer steers him back to literature, Eckermann says the *Review* "came along just as literature ceased to be of any general interest."

Once again, Eckermann gets off subject, giving his opinion of reviewers' opinions of writers' books in the *Review* as the interview deteriorates into incoherence and irrelevancy. As the interviewer seeks to end the interview and extricate himself, Eckermann amusingly tells him, "On your way out, open the second shutter so that more light can come in." The final absurd line of this satirical essay, of course, points to the intellectual mess that modern literary criticism has become.

"Novelists and Critics of the 1940s" (1953)

"Novelists and Critics of the 1940s" (1953) Summary and Analysis

Little has changed in the world of literary criticism in the last century because the problems of life haven't really changed much, and too many critics and readers alike would prefer a book that comforts them and agrees with their prejudices than one that challenges their assumptions about life. With that thesis as a foundation, Vidal launches a broadside against contemporary literary criticism.

Vidal sees "a significant distinction between the reviewers for popular newspapers and magazines—whom no one interested in literature reads—and the serious critics of the Academy who write for one another in the quarterlies and occasionally for the public in the Sunday supplements."

Although the critics are serious, well-educated people they have the nearly impossible task of trying to explicate the modern novel about which few, if any, "rules" or "principles" can be ascertained. Vidal calls literary quarterlies "house organs for the academic world" that seldom publish truly imaginative work and sometimes are more interested in commentaries on writing than writing itself.

Vidal decries the major critics like Edmund Wilson and Malcolm Cowley of the 1950s for seemingly having no interest in current literature that has influenced both the evolution of literary forms and other writers. Although the nature of the human struggle has changed little over the centuries, contemporary writers such as Carson McCullers, Tennessee Williams and Paul Bowles are engaged in "truth-saying" that has brought them deeper into the "rich interior of the human drama."

The pervasive concern in modern literature with sexuality, Vidal says, merely reflects the fact that the rules of the society man has created constrict the sexuality and full expression of humanity. Writes Vidal, "Yet while ours is a society where mass murder and violence are perfectly ordinary and their expression in the most popular novels and comic books is accepted with aplomb, any love between two people which does not conform is attacked."

Vidal notes that although the tone of the contemporary novel is not cheerful, it is precise and often on a small scale. Authority, religious dogma and political doctrine are now the pervasive evils that modern novelists must confront. Against a despairing world, the artist is the dreamer of new dreams and keeper of hope.

"A Note on the Novel" (1956)

"A Note on the Novel" (1956) Summary and Analysis

In this very brief essay, Gore Vidal asserts that "after 300 years, the novel in English has lost the general reader (or rather the general reader has lost the novel)." That said, it's not the fault of novelists, rather the fault of the audience, which is "an unpleasant accusation to make in a democracy where, ultimately, the taste of the majority is the measure of all things." Vidal reflects that American civilization has come full circle from the Greek mysteries and plays to the printing press and the novel to television and play again. It's as if, he says, the novel was only a stand-in for the drama that used to be limited to theaters. Despite the plethora of "live" plays for television and massive quantities of paperback books, Vidal says these are not serious signs of a yearning for culture but more likely people merely indulging "secret vices from one bright cover picture to another—consuming and not reading." With adventure stories, exotic voyages, superficial histories and the like now the provenance of television and movies, novelists are left with exploration of the "inner world's divisions and distinctions where no camera may follow." This essay is an early peroration by Vidal on the declining state of the novel and readership in the United States—a theme to which he often returns in subsequent essays.

"Satire in the 1950s" (1958)

"Satire in the 1950s" (1958) Summary and Analysis

Never has there been a time when satire is more needed and in shorter supply, Vidal says in this short essay originally published in *The Nation*. He compares America under "the Great Golfer" (President Eisenhower) to the Catholic Church in its intolerance for tolerance, its complete ineptness when it comes to satire. The Roman Empire, by contrast, was a hurly-burly circus of conflicting religious, moral and political beliefs that was ripe for satirists. Post-war America, according to Vidal, is a brain-fogged land of lockstep conformity where issues such as religion, race, and ethnic and political differences are all swept under the rug. "A profound tolerance is in the land, a tolerance so profound that it is not unlike terror," Vidal says.

In fact, the conformity that engulfs America is so pervasive, particularly among the young who want security, not adventure, that "if ever there was a people ripe for dictatorship it is the American people today." Oddly enough, there are many potential targets for satire: Christianity, psychiatry, Marxism, romantic love, xenophobia and even science all offer rich veins for satire, Vidal says. Although there is probably no room for real satirists on television or in the movies, the novel remains a vehicle for such cultural wasp stings. Satirists are needed as much as the truth is needed, Vidal says, because satire is simply "truth grinning in a solemn canting world."

"Norman Mailer's Self-Advertisements" (1960)

"Norman Mailer's Self-Advertisements" (1960) Summary and Analysis

Vidal assesses Normal Mailer as novelist in comparison with his own novel-writing career and that of other American novelists. He concludes that Mailer is probably more self-promoter than serious writer, although he is an "honorable" person. Vidal notes parallels between his career and Mailer's such as the publication of the former's first novel, *Williwaw,* at about the same time as the latter's *The Naked and the Dead*, and finds a sadness in the fact that both of their careers were stifled by the intellectual barrenness of the Eisenhower years.

Vidal also seems to lament that writers in America are no more immune than, say, presidents, movie stars or baseball players to the swift ascent followed by the crashing to earth that results from fickle public tastes in a capitalist democracy. "That wide graveyard of stillborn talents which contains so much of the brief ignoble history of American letters is a tribute to the power of a democracy to destroy its critics, brave fools and passionate men," he writes.

Advertisements for Myself, Mailer's book under consideration, is nothing more than a confessional of the type popularized by fallen actresses with an eye on the comeback trail, according to Vidal. Vidal does say that, of all his contemporaries, he has "the greatest affection for Mailer as a force and as an artist" and that his faults "add to rather than subtract from the sum of his natural achievement." In this essay, the reader is exposed to a recurrent stylistic device used by Vidal—attack, then appreciate. Somewhat annoying on first encounter, this technique leaves the reader with the feeling that Vidal has thoroughly thought the issues through and must put in those things that he loves or appreciates about the author. The technique tends to add veracity to his essays as well as critical balance.

"Writers and the World" (1965)

"Writers and the World" (1965) Summary and Analysis

Vidal's essay "Writers and the World" was prompted by the fact that the entertainment newspaper *Variety* had begun reviewing writers who appeared on television "in precisely the same terms that they review comedians and singers." Whereas in earlier times it took a generation for poet Carl Sandberg to become a national figure, thanks to new electronic media fame is now an overnight phenomenon. "Talking writers," as Vidal describes them, became familiar staples of TV when producers found that movie stars needed a script to follow and politicians couldn't be counted on to allow equal time for opposing points of view. Thus the dilemma of the public artist: when does a "talking writer" actually write?

Although most writers would say that public appearances and media exposure are good for book sales, there is a strong suspicion among Americans of artists and writers who become public figures. "Most Americans prefer their serious writers obscure, poor and, if possible, doomed by drink or gaudy vice," Vidal writes. Vidal traces the role of writers to "the world" by decades; e.g., except for a time in the 1930s, the notion of the writer as a citizen has not been popular. In the 1940s, intellectuals and writers were alienated. In the 1950s there was "a death in the land to which the only response was the Beats." As the Beats disappeared in a puff of marijuana, the raucous 1960s brought politics and literature together and as a result, writers came to think of themselves as reformers with a clear moral vision.

One result, according to Vidal, was that college students in the 1960s became interested in writers—for a while. This phenomenon explains the success of writers such as Kurt Vonnegut and the resurgence of interest in Hermann Hesse. "Courses in contemporary literature have made a generation of young people aware of writers who ordinarily might have gone on to the end in honorable obscurity," Vidal writes. Yet old archetypes about the corruptibility of writers by public exposure seem to have been turned upside down, as Vidal observes: "William Faulkner's 30 years as a move writer affected his novels not at all. He could do both."

Vidal also makes the sly observation that American men do not read novels because they feel guilty when they read books that do not have facts in them. The cultural bias seems to be that fictional tales are for women and children, while facts are for men. The truth about writers as public figures, however, may not be the danger that they will become corrupted, but that they will waste time and access to the "stillness" of spirit mentioned by Goethe as essential to creative output, Vidal says.

"Literary Gangsters" (1970)

"Literary Gangsters" (1970) Summary and Analysis

Who is a literary gangster and why should we care? Cut to the chase: literary gangsters are, as Vidal explains, "hit-and-run journalists without conscience, forced to live precariously by their wits [that] are increasingly strained nowadays because there are fewer places to publish than there used to be, which means a lot more edgy hoods hanging around the playgrounds of the West Side."

Who exactly, though, is Vidal taking about? Anyone who has grasped the reality that Americans would rather read about writers as personalities than read their books would rather absorb strong opinions delivered vociferously regardless of factual foundations, and who exploits those facts to further his or her literary career, that's who. The reader senses both Vidal's irritation with this ilk of literary opportunist, but is grateful for his ability to describe it so clearly.

The first of these literary gangsters, Vidal informs, was John W. Aldredge, Jr. who first emerged as an ostensible literary critic in the 1940s when he wrote warmly of the works of John Burns and Vidal himself. Aldredge moved to Connecticut to be closer to several future victims, still covering them with lavish praise. Suddenly, Alrdredge turned and publicly "bit one by one those very asses he had with such cunning kissed," Vidal says. He was praised in *Life* magazine for showing up the decadence and immorality of post-war writers. Aldredge, however, has since vanished from the literary scene.

Other literary gangsters include John Simon who "slashed his way through literature, theater, cinema clanking chains, snapping whips, giggling and hissing. [His] flow of venom has proved inexhaustible." Robert Brustein, "a failed theater person," who leaves the impression that he plays the part of a highbrow critic whose specialty is a sort of Old Testament lamentation, is another.

Mr. Vidal saves the point of his stinger for Richard Gilman, "a notorious hood" who

has written extensively about Normal Mailer, Susan Sontag, Donald Barthelme and other authors. Vidal decries the banality of Gilman's literary observations (*The Naked and the Dead* is a "conventional novel" with no new style), his poor writing and limited receptivity to the truly innovative. In one instance, Vidal corrects Gilman's factual errors, such as his statement that narrative is no longer important in the novel.

"'We are bored by most plays today,'" Gilman says, to which Vidal adds: "He is probably right and writers and teachers like Mr. Gilman have certainly helped make art dull for the many." Vidal suggests that Gilman abandon gangsterdom and take up popular journalism instead, but, as Vidal writes, "I fear he will be deceived by the good reviews he has no doubt already arranged for his book (*The Confusion of Realms*) and so persist in error."

"Love, Love, Love" (1959)

"Love, Love, Love" (1959) Summary and Analysis

The cult of feeling in modern theater reflects an anti-intellectual bias in American culture while simultaneously retarding the development of truly superior drama. Love, or feeling, has become more important than mind in not only theater but also in the serious novel and other art forms, Vidal argues. This state of affairs "does no more than reflect the ubiquitous flab of the Great Golfer's (President Eisenhower) reign." One example: the excellent dramatist and writer George Bernard Shaw produced works of art such as "My Fair Lady that appear on the American stage as nothing more than trivial musicals.

Vidal draws a clear line between Eugene O'Neill ("whose mastery of ideas was second to none unless it be his fellow Nobelist Pearl Buck") and playwrights such as Arthur Miller who, although a bad writer in Vidal's opinion, is an often-compelling dramatist. Miller is the kind of dramatist he is, Vidal says, because that's the kind of drama Americans want to experience. Playwrights, if they're aware of the literary world at all, know that other writers tend to disdain them for their sloppy use of language and general lack of ideas.

Oddly enough, it is actors themselves who have been most victimized by the cult of feeling. Actors have learned that "truth" is everything, that truth is feeling, and that feeling is "their own secret core, to which the character they are to interpret must be related," Vidal says. Listening to actors speak is evidence of this: they communicate in a kind of psycho-babble that is a mixture of "baby talk and analysts' jargon." The result of all this subconsciousness onstage is not theater, but group therapy as actors bring waves of their personal, irrelevant emotions to a role. Vidal defends Tennessee Williams against attacks by several critics, including a "majestically wrongheaded" review of *A Streetcar Named Desire* by Mary McCarthy who accused Williams of ambition, as if it were repulsive.

Vidal concludes with a comparison of American theater to European theater and finds that ours is really not much worse. He cautions the reader to expect less—not more—intelligence onstage as Broadway budgets tighten and the tastes of the American public are satisfied by plays of only feeling and not ideas.

"The Top Ten Best-Sellers" (1973)

"The Top Ten Best-Sellers" (1973) Summary and Analysis

Vidal perceives a sneaky familiarity in all the books on the top 10 best seller list of the *New York Times* of Sunday, Jan. 7, 1973: their stories, characters, language and even scenes are recycled from Hollywood. For example, taking the books in reverse chronology, he asserts that *Two from Galilee* by Marjorie Holmes ("a love story starring the Mother and Stepfather of Our Lord") blatantly and obviously borrows descriptions from the screenplay that Vidal worked on for *Ben-Hur*. Although the author's style is "beyond clichy," her scene-making ability relies on familiar biblical banalities.

The Eiger Sanction by (one name only) Trevanian, "an Ian Fleming by-blow," is sometimes well-written but completely derivative of the on-screen adventures of hyper-masculine James Bond. Just when the author begins to ascend to the level of *belles lettres*, he descends once again into incoherent *bathos*.Vidal notes that Trevanian has an irritating habit of sticking news celebrities such as Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis and Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor into his narrative. These celebrities are pulled onstage for reader identification and have no real purpose in the story line.

On the Night of the Seventh Moon by Victoria Holt belongs to the genre of "the Gothic novel for ladies," of which Vidal says he knows little. He does, however, detect strong similarities between Holt's work and Daphne du Maurier's *The Scapegoat*, for which Vidal wrote the screenplay. Vidal notes also that *Scapegoat* is nothing more than du Maurier's rewrite of *The Prisoner of Zenda*. The plot gets complicated as the author borrows freely from Hollywood films for characters and scenes. The lead character, the virginal Helena Trant (reminiscent of radio heroine Helen Trent and Maria von Trapp), is visited by lust in the person of Black Forest Duke Maximilian, whose kiss makes her feel "exalted and expectant all at once. It was cruel and yet tender; it was passionate and caressing." The hackneyed story ends with an even more hackneyed moment for the lovers beneath the stars, in a scene borrowed from a Bette Davis movie. The reader can almost hear Vidal gag.

Herman Wouk's *The Winds of War*, despite its 885-page heft, numerous historical inanities and unlikely characters, gets a nod from Mr. Vidal as pleasurable reading but not a novel of ideas. Wouk's religiosity and pedestrian imagination hinder the book. When Wouk has a character indulge in the "swooping high notes of smart Washington women, Vidal counters that he grew up in Washington, D.C. at precisely the time referred to in the novel and demurs "smart Washington ladies sounded no different than smart New York ladies (no swooping in either city)."

Of all the books on the bestseller list, *The Camerons* by Robert Crichton is closest to the movies, according to Vidal. A miner's daughter in the UK during the 1870s goes to the Scottish Highlands, captures a fisherman, locks him up in the mines for 20 years

and has a number of children by him. Later, after a labor fight at the mines, the family migrates to America. The movie cliches include, as Vidal points out, "the Mirror Scene, the Food Scene, the Fever Breaks Scene, the Confrontation between Mr. Big and the Hero [and] the Mob Scene." Derivative movie sources include "How Green Was My Valley," "None But the Lonely Heart," "The Corn Is Green," and "Peyton Place."

The Persian Boy by Mary Renault, is "the only true love story on the best seller list [and is] about two homosexualists" and their aberration that moralists such as Herman Wouk would find upsetting, Vidal observes . It concerns the love between 26-year-old Alexander the Great and a Persian eunuch named Bagoas. The story is told from Bagoas' perspective in first-person style. Bagoas is captured, castrated, enslaved and finally given to Alexander as one of the spoils of war. Although Alexander never took advantage of those he conquered, Bagoas seduces him and they continue as lovers despite Alexander's several wives. Vidal describes the book as "phantasmagoric [with] marvelous cities, strange landscape, colliding cultures and at center the golden conqueror of the earth."

Aleksandr Solzhenitisyn's *August 1914* is an admirable book, just as its author is admirable for maintaining his human dignity in the face of the Soviet system, Vidal says. While it's easy to admire the man, it's not so easy to love his writing. As an author, Solzhhenitsyn is "rooted most ambitiously in literature as well as in films," according to Vidal. "Tolstoi hangs over the work like a mushroom cloud." Vidal finds his account of Russian military errors at the outset of World War I "long and wearisome" and finds his characters "impossible to keep straight." The core of his book is "nothing beyond the author's crypto-Christianity," Vidal says, but he gives the "noble engineer" credit for being good at describing how things work and guesses he should have stuck to writing "manuals of artillery or instructions on how to take apart a threshing machine."

Semi-Tough by Dan Jenkins is a jock story about the preparation for the big (football) game that involved "an astonishing amount of drink, pot, and what the narrator refers to as 'wool,' meaning cunt," Vidal says. Briefly, the essayist ponders the connection between why American males are fixated on watching sports and their poor physical condition. "According to a WHO report, the American male is the world's fattest and softest; this might explain why he also loves guns—you can always get your revolver up." Vidal sees no movie in this vapid book, unless Andy Warhol were to film it.

The Odessa File by Frederick Forsyth is a slapdash work of pseudo-documentary that depends largely on reminding readers of the Third Reich and the holocaust as well as the role of Jews in the death of Jesus. In a series of elaborate ruses (foreword, author's note, publisher's note), the reader learns that Viking wants to leave the reader guessing about which characters are real and which are fictional, in this account of the secret Nazi organization known as Odessa. The organization, Vidal writes, helped hide SS men in South America but has also infiltrated the post-war German government. The plot involves former SS men providing Egypt with biological and nuclear weapons to be used against Israel, changing names and identities, and "splendid Fu Manchu nonsense." In the end, Vidal decries both the author and the publisher for publication of the book because it exploits crass fears and resentments.

At the top of the bestseller list is *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*, "a greeting card bound like a book with a number of photographs of seagulls in flight," Vidal observes. The slim text concerns a seagull that wants to learn to fly better and more beautifully just for the sake of flying and not for food. Because of this, he is ostracized and then transported to higher realms where he can go on perfecting his flight techniques. Vidal finds it "touching" that the story is so popular among "the artless and conforming" because it celebrates art for art's sake and the virtues of nonconformity.

"French Letters: Theories of the New Novel" (1967)

"French Letters: Theories of the New Novel" (1967) Summary and Analysis

Despite atrophied interest in the novel by general readers in the United States, and the historical inevitability of its survival primarily for a small group of writers and hardened readers, theorists of the "new novel" forge blindly ahead. "The large public which used to find pleasure in prose fictions prefers movies, television, journalism and books of 'fact,'" Vidal notes. The title and presentation of a novel is more important to its success in the marketplace than its subject or writer, he observes. Books about doctors, the Kennedys and gruesome murders are more popular than imaginative fiction. The impact of academia upon literature has been to supplant the exegesis in the reader's mind as more important than the original work under examination.

Several French writers including, Alain Robbe-Grillet, Nathalie Sarraute, Michel Butor, Claude Simon and Robert Pinget, have tried to change the form of the novel and its relationship with the reader, Vidal says. Among this cadre of "new novelists," the two primary theorists are, as Vidal points out, Robbe-Grillet and Sarraute. The former believes that any attempt by the novelist to assign the world meaning is absurd; the latter believes that character in the novel has become a point of mistrust between writer and reader in an age of human life devoid of any meaning. Despite her existentialist views, Sarraute is "obsessed with form in a way that the traditional writer seldom is," Vidal observes.

"There is, however, something very odd about a literary movement so radical in its pronouncements yet so traditional in its references," he writes. Both French authors/critics continually relate themselves to great writers, which raises the question whether they assume for themselves the accomplishments of the likes of James Joyce, Marcel Proust, Fyodor Dostoevsky and Samuel Beckett. In many respects, Vidal says, the writing of Robbe-Grillet and Sarroute resembles that of the anachronistic brothers Edmond and Jules de Goncourt whose literary partnership ended in the late 1800s. Vidal notes that the "manifestos of these two explorers" are filled with quasi-scientific terms such as "tropism," "larval," "magma," "evolution" and "equilibrium" although Sarroute, in particular, rejects the title of "laboratory novelist."

This may be only a reflection of a preference on the part of the reading public for "facts" over the imagination. "It is the spirit of the age to believe that any fact, no matter how suspect, is superior to any imaginative exercise," Vidal observes. Further, Vidal notes that Robbe-Grillet and Sarraute "often appropriate the language of science without understanding its spirit—for instance, one can verify the law of physics states there is no action with reaction, but how to prove the critical assertion that things in themselves

are what caused Camus' creature to kill?" Even Robbe-Grillet himself admits that it is easier to define a new literary form than to follow it unswervingly.

According to Vidal, Robbe-Grillet's central focus is on the novel as an expression of man's relationship to his environment and the Frenchman rejects "our race's tendency to console itself by making human what is plainly non-human." For Ms. Sarraute, however, the pathetic fallacy is alive and well as she happily describes "crouched houses," Vidal says. Robbe-Grillet seeks, in his own words, "to create a world but starting from nothing, from the dust," but Vidal calls it "worrisome to be told that a man can create a world from nothing when that is the one thing he cannot begin to do, simply because no matter how hard he tries, he cannot dispose of himself." Robbe-Grillet believes the only purpose for the novel is the invention, or reinvention, of the world by complete rejection of old forms that expressed an "absurd and futile" relationship of man to his environment.

Ms. Sarraute admires Faulkner's ability to draw the reader into his imaginary universe and finds the identifier of modern art to be the device of referring to the leading characters as "I," as illustrated in the shifting narrative points of view in "As I Lay Dying." However, she sees the challenge of the modern novel as somehow recording the "sub-conversation," something sensed but not said, the hidden counterpoint to the stated theme. Vidal notes the virtual impossibility of this because, as Ms. Sarraute observes, "no inner language can convey it." Vidal says the "new novel" appears in many ways to be approaching the "pure" state of music, something envisioned by American author/essayist Susan Sontag as "a kind of total structuring" of the novel akin to music and to approximate the "perfect irreducible artifact Robbe-Grillet dreams of." Vidal says, however, that this is only possible "if one were to eliminate as much as possible the human from the novel."

"The Hacks of Academe" (1976)

"The Hacks of Academe" (1976) Summary and Analysis

In this essay, Vidal applies his rapier wit to *The Theory of the Novel: New Essays*, edited by John Halperin, associate professor in the English Department of the University of Southern California. It's a collection of 19 essays written by as many professors of English, most of them American creative writing teachers. Vidal begins by noting a major historical gaffe by the author when he asserts that "the gestation period of the novel" did not begin until 1,500 years after the birth of Christ. "This is sweet innocence; also, ignorance. Two very good novels (*Satyricon*, *Golden Ass*) were written by near-contemporaries of the gentle Nazarene [Jesus]," Vidal says.

In the first essay, "What is Exposition," author Professor Meir Sternberg resorts to a "Cheopsean" set of diagrams and graphics with parallel English and Latin terms, such as "story/fabula" and indecipherable charts to convey how "time-honored" exposition works in tragedy. His pedestrian summary: "Exposition is a time problem *par excellence*." Professor Irving Buchen believes "the key to the artistry of the novel is managing fecundity." Vidal's comment on this analysis is terse: "The late Margaret Sanger [birth control proponent] could not have put it better."

Vidal finds Professor Frank Kermode's "Novel and Narrative" essay "characteristically elegant," and especially insightful on the writings of Roland Barthes, probably because he's read his books and not just the jacket blurbs. Professor Leon Edel in "Novel and Camera" notes that the audience for the novel has been steadily dwindling while that for films, comic books and TV is rapidly growing. Vidal appreciates Professor George Levine's "number of intelligent things to say about writing" as well as his direct manner of expression—especially in a statement such as "fiction is fiction." Vidal says the essay reminds him of the words of Calvin Coolidge: 'In public life, it is sometimes necessary in order to appear really natural to be actually artificial.'

Professor Leslie Fiedler ("a redskin most at home in white clown makeup") reminds readers that the novel is primarily a popular art form and falsely ascribes its genesis in the 17th Century to Samuel Richardson, Vidal notes. Fiedler says that Richardson launched the novel as "the first successful form of pop art" ignoring the centuries of other popular art forms such as the ballad and epic poetry, and that Richardson made possible the comic book, film and TV program as "dream literature." Vidal calls *Giles Goat-Boy* by John Barth "a very bad prose-work" but it is not, as Fiedler claims, "a comic novel, a satire intended to mock everything which comes before it. It is as if the Art Novel, aware that it must die, has determined to die laughing." To this Vidal responds, "With that, Professor Fiedler goes over the side of Huck's raft."

"The Anti-art Art Novel does not exist despite the nervous attempts of teachers to find a way of making the novel if not news, really and truly new," he concludes.

"American Plastic: The Matter of Fiction" (1970)

"American Plastic: The Matter of Fiction" (1970) Summary and Analysis

Vidal rummages in vain for signs of life and renewal in The New Novel, which is at 40 years old in 1970, "young for an American presidential candidate or a Chinese buried egg [but] old indeed for a literary movement—particularly a French literary movement. He finds roots of The New Novel in the works of French writers/theorists Nathalie Sarraute and Alain Robbe-Grillet, whose seminal works of the late 1930s impacted American academic authors and teachers at a glacial pace, primarily second-hand through the proponent of "zero degree writing," Roland Barthes.

Among the American novelists who have come under Monsieur Barthes' influence are Donald Barthelme, John Barth, Thomas Pynchon and William Gass—mostly university English professors who write "experimental" prose intended primarily to be taught by—voila!—other English professors. "I find it hard to take seriously the novel that is written to be taught, nor can I see how the American university can provide a base for the making of 'new' writing when the American university is, at best, culturally and intellectually conservative and, at worst, reactionary," Vidal says. He describes the writings of these authors as "plastic" that leaves him feeling depressed.

Vidal notes Barthes' advocacy of zero degree, or "white," writing as first defined by Albert Camus in *The Stranger* and further expostulated by Barthes in his Element of Semiology, which is "full of graphs and theorems as well as definitions and puzzles. It results in writing devoid of metaphor or anthropomorphizing, the goal of which is to make the reader "no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text." The result is a "very elaborate style that seems willfully complicated. Vidal assumes that Barthes' reliance on formulas and diagrams is a result of "teaching in classrooms equipped with blackboards and chalk. Envious of the half-erased theorems—the prestigious *signs*—of the physicists, English teachers now compete by chalking up theorems and theories of their own, words having failed them yet again."

Thus, the appearance of perspective drawings—ominous faces and strange graphics embedded in the short stories of Donald Barthelme published in *The New Yorker*. Barthelme's first book, *Come Back, Dr. Caligari*, is a collection of short stories written between 1961 and 1964, "the period during which Sarraute and Robbe-Grillet and Barthes were being translated into English," Vidal notes. At this point, Vidal distinguishes proponents of The New Novel as being more interested in fiction's R and D (research and development) than in "the old R and R (rest and recuperation)." "America's most imitated young writer [Barthelme] is also not only the most imitable but also one of the most imitative," Vidal sneers.

Somewhat surprisingly, Vidal likes the short stories of Grace Paley who he describes as a writer in the "R and R school" working from "something very like life—I mean 'life.' She has an extraordinary ear for the way people sound. She knows the ethnics in different voices."Although her prose tends at times to be somewhat plain, it is suffused with so much vitality that her style is not a distraction, he says. Vidal admits enjoying William Gass's first novel, *Omensetter's Luck*, and finds his essays "often eerily good." He calls Gass's mind "not only first-rate but far too complex to settle for the easy effects of, say, Mr. Barthelme."

For 12 years, Vidal confesses, he tried unsuccessfully to read John Barth's *The Sot-Weed Factor*, which he diagnoses as "an astonishingly dull book neither farce nor satire nor much or anything except English-teacher-writing at a pretty low level." He calls *Giles Goat-Boy* "another 800 pages of ambitious schoolteacher-writing: a book to be taught rather than read."

In Thomas Pynchon's first novel, *V*, "the prose is very close to that of the comic books of the fifties," Vidal says. Vidal finds Pynchon's insertion of freshman science from his days as a student at Cornell with the use of concepts such as entropy and anti-matter "superbly ambitious." However, he finds the idea of spiritual continuity after death "somber, but I am in a minority: this generation of Americans is god-hungry and craves reassurance and craves reassurance of personal immortality. If Pynchon can provide it, he will be a god—rather his intention, I would guess."

"Thomas Love Peacock: The Novel of Ideas" (1980)

"Thomas Love Peacock: The Novel of Ideas" (1980) Summary and Analysis

Because most American novels are either genre works (romances, westerns, lawyer epics) for pure entertainment or else present themselves as in some understandable sense "true," The Novel of Ideas is practically unknown in this country—although it has a respectable tradition in Europe and England. Vidal observes that for the last half-century the "Serious American Novel" has dealt only with the white middle class, usually schoolteachers "who confront what they take to be real life" but is devoid of wit and irony, politics or theories of education or the nature of good.

The result: the serious novel is of no real interest to anyone, including those who write them, Vidal says. The insular quality of American letters is deeply-rooted in American history itself since "Americans will never accept any literature that does not plainly support the prejudices and aspirations of a powerful and bigoted middle class which is now supplementing its powerful churches with equally powerful universities where what is said and thought and imagines is homogenized to a degree that teachers and students do not begin to suspect because they have never set foot outside the cage they were born in."

Why, though, doesn't the novel of ideas have currency in contemporary America? Could it relate to literacy levels? Vidal, in a slight digression, mentions the oft-quoted statement by Thomas Jefferson ("the mellifluous old faker") that between "a government without newspapers, or newspapers without a government," he'd choose the latter. Vidal notes, however, that Jefferson was quick to add: "But I should mean that every man should receive those papers and be capable of reading them." Vidal says the last sentence cancels the first, then adds, "Jefferson was no leveler."

Vidal discusses Marilyn Butler's observation that students of literature are taught to prize introspection more highly than objective thinking, and "we are stunned by reiteration into believing that what the world wants is positive thinking. Peacock makes out a case, illustrated by Voltaire, for negative thinking, and its attendant virtues of challenge, self-doubt, mutual acceptance and toleration," Butler writes. Vidal agrees that, particularly in America, "the passive yea-sayer who has no ideas at all about politics, religion, ethics, history is absolutely central to our syllabus and his only competition is the artist as advertiser of sweet self alone."

Mary McCarthy also notes that the grittier side of life, raw emotion that is refined away in the novels of Victor Hugo and Henry James has become the provenance of film, which she calls "a narrative medium that is incapable of thought." Ms. McCarthy suggests that it might be possible to go back in time and resurrect the novel of ideas

and believes that "a special license has always been granted to the Jewish novel, which is free to juggle ideas in full public." Vidal chooses to believe that this is not because such writers as Roth, Bellow and Malamud are Jewish, but rather that they arrived after Henry James.

"Meredith" (1970)

"Meredith" (1970) Summary and Analysis

Publication of critic V.S. Pritchett's lectures on the British novelist George Meredith provides Vidal a springboard for his own assessment ("a rare combination of will and genius") and an opportunity to remark on the demise of the novel in English. Vidal notes that Henry James referred to Meredith's "charming *accueil*, his impenetrable shining scales, and the (to me) general mystery of his perversity."

Vidal calls the technique of Meredith's novel "theatrical," in which carefully staged conflicts create the challenges that confront the hero and which he must endure to experience "that clarification and sad wisdom which can only be achieved when all pride and self-delusion are burnt away." Vidal celebrates Meredith's "energy, wit, comedic invention [which] are not only satisfying but like no one else's."

In this very short essay, Vidal calls Meredith "a king" in the realm of the novel, as it "stutters into silence" after three centuries. This note of poignant nostalgia recurs constantly in Vidal's essays, as he considers literature generally and the novel specifically as dying art forms.

"The Bookchat of Henry James" (1986)

"The Bookchat of Henry James" (1986) Summary and Analysis

Henry James as book critic is the subject of this Vidal essay, largely based on publications by the Library of America in a single volume of all of James' reviews of books by American and English writers. James began reviewing books at the age of 23 ("far too young," Vidal asserts) while he was still an American resident and before he was sent to Paris as a correspondent for the *New York Tribune*.

Vidal notes that James found the milieu of D.H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* depressing, as well as that of Thomas Hardy in a review of *Far from the Madding Crowd*. James detested dialect novels—British or American—and called Hardy's novel "singularly inartistic." As a young man, James also had no use for George Eliot and her *Silas Marner*. But 20 years later, according to Vidal, he'd undergone a change of heart and wrote of George Eliot: "What is remarkable, extraordinary—and the process remains inscrutable and mysterious—is that this quiet, anxious, sedentary, serious, invalidical English lady, without animal spirits, without adventures or sensations, should have made us believe that nothing in the world was alien to her, should have produced such rich, deep, masterly pictures of the multiform side of man."

Similarly, James at first encounter thought Walt Whitman vulgar and pretentious for assuming the mantle of national poet. Twenty-five years later, James had grown to appreciate Whitman and "the vulgarity of Whitman was seen for what it is, the nation itself made flesh," Vidal observes. On the other hand, James apprehended that communism in its earliest forms was only a way to increase economic productivity, as outlined in *The Communistic Societies of the United States* by Charles Nordhoff. His work focused on the communistic societies of the Oneida, Amana, Mount Lebanon and Shaker groups.

Vidal says James, "predictably, deplores the 'attempt to organize and glorify the detestable tendency toward the complete effacement of privacy in life and thought'" in these utopian movements. Although Henry James made no critical mention of other American writers such as Jack London and Stephen Crane, "Nathaniel Hawthorne is the only American novelist to whom James pays full homage," Vidal says. Likewise, Herman Melville and Mark Twain are barely given a mention. Vidal concludes that, in many ways, James was more comfortable with the works of European novelists.

"The Golden Bowl of Henry James" (1984)

"The Golden Bowl of Henry James" (1984) Summary and Analysis

Henry James contracted an obsession with gold when, as a young man, he visited the Galerie d'Appolon in the palace of the Louvre. Throughout his life, James confessed that he could, in Vidal's words, "take quite a lot of gold." James' crowning achievement as a novelist, *The Golden Bowl*, described by Vidal as "a work whose spirit is not imperial so much as it is ambitiously divine," is a touchstone to all his work and the subject of this essay.

As a metaphor for his life and work, gold serves well because of James' obsession with perfection, Vidal says. Once the American expatriate had spent a few years in Europe, he felt less confident drawing upon his knowledge of "familiar types engaged in mating rituals against carefully noted backgrounds. James decided to heighten the realistic novel to a point no one had heretofore imagined possible and to aim for perfection. The result is that as James' novels grow longer and longer, they also become more concentrated with fewer characters.

"As James more and more mastered his curious art, he relied more and more on the thing not said for his essential dramas; in the process, the books become somewhat closer to theater than to the novel tradition that had gone before him," Vidal observes. James sought to make the action in his novels unfold much like that of a play, but through the eyes of a single observer. The familiar reference to "James the First, James the Second and the Old Pretender" are useful in understanding his work, Vidal says. James the First is the traditional 10th Century novelist; James the Second is the "disciplined, precise realist;" and finally, the Old Pretender is "the magician who unlike Prospero breaks not his staff but a golden bowl."

In the relationship between the wealthy father, Adam Verver, and his daughter, Maggie, as well as the other characters who are drawn into adulterous relationships symbolized by the golden bowl, Henry James has gone far beyond what James describes as "really the pathetic simplicity and good faith of the father and daughter in their abandonment" in Europe. This, Vidal says, is "plain nonsense. James is now giving us monsters on a divine scale."

Maggie acquires the bowl as a present for her father and learns from the dealer of a flaw in the bowl as well as an adulterous relationship between her husband and another woman, Charlotte that existed before their marriage. Crushed, she seeks solace with her father and tells him, "I believe in you more than anyone." Vidal observes, "They are again as one, this superbly monstrous couple"

At the end, James has sought "another and higher state for the novel by making gods of his characters, and has "turned them all to gold." Vidal clearly admires this kind of artistic alchemy and concludes that, somehow, James seems to have achieved in "The Golden Bowl" the perfection he sought.

"Logan Pearsall Smith Loves the Adverb" (1984)

"Logan Pearsall Smith Loves the Adverb" (1984) Summary and Analysis

Vidal salutes a forgotten literary miniaturist of excellent quality in Logan Pearsall Smith, a writer and lover of writing who was born a Philadelphia Quaker in 1965. Smith became a British subject in 1913 and died in 1946. He "married literature" through family connections with Virginia Woolf and Bertrand Russell and friendship with various members of the Bloomsbury cult of writers of the 1930s.

Vidal is astounded that a literary figure such as Smith, who predates the word processor and computer, could spend his life obsessed with finding the right word, the correct phrase, the proper turn of language and wants the reader to cherish this relic of the now-passed age of literacy. Vidal laments:

"The century that began with a golden age in all the arts (or at least the golden twilight of one) is ending not so much without art as without the idea of art, while the written culture that was the core of every educational system since the 5th Century BC is now being replaced by sounds and images electronically transmitted. This is a radical change to say the least, and one of us knows quite how to respond."

Vidal finds it "startling" that someone like Smith lived most of his life in the 20th Century drunk with language and spending almost as much time searching for the right adjective to describe the moon as humans spend getting to that celestial body. A member of the long-defunct Society for Pure English, "Smith fell in love in old age—with the adverb," Vidal reports. Logan had an independent income and spent his time making anthologies of Milton and Shakespeare, collecting aphorisms of others and making up his own. He was, Vidal says, "always on the lookout for sentences" and devoted his life to getting his own sentences right.

In 1902 he published *Trivia*, a collection of his pensyes, witticisms, and observations under the pseudonym Anthony Woodhouse, which became quite popular. A sample of this writing follows: "Those who set out to serve both God and Mammon soon discover that there is no God." And: "If you want to be thought a liar, always tell the truth."

Vidal holds Logan Pearsall Smith up as an example of a true artist, willing to go to any length to perfect his art, obsessed with language, and probably nothing more in the electronic age than an historical anachronism.

"William Dean Howells" (1983)

"William Dean Howells" (1983) Summary and Analysis

Republication by the Library of America of four novels by William Dean Howells, peripatetic novelist, newspaperman and literary critic of the late 1800s, provides an occasion for commentary by Vidal on the literary merits of Howells himself, as well as ruminations on the state of American literacy and public education.

Although Vidal applauds the intent of the Library of America, founded by the critic Edmund Wilson as a way of bringing important works before a public who would otherwise probably never encounter them, he bemoans the decline of readership in general and trembles at the onslaught of visual media such as movies and TV that compel writers to work "harder and harder to write simply enough for people who don't really know how to read."

The clear danger of this kind of illiteracy is not only a coarsening of public sensibilities, a cheapening of cultural values and loss of control over the political system, but also the possibility of each generation being condemned to repeat the unlearned lessons of history, Vidal says. He relates a story about a visit by Howells to the Ohio home of President James Garfield in the early 1970s. When the young Ohio poet talked of the poets he'd met in Boston and New York, Garfield told him to stop and summoned his neighbor: "Come over here! He's talking about Holmes, and Longfellow, and Lowell, and Whittier!" The neighbors gathered around Howells, then Garfield told him to continue.

"Today we take it for granted that no living president will ever have heard the name of any living poet," Vidal says. "This is not necessarily an unbearable loss. But it is unbearable to have lost those Ohio neighbors who actually read books of poetry and wanted to know about the poets."

William Dean Howells thrust himself to the center of a fierce debate over free speech that ignited in the wake of the hangings of four men in 1887 following the Haymarket Square riots and police massacre in Chicago, because of their use of "incendiary and seditious" language. As the editor of *Harper's Monthly*, Howells launched "a devastating attack" on the Illinois attorney general, the judge and "the shrinking press" in the case, according to Vidal. He called the hangings "a political execution" and strongly made the case for rights of freedom to express unpopular opinions. Two years after the Haymarket Square riots, Howells wrote to his friend Henry James: "After 50 years of optimistic content with 'civilization' and its ability to come out all right in the end, I now abhor it and feel that it is coming out all wrong in the end unless it bases itself on a real equality.'"

After a trip to Europe where he wrote a book of sketches called *Venetian Life*, Howells returned to the United States and became an editor of *The Nation*, then quickly was hired as assistant editor of *Atlantic Monthly*. In the four novels reviewed by Vidal ("A

Forgone Conclusion," "A Modern Instance," "The Rise of Silas Lapham," and "Indian Summer"), Howells reveals himself as a careful craftsman able to place the then-contemporary lives of his characters in an historical and cultural context, something rare in American letters. Vidal reflects upon the irony that Americans seem to believe they are called to lead countries around the globe about when they know next to nothing, alienated as they are from their own and others' histories. He concludes:

"That is why it is not really possible to compare a writer like Howells with any living American writer because Howells thought that it was a good thing to know as much as possible about his own country as well as other countries, while our writers today, in common with the presidents and paint manufacturers, live in a present without past among signs whose meanings are uninterpretable."

Vidal thus appreciates and laments the loss of a conscientious writer such as Howells and the time in society when writers and their works were taken seriously and read and discussed widely.

"Oscar Wilde: On the Skids Again" (1987)

"Oscar Wilde: On the Skids Again" (1987) Summary and Analysis

Vidal begins his essay on Oscar Wilde on a note of exasperation—not so much with Wilde as with the critics, social theorists and academicians who would once again pick and pry into his tortured life and homosexuality. However, he ends the essay on a note of praise for Wilde's work that it is strong enough to have endured decades of this kind of deconstruction.

The occasion for this essay is the publication by Richard Ellmann of a book ("Four Dubliners," with biographical essays on Wilde, Yeats, Joyce and Beckett) that revives Wilde as man and as artist. The late Professor Ellmann admitted there is little connection between the four writers, other than the accident of geography and an academic interest in bundling them together. Vidal notes "to an academic of Ellmann's generation, explication is all."

Yet Wilde does not need explication any more than the public needs to hear once again about his homosexual love affair with a British noble that led him to jail where he despaired, grew ill and eventually died a premature death. "The problem with Wilde is that he does not need explication or interpretation," Vidal writes. "He only needs to be read, or listened to. He plays no word games other than that most mechanical of verbal tricks: the paradox. When he rises to the sublime in poetry or prose there is so much purple all over the place that one longs for the clean astringencies of Swinburne."

Despite critical opinions and trends that swept him in and out of favor over the decades, Vidal concludes: "He [Oscar Wilde] was an extremely good man and his desire to subvert a supremely bad society was virtuous. [His] only mistake was to apologize for his good work and life." In this essay, Vidal once again uses his familiar technique of seeming to butcher the author and/or his work, only to end the essay on a note of appreciation and even admiration.

"Bernard Shaw's *Heartbreak House*" (1959)

"Bernard Shaw's Heartbreak House" (1959) Summary and Analysis

"Everything about the play is queer, even its production history." Vidal thus introduces one of George Bernard Shaw's lesser-known works, *Heartbreak House*, a brilliant failure that nonetheless entertains as it attempts to overthrow by proxy the British ruling class of pre-1914. Shaw himself confessed that he didn't know how to end his play until he came up with the idea of dropping a bomb."Yet it is not the residents of Heartbreak House or their first-born who get blown up; only a businessman and a burglar expiate the folly and worthlessness of...what? Not Heartbreak House; capitalism, perhaps," Vidal says.

Shaw began writing *Heartbreak House* in 1913 although he did not publish it until 1919. The play was finally produced in 1920 in New York before it made its way to the London stage. Shaw wrote his play "with the wrong kind of hindsight," Vidal writes after seeing it staged for the first time. When Shaw began his play he did not know that the "first-born of Heartbreak House" would be smitten, nor that there would be a war when the first aerial bombardment in history occurred. There is no reference at all to war, real or potential, in the first two acts.

Despite these quirks, Vidal asserts, he ranks Shaw second only to Shakespeare among English playwrights and considers *Heartbreak House* to represent, in the context of the play, the ruling class of England before World War I. They are "'nice people,' somewhat educated, somewhat sensitive, somewhat independent financially. *Heartbreak House*, of course, is only another name for our new friend the Establishment." Vidal observes that while Shaw's intent in the play is clear, his technique and method of working sometimes leads the playwright (and thus the audience) into dead-ends.

His verdict? He states that the production of *Heartbreak House* should run forever and give heart to those who expect the theater to be more than just a business or mere entertainment.

"Maugham's Half & Half" (1990)

"Maugham's Half & Half" (1990) Summary and Analysis

Calling him "the old fruitcake" who was the premier English storyteller of his age, Vidal looks at the life and career of W. Somerset Maugham as seen through the prism of a just-published biography written by Robert Calder, a Saskatchewan schoolteacher. The title of his essay derives from Vidal's estimation of Maugham's work as half trash, half literature. Vidal acknowledges Maugham's ubiquity in films and novels of the 1930s and 1940s, and "he dominated the movies when movies were the lingua franca of the world."

Vidal describes a "mysterious self-pity" that followed Maugham throughout his life, coming to "a rather ghastly flowering in *Of Human Bondage*. Despite the fact Maugham was well-placed (his father was a lawyer attached to the British embassy in Paris, his mother a popular socialite) and an obstetrician, he suffered the loss of his mother at eight, three brothers left to boarding school, and he lsot his father when he was 11. He lived with an uncle in England where he had access to a wonderful library, "the writer's best education," but was sickly and only 5-foot-7, with an underslung jaw and a speech impediment.

These disadvantages, Vidal believes, were nothing more than "a scratch or two" and could not have accounted for Maugham's self-pity, but his homosexuality was discretely hidden in a marriage that produced a daughter, and he appeared to have affairs with women—not men. Those who knew Maugham best attested to his "voracious" sexual appetite, while Freudians concluded that because Maugham liked men he must have hated women. "This is one of the rocks on which the whole Freudian structure has been, well...erected," Vidal says.

Maugham contrived to create his literary persona, the world-weary world-traveler whose first-person narrative style became known worldwide. He compensates for his own perceived shortcomings as a man and as a writer by offering the reader something different—inside gossip, Vidal says. "It is these confidences that made Maugham so agreeable to read: nothing, he tells us with a smile, is what it seems. That was his one trick, and it seldom failed."

Vidal takes biographer Robert Calder to task for his obsession with Maugham's homosexuality: "Mr. Calder cannot get enough of Maugham the faggot in conflict with Maugham the potential MMM&G (married, mature, monogamous and good). Will good drive out evil? Maturity immaturity?" He notes the dreary Freudian analysis of homosexuality with the observation that, although none of it makes any sense, that does not alter belief because "in matters of faith, inconvenient evidence is always suppressed while contradictions go unnoticed."

Because so many of his books were made into movies (*Cakes and Ale, The Moon and Sixpence, Of Human Bondage, The Razor's Edge, Rain*, and many more), "Maugham will be remembered not so much for his own work as for his influence on movies and television," Vidal says. Maugham's short stories, *Cakes and Ale* ("a small perfect novel") and *The Narrow Corner,* represent his best work, his better half, as opposed to his "half-trashy" work, according to Vidal.

"Ford's Way" (1990)

"Ford's Way" (1990) Summary and Analysis

Vidal asserts that literary theory and those who purvey it, namely academics, has supplanted literature itself as the main focus of literary studies and that writers' lives, not their works, are of greatest interest to the public. He recounts his statement that the serious novel has lost its audience because it has been pushed off the stage by television and film as popular culture becomes ever more visual and semi-literate. In this environment, Vidal welcomes the publication of *Ford Madox Ford* by Alan Judd, "himself a lively writer with an attractive conversational style...who never bores."

Ford Madox Ford was born Hueffer in England in 1873, but the family later changed its name to Ford because of anti-Teutonic sentiment. Nevertheless, Ford/Hueffer was tall, blond and blue-eyed but "something about him was off-putting," according to Vidal. "Hemingway didn't like his smell. David Garnett confessed to a physical distaste for Ford's 'too-mobile lips.' Ford was also pretty fat from maturity on; he smoked and drank far too much and he was besotted by women."

Nevertheless, this almost-forgotten man wrote more than 70 novels, among them his masterpiece, *The Good Soldier*. Vidal approves of Judd's mention of a relationship between Ford and Joseph Conrad in which the two collaborated on three "not memorable" novels. This proves altruism on the part of Conrad, for his willingness to help the struggling Polish writer, "a quality as hated by the generality as it is rare," Vidal says. "If nothing else, Ford gained an audience in Conrad. Each thought the novel could be high art, whose author's non-presence was an irradiating holy ghost."

Vidal's estimation of Ford's worth: "He believed above all in the importance of art—specifically the art of the novel, which puts him well outside contemporary life, not to mention theory."

The Sexus of Henry Miller" (1965)

The Sexus of Henry Miller" (1965) Summary and Analysis

Despite Henry Miller's protestations to the contrary in letters to fellow novelist Lawrence Durrell, Vidal finds Miller's *Sexus* nothing but a 600-page ego trip and self-congratulatory work focused on the central character who happens to be named Henry Miller. Vidal snarls, "Only a total egotist could have written a book which has no subject other than Henry Miller in all his sweet monotony."

The other characters in *Sexus* play "straight man" to Miller, the sexual athlete, Miller the literary genius and life force, and Miller and the cosmos. In the novel, Henry Miller sometimes and oddly morphs into Val; he conducts an extramarital affair with a dance hall girl named Mara, whose name also morphs halfway through into Mona. *Sexus*, because of Miller's "hydraulic approach to sex and dogged use of four-letter words," was banned from publication in the United States for 24 years—a virtual assurance of future sales.

The story line is simple, as Vidal explains: "Things usually get going when Miller meets a New Person at a party. New Person immediately realizes that this is no ordinary man. In fact, New Person's whole life is often changed after exposure to the hot radiance of Henry Miller. For opening the door to Feeling, Miller is then praised by New Person in terms which might turn the head of God—but not the head of Henry Miller."

Although the self-confession as a literary form is an honored one, including Saints Augustine and Genet, the primary basis for confession is absent from Miller's work: the truth. Everyone Henry Miller (aka Henry Miller) meets either likes or admires him, and he never fails in bed, Vidal says. Those who are bedazzled and seduced by Henry Miller and his "cosmic" talk beg him for "the Answer," "the Secret," but his reply is only something vague about the virtue of feeling as opposed to thinking.

"Those who try to think out matters are arid, sterile, anti-life, while those who float about in a daffy daze enjoy copious orgasms and the happy knowledge that they are the salt of the earth," Vidal says. "This may well be true but Miller is hard put to prove it, if only because to make a case of any kind, cerebration is necessary thereby betraying the essential position." Vidal acknowledges the impact of Miller's work on other writers, as well his importance in lifting censorship of sexual matters. If the hinges on society's closed doors were sprung by D.H. Lawrence, the door was kicked down by Miller.

"Pen Pals: Henry Miller and Lawrence Durrell" (1988)

"Pen Pals: Henry Miller and Lawrence Durrell" (1988) Summary and Analysis

Vidal considers the literary friendship between Lawrence Durrell (*Justine*) and Henry Miller (*Sexus*) as outlined in *The Durrell-Miller Letters 1935-80* first by focusing on the dust jacket photo of Durrell, Miller and "Henry Miller's numinous cock." The last of these three "looks slightly exhausted and rather smaller than one recalls it from literature; and yet even in its fragile state one senses that humming hydraulic energy which made it the stuff of legend in the first place."

The two writers first met in Paris in 1937 when Miller, already-acclaimed author of *Tropic of Cancer*, was 46 and Durrell 25. Dissimilar in background, they were also very different as artists. Miller was, according to Vidal, an American proletarian "who had somehow discovered literature and then, in a wacky autodidactic way, made himself a master of a kind." If Miller often sounded like the village idiot, well, "that was because, like Whitman, he was the rest of the village as well." Durrell was born into an English civil service family in India and sent to school in England.

In the early days, both writers were concerned with getting published and with self-promotion. Through the years, there are marriages with women coming and going, children being born, houses moved into and out of. The stable link between the two is provided by French author Anais Nin, with whom Miller was sleeping when he met Durrell. Eventually, Nin married a wealthy banker who enabled her to publish both Miller and herself in Paris. In their exchanges, each postures that fame is a drag. They also have divergent views of the Beats. Durrell finds Jack Kerouac's *Dharma Bums* "really corny and deeply embarrassing," but Miller praises "the king of the Beats."

In the 1970s, both Miller and Durrell become preoccupied with the Nobel Prize (neither earned it), and with the literary ascent of their mutual friend and erotic writer Anais Nin. Miller writes to his friend that Nin "will never be more than a series of busy footnotes clacking like castanets through the biographies of others." Henry Miller died in 1980. Each writer used his own unique gifts and style over a lifetime and, Vidal concludes, "though I would rather read Durrell than Miller, our literary landscape would be even more lunar than it is had the two of them not passed, so goonily, so cheerily, so originally through this sad century."

"Edmund Wilson: this Critic and this Gin and these Shoes" (1980)

"Edmund Wilson: this Critic and this Gin and these Shoes" (1980) Summary and Analysis

Vidal's essay on the literary critic Edmund Wilson begins with a 1955 reflection upon the unhealthy lifestyle of writers, referring to an entry in Wilson's journal Upstate in which Wilson mentions drinking an entire bottle of champagne, part of a bottle of Old Grand-Dad, and a bottle of red wine while consuming Limburger cheese and ginger snaps—then falling asleep (or passing out) in his chair. Vidal recalls that at about the same time he got a letter from novelist Upton Sinclair in which the social reformer denounced John Barleycorn.

Sinclair wrote that during the course of a long life, practically every writer he'd known, including his friend Jack London, had died of alcoholism. Vidal agrees and says, "a significant number of American writers are to a greater or lesser degree alcoholics and why this should be the case I leave to the medicine men." Edmund Wilson, on the other hand, drank heavily and had a long and productive life.

Primarily a critic, Wilson also wrote novels, short stories and plays although "he was not entirely a master of any of these forms," according to Vidal. In the 1930s, Wilson wrote *Axel's Castle* and *To the Finland Station* as well as a great deal of literary journalism. He also supported the American Communist party, visited the Soviet Union and taught at the University of Chicago. He married Margaret Canby, who died two years later, then "conducted a wide range of affairs, many on the raunchy side." Wilson also kept detailed, explicit journals of his sexual exploits but was somehow "unable to accept the fact that a fairy could be a major artist." Wilson did, however, make an exception in the case of Thornton Wilder, praising and defending the novelist and playwright.

Wilson was that rarest of literary figures, a critic who made the necessary human connections of every work before criticism became a cottage industry of academia where "ambitious English teachers now invent systems that have nothing to do with literature or life but everything to do with those games that must be played in order for them to rise in the academic bureaucracy," Vidal says. "Their works are empty indeed. But then, their works are not meant to be full. They are to be taught, not read."

"F. Scott Fitzgerald's Case" (1980)

"F. Scott Fitzgerald's Case" (1980) Summary and Analysis

In F. Scott Fitzgerald's 44 years, he published four novels, 160 short stories, fragments of autobiography and wrote screenplays for Hollywood. Although very little of Fitzgerald's work has any lasting value as literature, true to form, his life has generated a healthy academic publishing and film industry, according to Vidal. This essay coincides with publication of two volumes of Fitzgerald's notebooks and letters, edited by Professor Matthew J. Bruccoli.

Vidal reminds us that Fitzgerald's first novel, *This Side of Paradise*, was published in 1920, whereupon he married Zelda Sayre and moved to Europe where his alcoholism and her madness blossomed as they attempted to raise a daughter. When his third novel, *The Great Gatsby,* published in 1925, failed to make money and the magazine market for his stories dried up, Fitzgerald turned to screen writing. Desperate and with a bad heart, he died in 1940, "already something of a period-piece, a relic of the Jazz Age, of flappers and bathtub gin," Vidal says.

Vidal doesn't agree with novelist James Dickey that Fitzgerald's notebooks "should be a bible for all writers. But one does not have to be a writer to respond to them—these *Notebooks* make writers of us all." The entries range from idle jottings, proper names and jokes to extended descriptions and complaints, but Vidal finds them less than transcendental. "I fear I must part company with [Edmund] Wilson, who finds these snippets 'extremely good reading.'" What, Vidal asks the reader, is the interest or value of seeing the name of a now-forgotten football star in Fitzgerald's notebooks? "So what?" Vidal asks. "The name itself is just a name and nothing more."

Fitzgerald's descriptions of places in his notebooks "are simply half-baked or strained. The description of a place or mood that is not in some way connected to action is to no point at all. These journals and notebooks that are intended to be read must somehow deal with real things that are complete in themselves." Vidal notes, too, Fitzgerald's "rather too many references to fairies and pansies," only to recall that Zelda had accused her husband of being homosexual and to speculate on whether Fitzgerald might have been seduced as a young student at a Catholic school in Minnesota.

At 40, Fitzgerald noted: "I saw that the novel, which at my maturity was the strongest and supplest medium for conveying thought and emotion from one human being to another, was becoming subordinated to a mechanical and communal art that, whether in the hands of Hollywood merchants or Russian idealists, was capable of reflecting only the tritest thought, the most obvious emotion. It was an art in which words were subordinate to images, where personality was worn down to the inevitable low gear of collaboration. As long past as 1930, I had a hunch that the talkies would make even the best-selling novelist as archaic as silent pictured."

Vidal provides glimpses into particular films that Fitzgerald works on, or walked out of, with references to directors, producers and actors of the time. Although Professor Bruccoli hails Fitzgerald's *The Last Tycoon* as "the best Hollywood novel ever written," Vidal disagrees and points to *The Day of the Locust, The Slide Area* and *What Makes Sammy Run* as better works in that genre. Vidal ends his essay with simple but painful statement: "Poor Scott."

"Dawn Powell: the American Writer" (1987)

"Dawn Powell: the American Writer" (1987) Summary and Analysis

Who has heard of Dawn Powell? Well, according to Vidal, this talented writer "was always just on the verge of ceasing to be a cult and becoming a major religion" with admirers such as John Dos Passos, Ernest Hemingway, Edmund Wilson, Matthew Josephson and Vidal himself. She published more than 15 novels, "divided between accounts of her native Midwest (and how the hell to get out of there and make it to New York), and the highly comic New York novels, centered on Greenwich Village, where she lived most of her adult life."

Vidal recalls a party at Powell's New York City duplex in 1950 with the poet E.E. Cummings and his wife, Marion, in attendance along with Dawn Powell's husband, Joe, and live-in lover, Coby. Martinis are dispensed from an elliptical aquarium, to the delight of all. "I realize, at last," Vidal says, "that this is a *mynage a trois* in Greenwich Village. My martini runs over." Having read Powell's entire opus, Vidal notes, "certain themes recur while the geography does not vary from that of her actual life. She left Ohio in 1918 via the Red Cross, ended up in New York, wrote publicity, got married and wrote ad copy for a while.

She took up novel writing when her theatrical career failed and came to rely on the $500 advance every two years that novelists of the day earned. Her first book, published in 1925, was *Whither* and her second was 1928's *She Walks in Beauty.* The first is a story of an Ohio heroine who goes to New York; the second an account of growing up in the Midwest. *Dance Night* (1930), is "the grittiest, most proletarian" of Powell's novels set in Lamptown, which has a railroad junction and a hat factory but "no artists or would-be artists," Vidal says. The novel tells a story of despair when the hard-working denizens of the town arrive in the middle class. Central to the stories is a theme of sexual triangulation and extramarital affairs.

Vidal's note of nostalgia about Dawn Powell and her era undoubtedly reflects his sense of loss for a New York that was more literate, more civilized and perhaps kinder to artists and writers than the literary world of today, driven by profit-hungry large corporations. It also is a meditation on the fragility of literary success, however modest.

"John O'Hara" (1964)

"John O'Hara" (1964) Summary and Analysis

As a prolific, naturalistic recorder of the social conventions of his time, John O'Hara serves as a mirror for the narcissistic middle class of post-war America, according to Vidal, but should not be taken for a serious, important writer of fiction. Vidal's essay on O'Hara coincided with the publication of Elizabeth Appleton, one of some 30 volumes of stories, plays, essays and novels by O'Hara.

Quoting George Santayana on Somerset Maugham, Vidal says the same observation holds true for O'Hara: "They [stories] are not pleasing, they are not pertinent to one's real interests, they are not true; they are simply graphic or plausible, like a bit of a dream that one might drop into in an afternoon nap." Yet Vidal says the one good reason to seriously consider popular literature is because it reflects "unconscious presuppositions" of the era in which it is written."

"One might even say that those writers who share the largest number of common assumptions with their audience, subliminally reflecting prejudices and aspirations so obvious that they are never stated, never precisely understood or even recognized. John O'Hara is an excellent example of this kind of writer, and useful to any examination of who we are," Vidal believes.

O'Hara's stated objective in writing was to record as accurately as possible the speech, sentiments and thoughts of his contemporaries—not unlike other novelists such as Sinclair Lewis and Emile Zola. However, he refers to markers of middle class life such as which schools characters attended, the clothes they wear and the sports they played rather blankly without explaining the significance of those markers or why they matter, according to Vidal. The result is that his prose is flat and without resonance, his characters rather two-dimensional and his stories freighted with minutiae that O'Hara doesn't bother to explain or put into a context or pattern.

Although a talented recorder of folkways, O'Hara lacks the ability to understand or interpret what he records because he is "not interested in the exercise of mind or in the exploration of what really goes on beneath that Harris tweed suit from J. Press," Vidal says. Therefore he is "doomed to go on being a writer of gossip" and his writing "cannot be taken seriously as literature."

"John Horne Burns" (1965)

"John Horne Burns" (1965) Summary and Analysis

An elegy to his lost novelist friend of World War II, this essay recalls the man who wrote *The Gallery* published in 1947, which Vidal calls "the best book of the Second War" even considering Vidal's own war novel, *Williwaw*. Burns, a raw Irishman from Boston, was awakened to life completely when, as a young soldier, he encountered the Galleria Umberto, a teeming "city within a city" in Naples.

"It was the time when cigarettes, chocolate and nylons were exchanged for an easy sex that could become, for a man like Burns, unexpected love," Vidal writes. In that environment, Burns came fully to his senses and fully alive, startled and delighted with the good humored brutality and simple dignity of the Italians. The book was a critical and popular success, but his second novel (*Lucifer with a Book*, 1949) was "perhaps the most savagely and unjustly attacked book of its day," and Burns left his prep school teaching job for Italy where he drank and nursed resentments against friends and foes alike. He died in 1958 at the age of 37.

Vidal quotes Burns' insight of "how simple life can be, uncomplicated by advertising and Puritanism and those loathsome values of a civilization in which everything is measured in terms of commercial success" was both prophetic and now a clichy. "Extreme circumstances made him [Burns] write a book which was better than his talent, an unbearable fate for an ambitious artist who wants to go on, but cannot—all later work shadowed by the splendid accident of a moment's genius."

John Dos Passos at Midcentury" (1961)

John Dos Passos at Midcentury" (1961) Summary and Analysis

Although admitting that he finds John Dos Passos's political drift from extreme left to extreme right in the period from the 1920s to the 1950s amusing, Vidal also avers in his essay on Dos Passos's novel *Midcentury* that he never liked his contemporary's work even in the earlier days. Dos Passos, unfortunately, belongs to the garrulous camp of American writers who are probably direct descendants of the Old Frontier where telling tall tales was both entertainment and boast. This line, however, led to what Vidal calls "demotic" writing, of which the Beat writer Jack Kerouac is the "purest contemporary example."

Midcentury purports to be about the American labor movement from the New Deal to the present. Somewhat chaotic in form, with Dos Passos's "patented device from USA" of intercutting the text with newspaper headlines and fragments of news stories to give a sense of time and place and to act as counterpoint to the narrative, the book is also filled with "inadvertent comedy" for the author's admiration of such figures as Barry Goldwater. The reference to "war-monger Roosevelt" gives the proper archconservative flavor.

"The newspaper technique is a good one; but to make it work the exerpts ought, minimally, to have some bearing on the narrative," Vidal writes. "In *Midcentury*, one has the impression that Dos Passos simply shredded a few newspapers at random and stuffed them between the chapters as a form of excelsior to keep the biographies from bumping into one another." Biographies of people such as Walter Reuther, John L. Lewis and James Hoffa, although their choice is "inscrutable," provide reader interest, but Vidal wonders why Passos would also include those of Robert Oppenheimer and Eleanor Roosevelt.

The book ends with a bizzare indictment of the younger generation, with an attack on James Dean that Vidal finds "oddly disgusting. I concede that there is some truth in everything Dos Passos says. But his spirit strikes me as sour and mean and, finally, uncomprehending. He has mistaken the decline of his own flesh and talent for the world's decline. This is the old man's folly, which a good artist or a generous man tries to avoid."

"Book Report" (1956)

"Book Report" (1956) Summary and Analysis

Assuming the persona and voice of a middle-aged woman addressing a roomful of book-clubbers, Vidal employs a bit of droll tomfoolery in reviewing *Band of Angels* by Robert Penn Warren. An historical novel, the book tells the story of Amantha Starr, a 16-year-old girl sent by her wealthy Kentucky plantation owner father to be educated in Ohio. Her father dies and she learns that he died bankrupt, and that she is the daughter of one of his slaves and must be sold to pay off his debts.

Amantha is bought by a kindly older man named Hamish Bond who lives in New Orleans. When the Civil War breaks out, Amantha meets her girlhood sweetheart, Tobias Sears, now an officer in the Union Army. Vidal, as the middle-aged student, reports that "everything ends all right with Tobias and Amantha, Miss Manty as everyone calls her, together in quite a beautiful and touching ending." The speaker reminds her audience that American soldiers captured by Chinese communists during the Korean War were easy to break down "because they did not know enough about American history and why they were fighting."

She/Vidal concludes: "I don't think it's fair to make fun of novels that may be a bit romantic but are still very useful ways of teaching what America is to people who are never going to read history or really deep things."

"V.S. Pritchett as 'Critic'" (1979)

"V.S. Pritchett as 'Critic'" (1979) Summary and Analysis

Publication of *The Myth Makers*, a collection of literary essays by writer/critic V.S. Pritchett, affords Vidal an opportunity to evaluate his work and to praise him as a global literary treasure, a standard-bearer of taste and literacy in English literature. Vidal reminds his readers that Pritchett praised literary masters "great and small, remembered or neglected [as] the freshest, the most original, the most importunate and living novelists of their time." These stand out from the merely second rate who "are rarely of their time. They are not on the tip of the wave. They are born out of date and out of touch and are rooted not in life but in literary convention."

As if to second Pritchett, Vidal takes a swipe at "busy teachers of English" whose spare time is dedicated to rewriting *Finnegan's Wake* or to attempting "to encompass within a construct of narrative prose all the known laws, let us say, of thermodynamics." Vidal notes that, unlike most critics, V.S. Pritchett is a writer, an excellent short story writer, at that. "If he is less successful as a novelist, it is because, perhaps, he lacks 'the novelist's vegetative temperament,' as he remarks of Chekhov," Vidal says. Further, he believes that there are too few good literary critics in America because Americans themselves are more interested in the personality of the author than the content of their work. However, this defines the value of Pritchett who "seldom loses sight of the fact that he is writing about writing, and not about writers at home."

In *The Myth Makers*, Pritchett examines the work of 19 writers, none of them American, including seven Russians, five French, five writers of Spanish or Portuguese, Strindberg and Kafka. In only one instance, however, does Pritchett express his outrage at what damage academics have done to the English language when he cites the preposterously overblown prose of one critic and states: "Literary criticism does not add to its status by opening an intellectual hardware store." To which Vidal replies: "Unfortunately, the hardware store is pretty much all that there is to 'literary criticism' in the United States." He ends his essay with a poignant hope: "It is good to know that our last critic in English is still at work, writing well—that is, writing as if writing well mattered. It would be nice if Sir Victor lived forever."

"The Great World and Louis Auchincloss" (1974)

"The Great World and Louis Auchincloss" (1974) Summary and Analysis

As a chronicler of The Establishment and the making and spending of vast fortunes, Louis Auchincloss is without peer in American literature, according to Vidal as he considers *The Partners*, a collection of short stories about a New York law firm that prefigures the work of John Grisham by 30 years. Born into a wealthy, elite Eastern family, Auchincloss lets the reader in on the real nature of life in the ruling class and says of Wall Street, "never shall I forget the horror inspired in me by those narrow dark streets and those tall sooty towers."

Vidal reveals his familial tie to Louis Auchincloss with the confession that "from the time I was 10 until I was 16 years old my stepfather was Hugh D. Auchincloss," and recalls meeting Louis Auchincloss at a party in Greenwich Village and being amazed that he could be both a Wall Street lawyer and an author. Auchincloss himself writes, "The fact that I was a Wall Street lawyer, a registered Republican, and a social registrite was quite enough for half the people at any one party to cross me off as a kind of duckbill platypus not to be taken seriously."

Auchincloss' value, besides the fact he is a good writer in the camp of novelists like Henry James, may be that he records the comings and goings of the American oligarchy, the Wall Street bankers and lawyers and brokers who "control the Chase Manhattan Bank, American foreign policy and the decision-making processes of both the Republican and Democratic parties," Vidal asserts. One might also add the policies of the Bush administration to that list.

Vidal concludes that Auchincloss' strengths and weaknesses are well displayed in this collection of short stories. His unique contribution is to show "men at work discreetly managing the nation's money, selecting its governors, creating the American empire." Among his weaknesses is sometimes forcing narrative too rapidly and at other times allowing his own "profound literariness" to seep from the mouths of improbable characters, such as Wall Street denizens who quote *King Lear*.

"Miss Sontag's New Novel" (1967)

"Miss Sontag's New Novel" (1967) Summary and Analysis

"Unfortunately, Miss Sontag's intelligence is still greater than her talent." With this single sentence, Vidal sums up his view of *Death Kit*, Sontag's surrealistic novel in the literary mode of Kafka, Sartre, Nathalie Sarraute, and Robbe-Grillet—the last two leading French "experimentalists" of the 1960s. Vidal says Sontag has appropriated what French existentialist Jean Paul Sartre calls Sarraute's "protoplasmic vision. This vision captures "a sort of guey slaver, sticking to him, lining his insides."

The intricate plot of *Death Kit* involves a murder on a train from Manhattan to Buffalo where Diddy, a divorced man in his 30s, encounters a blind girl and an older woman. The reader is taken from the subterranean world of the train, through darkness and blindness, deeper into both the interior of the characters and deeper into the bowels of a railroad tunnel where Diddy "walks naked through one subterranean room after another, among coffins and corpses heavy with dust."

In this powerfully written conclusion, Sontag displays a "flash of talent [that] makes all the most annoying what precedes it," namely literary borrowings and poses of the most blatant sort. Vidal says, "Miss Sontag is a didactic, naturalistic, Jewish-American writer who wants to be an entirely different sort of writer—not American but high European, not Jewish but ecumenical, not naturalistic in style but allusive, resonant, ambiguous. It is as an heiress to Joyce, Proust and Kafka that she sees herself; her stand to be taken on foreign rather than on native ground."

Vidal believes the form of the author actually hinders the novel's execution, as when she inserts "at maddeningly regular but seemingly random intervals" the word *now* in parenthesis, or when certain passages for no apparent reason are indented on the page. Although the story is told primarily in the third person, on four occasions she shifts to the first person plural which "is a nice surprise, but one that we don't understand." Nevertheless, Vidal says there is reason to hope that "once [Miss Sontag] has freed herself of literature, she will have the power to make it, and there are not many American writers one can say that of."

"Doris Lessing's Science Fiction" (1979)

"Doris Lessing's Science Fiction"

(1979) Summary and Analysis

Doris Lessing's work belongs to "a continuum all her own somewhere between John Milton and L. Ron Hubbard;" artistically she is more closely allied with George Eliot than any other serious contemporary novelists, according to Gore Vidal. His assessment of Lessing's work is based primarily on "Shikasta, which seems to use Old Testament moral themes although it is more Sufi-like in spirit because Lessing believes it is possible to "Plug-in" to an overmind, Ur-Mind or unconscious that makes all sorts of improbabilities and "coincidences" possible."

Vidal admits that Shikasta "is the work of a formidable imagination" and that her storytelling capabilities are first-rate. Although her work redounds with classical themes and solemnity in its depiction of good and evil, the nature of free will and morality, its most recent precursor is probably the writing of Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., whom Lessing admires. In Lessing's novel, Shikastans are programmed by outside forces, some benign, some evil, and they themselves are passive. Their lack of free will seems an artistic trap, Vidal writes.

"The fact that in the course of a very long book Lessing had not managed to create a character of the slightest interest is the result not so much of any failure in her considerable art as it is a sign that she has surrendered her mind to SOWF (substance-of-we-feeling), or to the woolies, or to the Jealous God," Vidal sneers. "Ultimately, Shikasta is not so much a fable of the human will in opposition to a god who has wronged the fire-seeker as it is a fairy tale about good and bad extra terrestrial forces who take come obscure pleasure in manipulating a passive ant-like human race."

Vidal concludes that Doris Lessing would do better to join the Church of Scientology founded by L. Ron Hubbard, a "religion" first created by *his* science fiction novel.

"Christopher Isherwood's Kind" (1976)

"Christopher Isherwood's Kind" (1976) Summary and Analysis

The life and work of Christopher Isherwood, as reprised in *Christopher and His Kind*, was "the voice of humanism in a bad time," Vidal says. The time was pre-World War II, when Isherwood lived in a free-and-easy Berlin with his lover, Heinz, who he later married. The book covers the period of 1929-'39, and is a sequel to *Lines and Shadows*, published in 1938. Worldwide fame came to Isherwood with the publication of *Goodbye to Berlin* in 1939, and its opening line: "I am a camera."

In his life in pre-war Berlin, according to his poet friend Stephen Spender, Isherwood was sometimes depressed or silent in social situations where the people who served as models for his characters were very much alive. Vidal says Isherwood, as one of the rebels who rejected British university and literary life, also rejected the "world of self-conscious aestheticism [and] chose to live as a proletarian in Berlin." A younger childhood chum, W.H. Auden, recalled Isherwood "chiefly for his air of naughtiness, his insolence, his smirking tantalizing air of knowing disreputable and exciting secrets."

Freed from the constraints of expressing his homosexuality in his upper-class society in England, Isherwood found release in cruising gay bars in Berlin and picking up boys, Vidal tells the reader. To make any kind of homosexual commitment to a partner in that world would have inevitably led to "psychic defeat" for one or both, Vidal says. "A beautiful irony never to be understood by United States-men given to the joys of the sexual majority is that a homosexualist like Isherwood cannot with any ease enjoy a satisfactory sexual relationship with a woman because he himself is so entirely masculine that the woman present no challenge, no masculine hardness, no exciting *agon*."

As the Nazis clamped down on freedoms in Berlin, Isherwood and Heinz moved restlessly between Copenhagen, Amsterdam, the Canary Islands and Brussels. At the conclusion of the way, Isherwood asked himself the hypothetical question if he would have blown up the entire Nazi army if he'd had the chance. "Of course not," Christopher answered. "That is the voice of humanism in a bad time, and one can only hope that thanks to Christopher's life and work, his true kind will increase even as they refuse, so wisely, to multiply," Vidal concludes.

"On Prettiness" (1978)

"On Prettiness" (1978) Summary and Analysis

The Parting Years, one of Sir Cecil Beaton's diaries, records his quest for beauty in people, clothes, dycor, landscapes and manners. "To the extent that Sir Cecil falls short of beauty in his life and work, he is merely pretty," Vidal writes. "But that is not such a bad thing." Vidal instructs the reader that the word *pretty* made its way from the Old Teutonic *pratti* or *pratta* (meaning trick or wile) into English in the 15th Century. The word was wonderfully expressive and widely used until the late 1800s, when "pretty" became a pejorative adjective. Vidal, however, wants to bring it back in its original sense, which is how he uses it in this essay.

Vidal believes Beaton is at his best as a designer for the theater, where his sense of aesthetics gets free rein. Everything's fine, so long as Sir Cecil doesn't try to be an actor. "Years ago I saw him in a play by (I think) Wilde. Like an elegant lizard just fed 20 milligrams of Valium, Bearton moved slowly about the stage. The tongue flicked; the lips moved; no word was audible." In Beaton's latest diary, the reader learns that Beaton doesn't like getting old but that he apparently hasn't yet learned that "after 50 you must never look into a mirror whose little tricks you don't already know in advance," Vidal says.

The book is full of obituaries for friends and acquaintances, as Beaton was 75 when it was published. Of the Duke of Windsor, Beaton says: "He had never shown any affection for or interest in me." Vidal continues: "Beaton also notes that the duke 'was inclined to be silly.' That is putting it mildly. The duke's stupidity was of a perfection seldom seen outside institutions." Vidal says Beaton ("this bright kingfisher") deserves praise and peace "for the pleasure that he has given to all those who for so many years have watched ('Look!') his swift, pretty flight."

"Why I am Eight Years Younger than Anthony Burgess" (1987)

"Why I am Eight Years Younger than Anthony Burgess" (1987) Summary and Analysis

Publication of the first part of Anthony Burgess' autobiography, *Little Wilson and Big God*, is the occasion for this essay by Vidal which is both personal recollection of friendship with Burgess and a professional appreciation for his talents as author. The title derives from Burgess' (nye John Wilson in 1917) encounter with a Catholic priest as a schoolboy who said his questioning the church amounted to a case of "Little Wilson and Big God."

The title of the essay derives from an encounter Vidal had with Burgess' wife, Lynne, in 1964 when Mrs. Burgess let him know she was unhappy with the fact Vidal's novel, *Julian*, had been chosen as a selection of the Book Society in England—despite the fact he was and is eight years younger than Burgess. "I remain, throughout eternity, eight years his junior." In those days, Burgess smoked 80 cigarettes a day and his wife was a hard drinker who died four years later, in 1968.

Probably best known to Americans as the author of *A Clockwork Orange*, Burgess inherited a number of gifts, including music from his father, a professional musician. "He could remember a thousand popular songs. Wistfully, he suggests that even to this day he could earn his living as a cocktail-bar pianist. But he was more ambitious than that. He set poems, wrote symphonies, attempted operas." Vidal says.

Three themes emerge in Burgess's autobiography—religion, sex and art. Having jettisoned the Roman Catholicism of his childhood, Burgess was "forever on the alert for another absolute system to provide one with certainty about everything," Vidal observes. Burgess flirted with Islam once, but was turned off by its bigotry. The easy availability of sex during World War II meant "those of us who joined the orgy in our teens often failed, in later life, to acquire the gift of intimacy," Vidal says of both himself and Burgess. Of these three themes, art is by far the most important to Burgess although "Burgess himself does not seem quite to know what to make of his novels." Buregess has little regard for his *A Clockwork Orange*, based on a true incident in which his pregnant wife was attacked by four American servicemen in the street and aborted.

"But Burgess was wise enough to allow his obsessions with religion, sex, language, to work themselves out as comedy," Vidal writes.

"Frederic Prokosch: The European Connection" (1983)

"Frederic Prokosch: The European Connection" (1983) Summary and Analysis

All but forgotten in America, Frederic Prokosch is a literary treasure important not only for his own writing but also for the influence he's had on other writers. Vidal recalls reading Prokosch's *The Seven Who Fled* at 13 when he took his first trip down the Italian peninsula in 1939. It was the second Prokosch novel, coming after *The Asiatics,* which made him "suddenly famous" in 1935. For three decades, Prokosch has been "completely out of fashion" in America (which Vidal calls Amnesia), although his novels have enjoyed a long and successful audience in France. Indeed, because generations of Latin American writers have long looked to Paris for literary inspiration, Prokosch's influence has been profound.

"Garcia Marquez would not write the way he does if Prokosch had not written the way that he did," Vidal says. "At a time when the American novel was either politically *engagy* or devoted to the homespun quotidian, Prokosch's first two novels were a half-century ahead of their time. This did him no good in the medium-long run." The occasion for this essay is the publication, at age 75, of Prokosch's memoir, *Voices*. This is an appropriate title, Vidal says, because of Prokosch's uncanny ear for speech honed by a lifelong practice of writing down bits of conversation—including conversations with the likes of James Joyce and Thomas Mann.

Born in Wisconsin in 1908, Prokosch was the son of a Sudeten-Czech linguist and philologist who earned a PhD in Middle English From Yale University. His poetry of the later 1930s was praised by William Butler Yeats and he shared with Vladimir Nabokov a love of collecting butterflies. Vidal observes that Prokosch enjoyed his literary fame without ever assuming the pose of "great author." In the last lines of his memoir, Prokosch writes: "I am no longer afraid of loneliness or suffering or death. I see the marvelous faces of the past gathering around me and I hear once again the murmuring of voices in the night."

"Professor V. Nabakov" (1983)

"Professor V. Nabakov" (1983) Summary and Analysis

Vladimir Nabokov, author of *Lolita* and explorer of a thousand American motel rooms, follows his "beautiful memoir" *Speak Memory* with *Strong Opinions*, a collection of press clippings "in which he has preserved for future classes what looks to be every interview granted during the last decade," Vidal says. Professor Nabakov's answers to reporters' questions are "often amusing, sometimes illuminating, and always—after the third or fourth performance—unbearable in their repetitiveness."

In this very short essay, Vidal notes that the best interviews are those with one "Alfred Appell, Jr." who is "plainly a Nabakovian invention." His questions are longer and wittier than Nabakov's answers, which brings Vidal to question whether a new academic comedy team has been launched. Periodically, the Russian-born American author feels compelled to note in the interviews that he himself is not attracted to young girls who appear in his works.

Vidal says this collection of interviews—real and imaginary—is not for those who admire Nabokov's novels. "But for students who will write about him in American universities, it is probably useful to have all this twaddle in one volume."

"Paul Bowles's Stories" (1983)

"Paul Bowles's Stories" (1983) Summary and Analysis

"As a short story writer, [Paul Bowles] has had few equals in the second half of the 20th Century. Obvious question: if he is so good, why is he so little known?"

Vidal's answer is that Bowles doesn't fit into a "crude America First-ism" that has permeated our literature. This attitude is responsible for the misrepresentation or undervaluation of America's three finest novelists, Henry James, who lived in England; Edith Wharton, who lived in France; and Vladimir Nabokov, who lived in Switzerland. Although Paul Bowles was raised in New York City and New England, and attended the University of Virginia, he lived most of his life in Morocco, Vidal notes.

In Bowles's memoir, *Without Stopping*, the reader learns that Bowles originally wanted to be a writer and not a composer, but was discouraged from writing after an encounter with Gertrude Stein who read some of his work and declared him "no poet." Later, as editor of a literary magazine, Bowles decided to invent some of his own myths while translating some ancient texts. He decided to use the surrealist method of abandoning conscious control and writing whatever came from his pen. His first story written in this manner, "The Scorpion," was well received, prompting Bowles to continue writing, Vidal says.

Upon re-reading some of Bowles's stories as he writes the preface to a new collection of his stories, Vidal says he stands by an assessment he made in 1952 that Bowles is one of the "three most interesting writers in America," along with Carson McCullers and Tennessee Williams.

"Tennessee Williams: Someone to Laugh at the Squares With" (1985)

"Tennessee Williams: Someone to Laugh at the Squares With" (1985) Summary and Analysis

Tennessee Williams was gifted with a tremendous amount of both creative and sexual energy. He used the former to produce some of the best and enduring plays in the English language; he used the latter to pursue his homosexual interests with avidity. To all this, Vidal says, "Why not? And so what?" Close friends and sometimes collaborators (Vidal wrote the screenplay for "Suddenly Last Summer") for more than 20 years, Williams and Vidal grew somewhat apart during the last decade of Williams' life because of his drug and alcohol use.

Vidal gave Williams the moniker Glorious Bird mot only because of his play, "Sweet Bird of Youth," but also because "his sympathies were always with those defeated by 'the squares,' or by time, once the sweet bird of youth is flown." Vidal agreed with Williams that his homosexuality gave him the insight to write compelling male and female characters from the inside. Vidal flatly states that Tennessee did not hate women, as sometimes rumored, and says "there is no actress on earth who will not testify that Williams created the best women characters in the modern theater."

Born Thomas Lanier Williams in Columbia, Miss., he was raised in St. Louis in a lower middle-class family: his father who was a salesman, his mother Edwina who was a "genteel wife," his brother, Dakin, and his sister, Rose, a troubled young woman who received a lobotomy at Edwina's direction and spent her entire life in a mental institution. Williams willed his entire, considerable estate for the upkeep of his sister when he died in 1983 by choking on a bottle cap. The characters from his immediate family, plus a couple of others such as Stanley Kowalski in "A Streetcar Named Desire" borrowed from real life, formed the core of his work.

The occasion for Vidal's essay is publication of two Tennessee Williams biographies: *The Kindness of Strangers* by Donald Spoto and *Tennessee: Cry of the Heart* by "a male sob sister who works for Parade magazine" and who Vidal thereafter refers to only as "Crier of the Heart." The first book tries to shock and titillate "in a responsible way" with facts, whereas the second "is a self-serving memoir with a [Truman] Capotean approach to reality," according to Vidal. The same New York critics who early and often praised Williams' work and gave him almost instant success also dogged his later years with poor reviews. The world and its squares become his target, finally, in "The Knightly Quest" when he takes on Lyndon Johnson, the Vietnam War, the American power elite —to which Vidal says: "Right on, Bird!"

"The Death of Mishima" (1971)

"The Death of Mishima" (1971) Summary and Analysis

The death by *seppuku* of Yukio Mishima, in which the 45-year-old writer eviscerated himself by sword in the presence of a Japanese general (and was then beheaded), was the climax to a sort of Hemingway-esque career more about action than letters. After all, Vidal tells the reader, "Hemingway never wrote a good novel." In a nation where a surprising number of people seem to resemble one another, and where the country is kind of a large family, Mishima was a famous writer but second in status to W. Somerset Maugham, according to Vidal.

Vidal notes that Mishima's novels are "pervaded with death," and his last, *Sun and Steel* published a few months before his suicide, eerily foreshadowed his own death. Although not a great novelist, Vidal says Mishima probably made greater literary contributions through his reworking of the traditional Japanese No plays, which present and resolve moral questions. Although Mishima was married and had two children, he was an occasional "homosexualist" who found "homosexual encounters quite as exciting as heterosexual encounters," Vidal writes.

Mishima, as soldier, lover and athlete, developed a religion of the flesh and of action. When faced with his own inevitable physical deterioration, he chose to die rather than "settle for the common fate," Vidal believes. "Mishima was a minor artist in the sense that, as Auden tells us, once the minor artist 'has reached maturity and found himself he ceases to have a history. The major artist, on the other hand, is always re-finding himself, so that the history of his works recapitulates or mirrors the history of art.

"Unable or unwilling to change his art," Vidal continues, "Mishima changed his life through sun, steel, death and so became a major art-figure in the only way—I fear—our contemporaries are apt to understand: not through the work but through the life."

"Sciascia's Italy" (1979)

"Sciascia's Italy" (1979) Summary and Analysis

In his life as in his art, Leonardo Sciascia sought to reconcile two divergent strains in Italian life and politics—one, the fascist, Catholic strain represented by "the Duce's loony pseudo-Roman norm" and the other, the communist /socialist strain. Indeed, post-war Italy, Vidal says, "has managed with characteristic artistry, to create a society that combines a number of the least appealing aspects of socialism with practically all the vices of capitalism." At the age of 48, schoolteacher and part-time writer Sciascia got a state pension for life and became a full-time writer and politician. He also ran for parliament as a candidate for the Radical Party and as "a voice of reason in a land where ideology has always tended to take the place of ideas."

As a Sicilian, Sciascia is very aware of the tendency of Sicilians to leave their island for the mainland and to resist change forced on them from outside—whether by the Catholic Church, the dictator Mussolini, or the "consumer society." When Sciascia was a teenager growing up in Sicily, the scars from Mussolini's attempt to destroy the Mafia were still fresh. Sciascia, however, was self-educated and read whole libraries of books seeking some balance between political extremes. He vividly remembered when the local Mafia, at the behest of business interests, opened fire on a meeting of communists and socialists in the piazza of Villalba in 1944.

In all his work, Sciascia deals with what happened at Villalba, Vidal says, "sometimes directly and realistically, other times he is oblique and fantastic. But he has never *not*, in a symbolic sense, dealt with this business." One of his themes, or ways of coping with this issue, appears in his work as the earthly world of the "Great Goddess" who dominates in the Mediterranean cultures versus the "Heavenly Father, or Aryan sky-god," who is absent from the realities of everyday life. It is the separation of these two strains that has caused most serious political conflict in Italy, and it is their reconciliation that is the path of the future, Sciascia suggests.

"No other Italian writer has said, quite so bluntly, that the historic compromise would lead to 'a regime in which, finally and enduringly, the two major parties would be joined in a unified management of power to the preclusion of all alternatives and all opposition. Finally, the Italians would be tranquil, irresponsible, no longer forced to think, to evaluate, to choose.'"

"Calvino's Novels" (1974)

"Calvino's Novels" (1974) Summary and Analysis

Although he first encountered the works of Italo Calvino in 1948 while living in post-war Italy, Vidal confesses that he at first had little interest, but, before writing this essay, he lets the reader know that he'd spent the previous year reading everything Calvino had written, and had concluded that "during the last quarter century Italo Calvino has advanced far beyond his American and English contemporaries.

"As they continue to look for the place where the spiders make their nests, Calvino has not only found that special place but learned how himself to make fantastic webs of prose to which all things adhere." Vidal says that in reading Calvino, he had "the unnerving sense" that he was also writing what Calvino had written so that "his art prove[s] his case as writer and reader become one, or One."

Calvino's style ranges from the rather straightforward narrative style of *The Path to the Nest of Spiders* published in 1948, which is a "plainly told, exuberant sort of book" with the sort of relentless scrutiny and description of objects typical of William Golding, to the utterly phantasmagorical sci-fi stories of *Cosmicomics* (1967), where the reader inhabits a meson, a mollusk and a dinosaur.

"At Daybreak" is the story of the creation of the universe as seen by Qfwfq and "his mysterious tribe consisting of a father, mother, sister, brother, Granny as well as acquaintances— formless sentiencies who inhabit the universal dust that is on the verge of becoming the nebula which will contain our solar system," Vidal says. Their identities and forms are obscure because light has not yet appeared in the cosmos. Bored with waiting to come into full being, Qfwfq makes signs to put in space to mark the fact he had been there, but a rival Kgwgk destroys his signs and puts up his own. The ensuing battle of signs obliterates all meaning, all reference to the fact that anything or anyone ever existed.

"Calvino's Death" (1985)

"Calvino's Death" (1985) Summary and Analysis

Vidal views the death of Italo Calvino in 1985, three weeks short of [his] 62nd birthday, through the lens of his personal friendship with the Italian author and through Calvino's last book, *Palomar*. The book is inscribed: "For Gore, these last meditations about Nature, Italo." Vidal says he felt "chilled and guilty" when he read the inscription and wondered whether Calvino knew he was in the process of "Learning to be dead," the title of the book's last chapter.

A proxy for Calvino himself, Palomar is on the beach at Castiglion trying to figure out the nature of waves and whether they reveal something about the nature of the universe and human perceptions of reality. Vidal is once again fascinated by Calvino's work: "Calvino often writes like the scientist that his parents were. He observes, precisely, the minutiae of nature: stars, waves, lizards, turtles a woman's breast exposed on the beach. In the process, he vacillates between macro and micro. The whole and the part."

Vidal notes that Calvino—revered in Italy as a cultural hero—was working on a series of Charles Everett Norton lectures he planned to give in the fall and winter of 1985 at Harvard, and confesses: "I can't wait to see what he has to say in the five lectures that he did write." As the funeral grinds to an end, Vidal recalls a passage from *Palomar*:

"First of all, you must not confuse being dead with not being, a condition that occupies the vast expanse of time before birth, apparently symmetrical with the other, equally vast expanse that follows death. In fact, before birth we are part of the infinite possibilities that may or may not be fulfilled; whereas, once dead, we cannot fulfill ourselves either in the past (to which we now belong entirely but on which we can no longer have any influence) or in the future (which, even if influenced by us, remains forbidden to us)."

"Montaigne" (1992)

"Montaigne" (1992) Summary and Analysis

As the consummate contemporary essayist in English, Vidal admits to a lifelong love of the work of French essayist Montaigne (born Michel Eyquem in 1533 at his father's estate, Montaigne, near Bordeaux). He also shares with the reader his joy in the recently published Complete Essays of Montaigne translated by M.A. Screech.

Although Vidal says his sensibilities would include Montaigne in the "relativist school of Lucretius and the Epicureans, thus making him proto-enlightenment," Screech on the other hand places him firmly within the Roman Catholic Church, beleaguered at the time by the Reformation which produced "pointless [ideological] war of the crude sort that has entertained us for so much of our own science-ridden century."

Raised as a gentleman ("a category that no longer exists in our specialized time"), soldier and lawyer, Montaigne received private tutoring in Latin but was largely self-educated by having access to his family's vast libraries. Himself not a college graduate, Vidal admires Montaigne's path. "The greatest action of this man of action was to withdraw to his library in order to read and think and write notes to himself that eventually became books for the world."

Vidal also invokes Montaigne's maxim on government as a tonic for the ills of our contemporary society: "The most desirable laws are those which are fewest, simplest and most general. I think moreover that it would be better to have none at all than to have them in the profusion we do now."

"The Twelve Caesars" (1952)

"The Twelve Caesars" (1952) Summary and Analysis

Since the Great Goddess was banished by Judeo-Christian patriarchy, male energy and dominance has taken charge of western political states, and the Roman Caesars are an excellent example of what that change has produced. Vidal discusses the implications of absolute power, as seen through the eyes of contemporary historian Suetonius and presented to modern readers in translation by the poet Robert Graves. The kind of unlimited power granted to the 12 Caesars who rules the Roman empire from 49 B.C. to A.D. 96 is the story of "twelve men wielding absolute power," Vidal says, with the result every kind of bestiality, perversion, sadism, violence and insanity imaginable—and unimaginable.

The progression from pulling the wings off flies to public executions and torture was swift for many of these emperors. "Caligula was certifiably mad," Vidal writes. "Nero, who started well, became progressively irrational. Even the stern Tiberius' character weakened." The case of the Emperor Domitian, "an intelligent man of some charm, trained to govern," is particular revealing. "Domitian upon succeeding to the Principate at first contented himself with tearing the wings off flies, an infantile pastime which gradually palled until, inevitably, for flies he substituted men. His favorite game was to talk gently of mercy to a nervous victim; then, once all fears had been allayed, execute him."

The relevance to our contemporary age is that, by surrendering inner-directedness for the "common good" in the form of other-directedness is to invite the emergence in our leaders of the dark side of the human soul that created 12 monstrous Caesars, Vidal says. In the gray, placid post-war days of the Eisenhower administration, "to deny the dark nature of human personality is not only fatuous but dangerous. For in our insistence on the surrender of private will...we have been made vulnerable not only to boredom, to that sense of meaninglessness which more than anything else is characteristic of our age, but vulnerable to the first messiah who offers the young and bored some splendid prospect, some Caesarean certainty. That is the political danger, and it is a real one."

"Sex and the Law" (1965)

"Sex and the Law" (1965) Summary and Analysis

Vidal tackles the age-old question of whether the law should be used to enforce "morality" in sexual behavior by citing John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty*: "The only purpose for which power can rightfully be exercised over another member of a civilized community against his will is to prevent harm to others." So, in the realm of sexual behavior, when is harm done, and when should law proscribe those behaviors? Vidal answers that the constitutional separation of church and state in America has, in practice if not in statute, consigned morality to the religious.

Yet Vidal notes that laws have been passed in America to outlaw alcohol (the Volstead Act), prohibit and punish the publication of "pornographic" literature, and to make certain practices—even between consenting, married adults—worthy of prison time. In the United States, laws attempting to govern correct human behavior are the products of state legislatures—and they are a confused mess, according to Vidal. In practice, most of these laws are ignored although, Vidal notes with a bit of glee, "242 Bostonians were arrested for adultery as recently as 1948." In nearly every state, oral and anal sex are punished, while 27 states forbid sexual relations and marriage between whites and blacks, American Indians, Asians and other "inferiors."

Vidal suggests that someone of liberal conscience might do well to try and reform these unenforced and "immoral" laws against immorality. He notes that "public opinion is a chaos of superstition, misinformation and prejudice," and asks: "Even if one could accurately interpret it, would that be a reason for basing the law upon a consensus?" He concludes that a test case before the Supreme Court is needed that would establish in a single decision that "sin," where it does not threaten the public order, is not the business of the state. "This conception is implicit in our Constitution," Vidal says. "But since it has never been tested, our laws continue to punish the sinful as though the state were still an arm of Church Militant."

"Sex Is Politics" (1979)

"Sex Is Politics" (1979) Summary and Analysis

Sex, and its regulation through religion as a political tool, is the focus of this essay that remains relevant today. Vidal reflects that, directly and indirectly, sex has become a hot political issue in terms of the Equal Rights Amendment and women's rights, abortion, homosexuality [and, he might add, stem cell research]. He notes the close correlation between sexual attitudes and political decisions, as evidenced by the laws that favor marriage as an institution that keeps men working in the capitalistic consumer economy.

In the aftermath of Vietnam, Americans' hot buttons grew harder to push, Vidal says, so the "nation's ownership has now gone back to the tried-and-true hot buttons: save our children, our fetuses, our ladies' rooms from the godless enemy. As usual, the sex buttons have proved satisfyingly hot." Vidal notes that a recent *Time Magazine* poll found that 76 percent of respondents believed it "morally wrong" for a married man to cheat on his wife, and 79 percent thought it wrong for a wife to cheat on her husband. Although 63 percent said it was wrong for teenagers to have sex, 55 percent of unmarried women and 85 percent of unmarried men said they'd had sex by the age of 19. "What people consider to be morally objectionable does not seem to have much effect on what they actually do," Vidal says.

Astonishingly, 70 percent of those polled thought there should be no laws, either state or federal, regulating sexual practice. Vidal says it's important to remember that mainstream American "morality" derives from the Judeo-Christian tradition, and that the Bible "created not only a religious anthology but also a political order in which man is woman's eternal master (Jewish men used to pray, 'I thank thee, Lord, that thou has not created me a woman'). The current wave of Christian religiosity that is flowing across the Republic like an oil slick has served as a reminder to women that they must submit to their husbands." Noting the prevalence throughout history of homosexuality, Vidal says "in the Old Testament, Sodom was destroyed not because the inhabitants were homosexualists but because a number of local men wanted to gang rape a pair of male angels who were guests of the town. That was a violation of the most sacred of ancient taboos: the law of hospitality. Also, gang rape, whether homosexual or heterosexual, is seldom agreeable in the eyes of any deity."

Vidal ends with an assessment of ultraconservative organizer/fundraiser Richard Viguerie who, with a mailing list of 10 million names and a goal of electing "many times more than 3 million," called for a "massive assault on Congress in 1978." Maybe not 3 million, but the start of a major political realignment in America.

"Police Brutality" (1961)

"Police Brutality" (1961) Summary and Analysis

As the New Frontier gets underway with "Presidential cries for action, vigor and moving-aheadness," Vidal presciently points to a glaring domestic problem that is often overlooked by the cocktail party intellectuals: social, racial and economic inequalities that are sometimes expressed by police brutality. His essay recounts a harrowing experience one spring night in Washington, D.C., while he was riding in a taxicab to the Union Station. Stalled in traffic, Vidal observes four policemen savagely beating an older man prostrate on the sidewalk and a younger man in an abandoned storefront. As the kicking and punching got into high gear, Vidal says, he jumped from the cab and demanded to know the names of the policemen. He was met with snarling threats as the police continued the pummeling, but he managed to cause a brief pause as he caught the attention of one of the officers.

"He turned on me and I have never seen such a savage, frightening little face. It was plump, flushed, with popping eyes; the face of a young pig gone berserk. He began to scream at me to get out of there or I'd be arrested. Threats and obscenities poured out of him in one long orgiastic breath," Vidal writes. Finally, one of the officers gave Vidal his name and he rode off to Union Station, where he called the night editor at the *Washington Post*. The editor asked if they could use Vidal's name; he said of course, and hung up. Despite all this, there was no coverage in the newspaper, no police inquiry—nothing.

When Vidal returned to New York, he learned that a southern editor had written an editorial attacking the John Birch Society, in which he quoted the FBI as saying that the Birchers were "irresponsible." Hours before the editorial was published, two FBI agents showed up at the editor's office and asked him on what authority he could quote the FBI as calling the John Birch Society irresponsible. When the editor asked how the FBI knew the contents of his editorial before it was published, he got no answer.

Vidal says these two incidents call out for citizens to guard their own liberties. "We may not be able to save Laos; but we can, as individuals, keep an eye on local police forces, even if it means setting up permanent committees of appeal in every city to hear cases of police brutality, or to consider infractions of our freedom to speak out in the pursuit of what our founders termed happiness—two rights always in danger, not only at the local but at the federal level."

"Pornography" (1966)

"Pornography" (1966) Summary and Analysis

As a form of sexual fantasy, pornography has been around since the dawn of "civilization" required the repression of sexuality until well after adolescence—particularly for the educated middle class. In the modern era, according to Vidal, pornography has become a multi-million dollar industry that thrives on the middle class male while "the lower orders" of the uneducated go for the real thing as soon as possible. Along with the rise of pornography as an industry there has been a flowering of fantasy as drama, so that Vidal suggests as a possible master's thesis "The Onanist as Dramatist."

Vidal focuses his reflections about pornography on *The Olympia Reader*, a compendium of pornographic and erotic writings published by Maurice Girodias, whose father sold "vast quantities" of Henry Miller's books to GIs in World War II, and later built a publishing empire on the works of Anais Nin, Lawrence Durrell, Cyril Connolly and others. Reading the collection straight through is "a curiously disjointed experience, like sitting through a program of movie trailers," and Vidal assures the reader that "as literature, most of the selections are junk."

In this crazed society, then, Vidal says pornographers serve the purpose of telling us most about the extraordinary variety of human sexual response, thus showing us that we are "rather like those Fun House mirrors which, even as they distort and mock the human figure, never cease to reflect the real thing."

"Doc Reuben" (1970)

"Doc Reuben" (1970) Summary and Analysis

Vidal begins his essay on former best-selling "sexologist" David Reuben, MD, a San Diego psychiatrist and author of *Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Sex but Were Afraid to Ask*, by reminding the reader that a "jocose," breezy approach to sex is a sure sign of discomfort and suggesting that Reuben is "in a state of communicable panic" that probably makes him unfit to practice psychiatry.

The Old Testament rabbinical approach to sexual matters promoted by Reuben—combined with his evident distaste for the rigors of scientific investigation—reveal him as a counter-revolutionary in the sexual arena and guarantee that the majority of American readers would be perplexed and perturbed by his attitudes, according to Vidal. "Essentially he is not a man of science but a moderately swinging rabbi who buttresses his prejudices with pious quotations from the Old Testament (a single reference to the New Testament is inaccurate); surprisingly, the only mental therapist he mentions is Freud—in order to set him straight," Vidal says.

Reuben's book "explodes with snappy generalities ('All children at the time of puberty develop pimples') and opinions ('All prostitutes hate men') and statistics which he seems to have made up ('Seventy to eighty percent of Americans engage in fellatio and cunnilingus')." A fan of cunnilingus, Reuben wants everyone to engage in more of this oral sex, except women. Dr. Reuben is also not shy about promoting the notion that psychiatry can fix just about any sexual hang-up from male impotence to female frigidity, which makes Vidal wonder whether he should be charged with misleading advertising for himself and his profession.

"The looniest of Dr. Reuben's folklore is 'Food seems to have a mysterious fascination for homosexuals,'" Vidal opines. "'Many of the world's greatest chefs have been homosexuals' (Who? I'm really curious. Not Brillat-Savarin, not Fanny Farmer.) 'Some of the country's best restaurants are run by homosexuals' (Those two at Twenty One?) 'Some of the fattest people are homosexuals' (King Farouk? Orson Welles? President Taft?). 'The exact reason is complex...' It certainly is, since there is no evidence one way or the other. But if there were, Dr. Reuben had best find himself a friendly shrink because he makes at least eight references in his book to the penis as food."

Vidal observes that Reuben practices a "pseudoscience," psychiatry, upon which any hypothesis can be erected, including such superstitions as the belief that all prostitutes hate men, are secretly lesbians, and receive their only emotional warmth from their pimp. To characterize commercial sex as "a kind of joyless masturbation into a vagina" is to compare it to marriage, Vidal says. Later, Dr. Reuben reveals the foundation of his superstitions: the so-called "natural law" of Roman Catholicism that all sex is for procreation. However, despite the reactionary opinions of the San Diego psychiatrist,

Vidal says, progress in understanding and accepting the varieties of human sexuality is underway.

"Women's Liberation: Feminism and Its Discontents" (1971)

"Women's Liberation: Feminism and Its Discontents" (1971) Summary and Analysis

Vidal believes the anger and outrage generated by the women's movement, particularly in its early days, is all the proof he needs that "the girls" (Germaine Greer, Betty Friedan, Gloria Steinem) are right on the mark. He thus welcomes publication of Patriarchal Attitudes by Eva Figes as "an elegant work" of literature comparable to the exalted work of philosopher John Stuart Mill.

Vidal notes that humans are the only mammalian species that must be taught how to mate, and in a post-Puritan society sex is something shameful and enshrouded in mystery and guilt. Nevertheless, society teaches male and female alike about their stereotyped roles, and if a girl should prefer a chemistry set to a doll there is instant neurosis. "This arbitrary and brutal shaping of men and women has filled the madhouses of the West, particularly today when the kind of society we still prepare children for (man outside at work, woman at home with children) is no longer the only possibility for a restless generation," Vidal writes.

"To survive we must stop making babies at the current rate, and this can only be accomplished by breaking the ancient stereotypes of man the warrior, woman the breeder," according to Vidal.

"Pink Triangle and Yellow Star" (1981)

"Pink Triangle and Yellow Star" (1981) Summary and Analysis

Vidal ostensibly wants to review *Tricks*, one of several books that deals with homosexuality, but spends most of his ink in this essay on a wide-ranging commentary on "certain curious facts of our social and cultural life." One of these facts is that "military societies on the rise tend to encourage same-sex activities." Another is that "American evangelical Christians are busy trying to impose on the population at large their superstitions about sex and the sexes and the creation of the world." Another fact is that "Jews, blacks and homosexualists are despised by the Christian and Communist majorities of East and West."

In the Nazi concentration camps of World War II, Jews wore yellow stars and "homosexualists" pink triangles, and "like it or not, Jews and homosexualists are in the same fragile boat," along with blacks and other minorities, Vidal says. As an example of the "shrill fag-baiting" that is common among the "new class" of New York, who are "no more than spear carriers in the political and cultural life of the West, Vidal names Midge Decter, married to Norman Podhoretz, publisher of *Commentary*. In an article for that magazine, Decter describes changes she's observed in the gays who populate Fire Island Pines, from harmless to militant gay rights advocates with large guard dogs.

Several thousand words into Decter's "tirade," Vidal says, he realizes that she doesn't know what homosexuality is. "Although to have sexual relations with a member of one's own sex is a common and natural activity (currently disapproved of by certain elements in this culture), there is no such thing as a homosexualist any more than there is such a thing as a heterosexualist," Vidal asserts. "That is one of the reasons there has been so much difficulty with nomenclature. What makes some people prefer same-sex sex derives from whatever impulse or conditioning makes some people prefer other-sex sex. This is so plain that it seems impossible that our Mosaic-Pauline-Freudian society has not yet figured it out."

While writing about Midge Decter's homophobic rant, Vidal reads about a report from the Kinsey Institute that concludes family life has nothing to do with sexual preference because "homosexuality is deep-rooted in childhood, may be biological in origin, and simply shows in more and more important ways as a child grows older. It is not a condition which therapy can reverse." Back to the business at hand, Vidal says Tricks by the French author Renaud Camus recounts his 25 sexual encounters in a six-month period ("a lot of anal and banal sex as well as oral and floral sex"). Although there is no suicide in the book, it is very sad because of its depiction of fag baiting.

Vidal concludes that those who stand to lose the most if the political right wing in America gains complete control—blacks, Jews, homosexuals—should band together

against the common enemy, "whose kindly voice is that of Ronald Reagan and whose less than kindly mind is elsewhere in the boardrooms of the Republic."

"The Birds and the Bees" (1991)

"The Birds and the Bees" (1991) Summary and Analysis

In this tongue-in-cheek essay, Vidal decides to "set the record straight" on the subject of sex. His first revelation: "Men and women are *not* alike. They have different roles to perform. Despite the best efforts of theologians and philosophers to disguise our condition, there is no point to us, or to any species, except proliferation and survival. We are biped animals filled with red sea water (reminder of our oceanic origin), and we exist to reproduce until we are eventually done in by the planet's changing weather or a stray meteor."

Vidal speculates that "love" was invented by some unknown artist because the cycle of reproduction and death, endlessly repeated, was just too depressing. From early tribal extended families evolved the "prenuclear" family, and "Skygods" were created in the image of man, giving rise to monotheistic religions. Those religions "from which we continue to suffer" are based on the only certainty of which humans can be confident—man plus woman equals baby. Then "natural lawyers" devised marriage, monogamy and sexual taboos "to keep the population in line so that the senior partners in the earthly firm could keep the rest of us busy building expensive pyramids to the glory of the Great Lawyer in the Sky," Vidal says.

Although the male's anatomy and physiology do not find monogamy natural or normal, the concept of monogamy is "drilled into the male's head from birth" so that the woman has someone to help her during and after pregnancy, according to Vidal. He observes that even the "patriarchal Viennese novelist and classics buff" Sigmund Freud accepted that the fundamental differences between the sexes produced endless conflict. This is because "*he* is designed to make as many babies as possible with as many different women as he can get his hands on, while *she* is designed to take time off from her busy schedule as astronaut and role model to lay an egg and bring up the result."

Tthe problem with this arrangement, however, is that "even the dullest and more superstitious of us now suspects that we may have overdone the replicating," Vidal writes. So men and women who want to mate with those of their own sex should be encouraged to do so, Vidal says, and "should be considered benefactors by everyone, while the breeders must be discouraged though, of course, not persecuted."

"How to Find God and Make Money" (1978)

"How to Find God and Make Money" (1978) Summary and Analysis

Sinning, seeking forgiveness, being "twice born" and then writing about it has become big business, Vidal says, as he notes ironically that books written by and about "Christians" have become a multi-million dollar industry. If the twice-born can sing, as in the case of Pat Boone or Anita Bryant, there are "countless stops not only along but above and below the Bible Belt where large audiences will pay to observe a reborn celebrity." Convicted rapist and former Black Panther Eldridge Cleaver, Watergate criminals such as Chuck Colson and a plethora of pundits, pranksters and politicians all have books peddling their particular flavor of born-again fundamentalism.

This Too Shall Pass, written by Mrs. Bert (LaBelle) Lance, wife of former Carter White House budget director Bert Lance, is one of the titles published by Christian Herald Books in Chappaqua, New York along with other stories about Missionaries in the Amazon jungle and triumphant encounters with the divine, Vidal says. Oddly, though, LaBelle Lance is neither celebrity nor sinner, but mere witness to the rise and fall of her husband as reported in the mass media. In her book, she lists the "afflictions" that she's experienced: "alcoholism, drugs, broken homes, suicide, death, violence, serious illness, car accidents, jailings, homosexuality, murder, adultery, runaway children."

After cataloguing her ills, LaBelle decides not to tell all and prefers to attack, instead, "the Mass Media" for reporting on her husband's financial misdeeds. "Fortunately, Jimmy's [Carter] friends Bert and LaBelle have the consolation of Holy Scripture in their dark hours," Vidal writes. As the grand jury convenes in Atlanta, he predicts, "Bert is certain to turn to Luke 11:52: 'Woe to you lawyers! For you have taken away the key of knowledge; you did not enter yourselves, and you hindered those who were entering.'"

"Rich Kids" (1978)

"Rich Kids" (1978) Summary and Analysis

Dr. Robert Coles, a child psychiatrist and author of a series of books on children of migrant workers, Eskimos, Appalachians, deals with well-off children in *Privileged Ones*, the last in his series, *Children of Crisis*. Because he firmly believes that Dr. Cole's heart is "so entirely in all the right places (mouth, boots, upon the sleeve), Vidal confesses that he agrees with his large themes of economic injustice, children, Middle America.

Coles does not challenge the reader to think, as would Plato, by asking questions but rather makes the reader *feel* by compiling dozens of interviews with many children over the years, "an enjoyable if somewhat questionable technique." However, Vidal praises it as "a work of high seriousness, and a great deal of labor if not work has gone into [it]."

Although Coles goes to great pains not to use the children he interviews as mouthpieces for his own social views, he does nevertheless and the result is that his interviewees seem to all speak with a single voice and remain "somewhat shadowy," Vidal observes. Coles reveals that he developed friendships with five wealthy New Orleans families in the course of researching his book but does not say whether he did so when called upon professionally, as a psychiatrist. Coles also interviewed "advantaged" children in Alaska, New Mexico, a San Antonio barrio, an Atlanta black ghetto and various areas around Boston.

Vidal decries the fact that Americans are hung up on explanation, as are the children interviewed by Dr. Coles. Nevertheless, despite "the grimly didactic tendencies of our future rulers," Vidal finds the kids themselves interesting. He records the importance of sports in the lives of wealthy children, but never explains the significance of the games they play. Vidal mentions, with shock: "I don't believe a single child whom he talked to mentions a book to him. But television is noted. And sports. And school. And parents. And servants. Servants!"

Vidal reports that Coles notices a significant difference between rich and poor children: the poor live in a "long unchanging present" while the wealthy children "have a future to look forward to." Rich kids think of "next year" when they'll go to Europe, or to the West Indies. Rich kids learn a sense of entitlement and think of themselves "with insistence, regularity, and not least, out of a learned sense of obligation." Wealthy girls are "adamant" about not wanting children, as well.

From earliest childhood, America's rulers-to-be are nurtured with a strong sense of what they are entitled to, or about 25 percent of the wealth of the United States. "To make sure that they will be able to hold on to this entitlement, most of the boys and one of the girls want to be—what else?—*lawyers*," Vidal says.

"Drugs" (1970)

"Drugs" (1970) Summary and Analysis

Vidal proposes a simple solution to most drug addiction in the United States: make all drugs available, sell them at cost and label each drug with an accurate description of the effects—good and bad—the drug will have on the user. Vidal says his plan will work only with the kind of "heroic honesty" that would inform people that marijuana is neither dangerous nor addictive, but that heroin is highly addictive and potentially lethal.

Ideas of personal liberty professed and practiced by America's founders stress that each person has the right to do what he or she wants, so long as it doesn't interfere with someone else's pursuit of happiness, Vidal reminds the reader. This notion, however, is "startling" to a generation of high school students who form the so-called "silent majority." Vidal observes the short historical memory in the U.S. that "we have no public memory of anything that happened before last Tuesday, " including the fact that prohibition "launched the greatest crime wave in the country's history, causing thousands of deaths from bad alcohol, and creating a general (and persisting) contempt among the citizenry for the laws of the United States."

Yet will anything be done to change the situation? Vidal thinks not because Americans are also addicted to the idea of "sin and punishment," while politicians find irresistible "the combination of sin and money." Thus, he predicts, things will only get worse.

"The Four Generations of the Adams Family" (1976)

"The Four Generations of the Adams Family" (1976) Summary and Analysis

John Adams was born in 1735 in Massachusetts, the founder of a family line that remained at the center of national and world political affairs for almost two centuries. Four generations of this brilliant but self-effacing family ended, Vidal says, with Henry Adams who is recalled by a conversation Vidal had as a young person with Eleanor Roosevelt. The first lady scolded Adams gently for his cynicism about history when her husband was just starting his political career.

"Young man," Adams told president-to-be Roosevelt, "it doesn't make the slightest difference who lives in that [White House], history goes on with or without the president." As an amateur historian, Henry Adams spent his last days trying to understand the forces that shape history—and finally abandoned history altogether, Vidal says. "I don't give a damn what happened," Vidal quotes Adams. "What I want to know is why it happened—never could find out—stopped writing history."

Before that sad ending to the Adams eminence, however, there was John Adams—somewhat a misfit among the framers of our country, but valued nevertheless by the other rebels like Jefferson. Given to self-criticism, as were all four generations of the leading Adamses, John Adams at 44 noted "a feebleness and a languor" in his own nature, but "suffered good health until the age of 91," Vidal reports. Despite his "ordinary" physical constitution, Adams notes that fame has been thrust upon him more by historical circumstance than personal achievement.

Adams attended Harvard, studied law and was admitted to the bar in Boston in 1758 and by the age of 36 had the largest law practice in Massachusetts, according to Vidal. Because of his status, Adams was chosen to present the objections of fellow colonists to the British over taxes levied upon them. "He, more than any other Inventor, prepared the way intellectually and rhetorically for revolution, as we like the call the slow separation of the colonies from England," Vidal writes. As a member of the Continental Congress from 1774-1778, Adams was instrumental in the selection of George Washington as commander-in-chief.

Elected vice president as Washington was unanimously elected president, Adams earned the sobriquet "His Rotundity" but persevered until he was elected president in 1797. When he left the presidency, his son John Quincy Adams was 35 years old and was respected more than liked in Washington, Vidal says. Appointed minister to England, Adams served briefly until appointed secretary of state by President Monroe, then was finally elected president in 1825. An ardent foe of slavery, he helped found the

Smithsonian Institution and collapsed on the floor of the House in a debate. He died in 1848.

His son, Charles Francis Adams "had committed hypergamy in the sense that he was the first Adams to marry a lot of money in the shape of Abigail Brooks, who according to one of her children 'took a constitutional and sincere pleasure in the forecast of evil. She delighted in the dark side of anticipation,'" Vidal says. Four of their sons distinguished themselves in the next generation—John Quincy II, Charles Francis II, Henry and Brooks. Henry Adams was "remarkably prescient about the coming horrors, like his mother he anticipated the worst," Vidal writes. Before the First World War he foretold the decline of England and France, and the rise of the United States, Russia and Germany.

"First Note on Abraham Lincoln" (1981)

"First Note on Abraham Lincoln" (1981) Summary and Analysis

Was the legendary sadness and depression so evident in portraits and historical descriptions of Abraham Lincoln because he gave syphilis to his wife, thereby causing her dementia and the early deaths of three of his sons? That is a possibility that can't be ruled out by the historical record, according to Vidal. In this brief essay on Lincoln, Vidal relies to an extent on the research and writings of Thomas Herndon, Lincoln's law partner and only friend. Despite the best efforts of "second rank poet" Carl Sandburg to depict Lincoln as a kind of "cornball Disneyland waxwork," he was an enormously complex and interesting man, Vidal says.

Born poor and possibly illegitimately, Lincoln was a wealthy lawyer and ambitious man by the time he was elected president. Vidal says it may come as a shock to the "twice-born" Christians that Lincoln not only rejected Christianity, but also wrote an anti-religion tract as a young man which his employer threw into a stove to be incinerated. Herndon, perhaps the most reliable witness to Lincoln, said that "he had terrible strong passions for women, could scarcely keep his hands off them, and yet he had honor and a strong will [which] enabled him to put out the fires of his terrible passion." Nevertheless, Lincoln evidently contracted syphilis as a youth and may have infected his wife, according to Vidal.

"The autopsy on Mary Todd [Lincoln] showed a physical deterioration of the brain consistent with paresis," Vidal says. "If Lincoln had given his wife syphilis and if he had, inadvertently, caused the death of his children, the fits of melancholy are now understandable—and unbearably tragic."

Although as a Congressman Lincoln seemed to advocate revolution and secession for any groups in American that choose that path, when elected president against a backdrop of abolitionist fervor, Lincoln lamely back-pedaled saying that he'd grown wiser since his original statement. In any event, Lincoln tried to save the union first without freeing the slaves, and then freed them with pious statements about right and wrong on his lips, Vidal tells the reader. "The real Lincoln was a superb politician. He knew when to wait; when to act."

Finally, Lincoln himself had a presentiment that he would not live longer than the Civil War, saying: "When it is over, my work is done." Vidal adds, "The work was done; and so was he."

"Lincoln, *Lincoln*, and the Priests of Academe" (1988-91)

"Lincoln, Lincoln, and the Priests of Academe" (1988-91) Summary and Analysis

A compilation of three separate articles written by Vidal over a three-year period for different publications, this essay is ostensibly about Abraham Lincoln but actually more about Vidal quibbling with critics of his historical novel, *Lincoln*. The reader may find the essay at times tedious, tortured and petty, but Vidal's elegant prose barely manages to make what amounts to an *apologia pro sua vita* interesting.

The first article, reprinted from *The New York Review of Books* in 1988, answers critics of his novel, primarily Richard N. Current, Yale history professor and "a leading Lincoln biographer," who wrote that "Vidal is wrong on big as well as little matters. He grossly distorts Lincoln's character and role in history." Vidal notes that his book is historical fiction that clearly demarcates the agreed-upon historical facts from fictional passages, and says he employed a professional researcher to correct names, dates and even "agreed-upon facts."

Vidal admits that he has often been amazed that "there has never been a first-rate biography of Lincoln," and suspects that is because "too often the bureaucrats of Academe have taken over the writing of history and most of them neither write well nor, worse, understand the nature of the men they are required to make saints of." Vidal quarrels with Current and other critics over the veracity of claims Lincoln had syphilis; Vidal's use of occasional British spellings; accusations that he'd written untruths that he never wrote; whether or not, and if so, when, Lincoln contemplated and advocated an American colony of freed black slaves in Africa; and Lincoln's bowel habits.

Vidal goes *mano a mano* with Current and his other critics in a second 1988 article in *The New York Review of Books*: "Current, lord of language, wants Lincoln to be Will Rogers, all folksy and homey. But Lincoln's own language resounds with what Current calls 'Briticisms;' Lincoln's prose was drenched in Shakespeare...I have found that whenever I do make a mistake in writing about history, it is usually because I have followed an acknowledged authority who turns out wrong."

The third and final piece is from The American Historical Review of 1991, wherein Vidal primarily defends himself against charges of "errors" in Lincoln leveled by Don Fehrenbacher, professor emeritus of history at Stanford University. Among Vidal's "errors" are having Lincoln say he was in New Orleans "once" instead of twice; locating a statue of Jefferson in Lafayette Park in Washington, D.C.; referring to Robert E. Lee as "the Rebel commander," and other monumental outrages—all of which Vidal rebuts.

"Last Note on Lincoln" (1991)

"Last Note on Lincoln" (1991) Summary and Analysis

Vidal shares some of his personal reflections on Abraham Lincoln, including the fact that Lincoln belonged to no Christian church but was also no atheist. When he viewed a life mask of Lincoln made shortly before his murder, Vidal was struck by the smallness of the head whose "vulpine little face seems strangely vulnerable" with shrunken cheeks, a sharper nose than one sees in photographs, and deep lines about the mouth. Lincoln, with eyes shut, looks to be a small man in rehearsal for his death," Vidal says.

Although Lincoln had, for practical purposes, no formal education, he studied law and learned a lean, muscular prose style that made him "a literary genius" and competent lawyer in an age when "most good lawyers, like good generals, wrote good prose; if they were not precisely understood, a case or a battle might be lost." Although depicted in mainstream history books as serene, even in defeat, Vidal quotes Lincoln's law partner, William Herndon, that "Lincoln was as crazy as a loon in this city in 1841," and reflects that he must have been "something of a manic-depressive."

Informed largely by his readings in the Bible and of Shakespeare, Lincoln wrote all of his own speeches and delivered them, at first in a shrill and unpleasant voice, but then with warmth, conviction and even a melodious voice. Although Lincoln thought people anywhere, at any time, had the right to rise up against their oppressors (including the South), he also believed that his mission was to maintain the union as the best hope for democracy in the world, according to Vidal.

"In any event," Vidal concludes, "we still live in the divided house that Lincoln cobbled together for us, and it is always useful to get to know through his writing not the god of the establishment-priests but a literary genius who was called upon to live, rather than merely to write, a high tragedy. I can think of no one in literary or political history quite like this essential American writer."

"President and Mrs. U.S. Grant (1975)

"President and Mrs. U.S. Grant (1975) Summary and Analysis

Publication of The Personal Memoirs of Julia Dent Grant, wife of Ulysses S. Grant, fills an historical void in understanding the general who, with Lincoln, fought to preserve the United States as the forces of secession and rebellion swept the land. Grant's own memoirs, written as he was dying of cancer and bankrupt, provided his widow with a lifetime inheritance and historians with an excellent autobiography, ending with the Civil War but not encompassing his presidency. Reading his wife's memoirs helps to better understand Grant, Vidal says.

Vidal plays with the title "first Lady," along with the title "president," to describe how the two occupants of the White House are "simple but awful" descriptors. Vidal agrees with historian Bruce Catton who described Mrs. Grant in the book's introduction as a "likeable" woman. "From her own account Julia Dent Grant does seem to have been a likeable, rather silly woman, enamored of First Ladyhood (and why not?), with a passion for clothes." Photographs show her as "short and dumpy, with quite astonishingly crossed eyes."

A graduate of West Point, Grant distinguished himself in the Mexican-American War then married Julia Dent. Grant later reflected that the "Southern rebellion was largely the outgrowth of the Mexican War. Nations, like individuals, are punished for their transgressions. We got our punishment in the most sanguinary and expensive war of modern times." Vidal comments that if Grant's law still obtains, then the "only hope for today's American is emigration."

Julia Grant tells the reader of her birth and youth in slave-holding Missouri, an indulged child in a privileged family. Vidal says Julia's description of meeting Grant is much more colorful than that provided by the general. They met through an introduction by Julia's brother, a West Point classmate of Grant. Julia's family generally looked down on Grant's Kentucky relatives. After the war, Grant's presidency became one of the most spectacularly corrupt administrations in American history. "Yet the people forgave the solemn little man who had preserved the Union and then proposed himself to a grateful nation with the phrase, 'Let us have peace.' " He was re-elected to a second term as president in 1872.

Nevertheless, First Lady Grant "hardly alludes" to the scandals in her memoirs, Vidal writes. She chatters on gaily about her trip around the world with her husband, decorating the White House, and meeting international dignitaries. They spent their last years together in Galena, Illinois. Vidal observes that although Grant did not respect what he called the "horrid old Constitution" either in peace or in war, he, with Lincoln, shaped modern America:

"Between Lincoln and Grant, the original American republic of states united in free association was jettisoned. From the many states they formed one union, a centralized nation-state devoted to the acquisition of wealth and territory by any means."

"Theodore Roosevelt: an American Sissy" (1981)

"Theodore Roosevelt: an American Sissy" (1981) Summary and Analysis

Theodore Roosevelt was an upper class sissy whose hyper-masculine jingoism and bully-bully swagger prefigured aspects of today's New Right, according to Vidal. The human being portrayed in a pair of Roosevelt biographies is both "fascinating and repellant," he asserts. Vidal refers to David McCullough, author of *Mornings on Horseback,* and *The Rise of Theodore Roosevelt*, by Edmund Morris.

In three generations, the Roosevelts in 19th Century New York City had risen from hardware to plate glass to land development and banking. They were, according to Vidal, "a solemn, hardworking, uninspired lot who, according to the New York World, had a tendency 'to cling to the fixed and the venerable.'" It was from this clan of solid burghers that Theodore and his siblings emerged. Roosevelt made no lasting friendships while at Harvard and had few attachments outside his family, Vidal says, mentioning the McCullough biography.

Theodore Roosevelt attended Columbia Law School and was elected to the New York State Assembly at the age of 23 with "no theory of government [and] simply loyal to his class," according to Vidal. He didn't try to become one of the boys and found the Tammany Hall gang repulsive socially, physically and politically. His high-pitched voice and upper class accent, like that of his niece Eleanor, was the object of mimicry and laughter "for 50 years." After a tour of New York City tenements conducted by union leader Samuel Gompers, Roosevelt changed his mind and voted to support a pro-labor bill.

Finding his path as a reformer, Roosevelt began to take on the established power structure and coined the famous phrase, "the wealthy criminal class." By showing loyalty to the Republican Party, though, Roosevelt gained the GOP nomination for president and the White House. His displays of macho continued and his slaughter of animals in the Badlands "outdoes in spades the butcheries of that sissy of a later era, Ernest Hemingway," Vidal says. "Elks, grizzly bears, blacktail bucks are killed joyously while a bear cub is shot, TR reports proudly, 'clean through from end to end' (the Teddy bear has yet to be invented.)"

Roosevelt "invented Panama out of a piece of Colombia" to build the Panama Canal, installed the United States as "the policeman of the Western Hemisphere," and "presided over the tail-end of the slaughter of more than half a million Filipinos" to set up an American colony in the Pacific. Vidal compares Roosevelt with Benito Mussolini and Winston Churchill, each " a sissy turned showoff." Whatever their faults, Vidal says, we are not likely to see their equals in our computerized, "mindless cue-card" era.

"Eleanor Roosevelt" (1971)

"Eleanor Roosevelt" (1971) Summary and Analysis

Discovering Eleanor Roosevelt arranging a dozen gladiolas in her toilet bowl is just one of the special insights Vidal brings to the American scene. In this essay, as in others, Vidal demonstrates how his family and political connections give him an inside track on "our rulers," as he calls them, in their moments of greatness as well as their moments of embarrassed domesticity. The scene with the gladiolas occurred when, summoned by Mrs. Roosevelt to her home at Hyde Park, Vidal wandered into an empty house and into a political and personal acquaintance that nurtured a real admiration for the former First Lady.

Finding her "remarkably candid about herself and others," Vidal scribbled notes to recall the confidences that revealed to him special truths. So when Eleanor and Franklin, written by Joseph Lash, was published, Vidal says he was shocked to read the same "confidences" shared by Mrs. Roosevelt in its pages. Admitting that he finds the book, like Mrs. Roosevelt, "fascinating," Vidal remarks that "reading [the book] is like having her alive again, hearing that odd, fluting yet precise voice with its careful emphases, its nervous glissade of giggles, the great smile which was calculated not only to avert wrath but warn potential enemies that here was a lioness quite capable of making a meal of anyone."

At the wedding of the two Roosevelt cousins, Franklin and Eleanor, uncle Teddy Roosevelt overshadowed both the bride and the groom, Vidal reports. Though her virtues were not yet apparent to the wider world in which Franklin D. Roosevelt had great ambitions, nevertheless "she was a catch for one excellent reason: she was the President's niece, and not just your average run-of-the-mill President but a unique political phenomenon who had roused the country in a way no other President had since Jackson." Eleanor's social conscience was stirred when she worked at a safe house for women where she saw how the poor and dispossessed lived. She was a "slow convert" to the causes of civil and women's rights.

Vidal's grandfather Senator Gore found his political career ended in 1936 after a collision with President Roosevelt, although both had been in the liberal wing of the Democratic Party. Although the world knows of the powerful partnership of Franklin and Eleanor, at bottom, Vidal speculates, theirs was not a happy marriage. Eleanor didn't like sex; Franklin did; she was crushed to learn of his affair with her secretary. They probably weren't very good parents, either. "I suspect the best years of Eleanor's life were the widowhood," Vidal says. "She was on her own, no longer an adjunct to [Franklin's] career."

"H.L. Mencken the Journalist" (1991)

"H.L. Mencken the Journalist" (1991) Summary and Analysis

Although Henry Louis (H.L.) Mencken's views would probably make him politically and socially "incorrect" in today's world, he was an exemplar of the old-style newspaper journalist that swaggered through the American scene "from century's turn to mid-century's television," Vidal observes. A cigar-chomping, outspoken German-American who looked like a vaudeville figure, Mencken wrote for the *Baltimore Sun* for a half-century; his beat was America. Mencken "described the show. He reveled in absurdity; found no bonnet entirely bee-less. He loved the national bores for their own sweet sake."

Mencken wrote during a time when there was still a public educational system and "the average person could probably get through a newspaper without numb lips," Vidal says. "Today, half the American population no longer reads newspapers; plainly, they are the clever half." Mencken believed newspapers should consist of one-syllable words understandable to a boy of 10, avoid ideas of any kind, and present events "as drama, with one side clearly right and the other clearly wrong." In this, Vidal observes, Mencken anticipated TV news programs and the 30-second commercial—not to mention political attack ads.

Mencken believed that, except for religion, politics have literally been the only concern of Americans since the start of the republic, to which men "of ability and ambition" turn for their self-expression. Vidal notes the parallel with Pericles's comment that "the man who thinks politics, not his business, has no business." Mencken wrote that government itself could be defined "as a conspiracy against [the common man]. Its one permanent aim, whatever its form, is to hobble him sufficiently to maintain itself."

Communism, Mencken wrote, was doomed to failure and its literature "as childish as the literature of Christian Science." He predicted that communism would "either convert itself into a sickly imitation of capitalism or blow itself up with a bang. The former seems likely." Though sometimes denounced as an anti-Semite, Mencken wrote in 1938 in the Baltimore Sun of his hope that "the poor Jews now being robbed and mauled in Germany will not take too seriously the plans of various politicians to rescue them."

Vidal's tribute to Mencken: "Plainly, so clear and hard a writer would not be allowed in the mainstream press of today, and those who think that they would like him back would be the first to censor and censure him."

"Paranoid Politics" (1967)

"Paranoid Politics" (1967) Summary and Analysis

Political paranoia is as American as apple pie, and probably pre-dates it with the arrival of fundamentalist Protestants in the 1600s, Vidal says. That residue of native paranoia was aggravated when "secular-minded 18th Century skeptics" arrived in North America and organized the United States along freethinking lines. Ever since, homegrown paranoia has shown itself in "western farmers denouncing eastern banks, Jews trying to censor the film of *Oliver Twist*, uneasy heterosexuals fearful of a homosexual takeover."

Because there is no single tribe to which all Americans belong, the great majority have never had any sense of national identity other than "the American way of life," which is nothing more than an economic system that involves "purchase of consumer goods on credit to maintain a high standard of living," Vidal observes. Thus, paranoids on the political left and right claim to be appalled at the lack of values of American society. It is strange, Vidal says, that a country that has never experienced a *coup d'etat* should be obsessed with the notion of conspiracy.

Professor Richard Hofstadter's enlightening book on the subject of political paranoia identifies Americans either going up or down the social stratum as most prone to paranoia. For example, Vidal says, "When white Anglo-Saxon Protestants lose status, they often suspect a conspiracy aimed at depriving them of their ancient primacy, while Irish Catholics, moving up, are often disappointed to find that their new riches do not entitle them to more of a say in the governing of their country."

Paranoia has shaped American policy and destiny more than is openly acknowledged, Vidal concludes: "Beneath a genuine high-mindedness, American leaders have unconsciously accepted the 'English-speaking, Teutonic' role of world conquerors for the world's good. With the result that the Americans are in this age the barbarian horde, as the English were in the last century."

"What Robert Moses Did to New York City" (1974)

"What Robert Moses Did to New York City" (1974) Summary and Analysis

From the early 1940s through the mid 1960s, Robert Moses was a demagogue of New York City power politics who established and operated a series of self-perpetuating fiefdoms such as the Triborough Bridge Authority, and whose style is "a perfect blueprint for...the first popularly elected dictator of the United States." Vidal views the career of Moses, a conservative, Yale-educated German Jew from New York City, as a cautionary tale—one laid out splendidly in a biography by Robert Caro.

After Yale, Moses studied at Oxford where he identified with the ruling class and believed it to be the most enlightened in the world, with its firm but benign ordering of the lower social classes. To transplant this style at home, Moses advocated in his PhD thesis "the remorseless exercise of the executive power of suppression and dismissal" to prevent workers from organizing labor unions. When he got to New York City, he joined forces with fellow reformer Al Smith and their political fortunes rose together, according to Vidal. Moses found a new and better form of corruption—instead of a envelope stuffed with cash and surreptitiously delivers in the dark of night, he devised whole bureaucracies to provide legitimate salaries and benefits.

Armed with a state parks plan for New York, Moses won the support of the conservationist wife of the publisher of *The New York Times*. His vision was to create a system of roadways connecting improved public parks to New York City for the benefit of urban residents who needed to escape the city. Coincidentally, the roadways would also provide fast commutes for the wealthy that lived in suburban enclaves far from Gotham. His Triborough Bridge Authority collected vast sums in tolls, which Moses used to reward those who helped him (legally) and to punish his enemies.

By the late 1950s, however, even *The New York Times* grew concerned about the lack of mass transit in the city and Moses refused to listen to city planners who lobbied for various forms of mass transit, choosing instead to build more and more roads. "When told that 'the automobiles required to transport the equivalent of one trainload of commuters uses about four acres of parking space in Manhattan,' Moses spoke of huge skyscrapers filled with cars; he even built one but it was not practical at the price," Vidal writes. Moses met his downfall in Nelson Rockefeller and his ambitions for the presidency, as well as "an arrogance equal to his own; remorselessness quite as complete; and resources that were infinite."

Once deposed, Moses continued to support an automobile-centered city, despite pollution energy crises, and unlivable cities. Vidal wants the reader to share in his amazement: "Rather than make the obvious point that a man of 86 is now out-of-date,

one ought instead to regard with a degree of awe his stamina and his continuing remorseless brilliance."

"Conglomerates" (1973)

"Conglomerates" (1973) Summary and Analysis

The multinational conglomerate (corporation) is an unfettered beast without loyalties to any state or group, save its stockholders, Vidal says after reading Anthony Sampson's *The Sovereign State of ITT.* The author "views with alarm the way these nomadic holding companies [such as International Telephone and Telegraph] have transformed themselves into sovereign states able to treat with nation states from a position of strength," Vidal says. Created by Virgin Islander Sosthenes Behn in 1928, ITT benefited from a takeover by dictator Juan Peron; Behn later did profitable business with Adolf Hitler and the Third Reich.

ITT holdings included Avis Cars, Sheraton Hotels, Levitt towns, and The Hartford, then the third largest insurance company in the world because, as Vidal notes, "cash in-flow is very important for a business which is in the business not of making things but of making money. According to Senator E. Kennedy, ITT—the eighth largest American company—paid no federal American tax in 1971." ITT founder Colonel Behn's successor, Harold Geneen, exhibits a "crusading fervor and vigor [which] is something new under the corporate sun," Vidal writes. "Instead of being embarrassed by all the dirty tricks he had been caught at, he takes the high line that in order to maintain the Western world's prosperity, his is the only way and if the United States and Western Europe are to compete with a corporate nation-state like Japan, say, then more not less ITT is necessary."

Vidal suspects that ITT will collapse and disappear, while taking the currency of the Western world with it in a replay of the stock market crash of 1929 that triggered the Depression.

"Edmund Wilson, Tax Dodger" (1963)

"Edmund Wilson, Tax Dodger" (1963) Summary and Analysis

Vidal reviews and endorses literary critic Edmund Wilson's "extraordinary polemic" against the American income tax and its enforcers, The Cold War and the Income Tax. Busy with his various writing and editing projects, four marriages and faltering royalties, Wilson ran afoul of the Internal Revenue Service in the amount of $20,000 which grew with interest and fines to $60,000, and learned to his surprise that any and all assets could be seized and liquidated.

Wilson's Kafkaesque encounter with the IRS is characterized by having one agent assigned to read all of his works in an attempt to discern whether his not paying taxes "was part of a sinister design to subvert a great nation," Vidal says. The legitimate investigation into his affairs was only aggravated by "the unrelenting impertinence of the investigators." Why did he spend $6 to buy a cushion for his dog to sleep on? Why was his daughter in private school? Why did he need three residences?

Noting that Americans paid more income tax in the 1960s than during the Second World War, Wilson asks why. The answer: expenses of the Cold War, foreign aid and defense account for some 80 percent of federal expenditures. He rails against spending $30 billion to put a man on the moon, "but he seems not to be aware of the original policy behind the Cold War," Vidal writes. "It was John Foster Dulles' decision to engage the Soviet in an arms race, Dulles figured, reasonably enough, that the Soviet economy could not endure this sort of competition."

Edmund Wilson points out in his polemic that, at 68 years old, he will never be able to pay the government what he owes. Under his settlement agreement with the IRS, everything he makes over a certain amount automatically goes toward settling the debt. So, Vidal says, Wilson hopes to keep his income below the taxable level on principle. To Wilson's statement, Vidal says, "I have finally come to feel that this country, whether or not I live in it, is no longer any place for me." He says losing the most distinguished man of letters of the age "is a stunning indictment of us all," and says he hopes it has the same rallying effect of Tom Paine's revolutionary pamphlets.

"President Kennedy" (1961)

"President Kennedy" (1961) Summary and Analysis

President John Kennedy changed not only the political dialogue, but brought people under 50 years of age into the conversation who previously had been excluded, Vidal says. His appeal to the press, young people, and intellectuals was as real as his snappy looks, although, according to Vidal, Kennedy "looks older than his photographs." "The outline is slender and youthful, but the face is heavily lined for his age. On the upper lip are those tiny vertical lines characteristic of a more advanced age. He is usually tanned from the sun, while his hair is what lady novelists call "chestnut," beginning to go gray," Vidal observes after a visit to the White House.

Kennedy and Vidal enjoyed a casual friendship, in which they exchanged books and saw each other occasionally. "Not only does he read them but he will comment on what he's read when I see him next," Vidal says. Kennedy's personality is "withdrawn, observant, icily objective in crisis, aware of the precise value of every card dealt him. Intellectually, he is dogged rather than brilliant...his relationships tend to be compartmentalized. There are cronies who have nothing to do with politics whom he sees for relaxation. There are advisers whom he sees politically but not socially."

One of President Kennedy's greatest achievements was to eliminate the idea that the presidency is some kind of honorary title "to be given a man whose career has been distinguished in some profession other than politics," or as a sort of retirement haven for achievers in their golden years, Vidal says. Kennedy handled the reins of power over staff and advisors by shifting them to various assignments and by safeguarding within himself the totality of information that would give the big picture on any issue or situation, according to Vidal. Kennedy's success will depend, Vidal predicted, upon his ability to rouse "the bored and cynical Western world, to fire the imagination of a generation never taught to think of "we" but only of "I."

"The Manchester Book" (1967)

"The Manchester Book" (1967) Summary and Analysis

Although William Manchester's *The Death of a President* suffers from mangled prose? the result of pressures from the Kennedy family to write their version of events?it is nevertheless a "compelling" story of the rise and death of our 35th president, according to Vidal. Having been stung by a professor hired to write a campaign biography of John Kennedy in 1960 because of its portrayal of Joe Kennedy's anti-Semitism and the candidate's wavering liberal loyalties, the Kennedys wanted to make sure this biography would present Camelot as the mythic realm the family wished.

Manchester's "starry-eyed" love for the Kennedys blazes on every page, while his portrayal of President Johnson is tepid because the Kennedys did not want to create a rift in the Democratic Party in 1967 that might prevent another Kennedy from ascending to the White House, Vidal says. It was no secret that "the Kennedys have always been particularly cruel about Johnson," but they did not want a strongly negative presentation of the Texan in Manchester's book. The public arm-wrestling of Jacqueline Kennedy with Manchester and various publishers caused an ugly scandal and also ensured best-seller status for the book. Mrs. Kennedy is both "undeserving of [the public's] love and equally undeserving of their dislike," Vidal writes.

The story of the Kennedys, their ambition and their rise and fall is "*the* story of our time [because] they are unique in our history, and the day they depart the public scene will be a sad one; for not only will we have lost a family as much our own as it is theirs, we shall have also lost one of the first shy hints since Christianity's decline that there may indeed be such a thing as fate."

"The Holy Family" (1967)

"The Holy Family" (1967) Summary and Analysis

By the second year of his administration, it was plain that John Kennedy was not going to accomplish much of anything other than a clever manipulation of appearances, Vidal says. Kennedy could have challenged Congress on pending legislation such as Medicare and civil rights bills, but he was afraid to rock the boat. In his second term, with a full majority behind him, he said he would work wonders but in reality his main interest would have been in "holding the franchise for his brother. The family, finally, was his only commitment and it colored all his deeds and judgment."

Kennedy's election fulfilled the ambition of his father who wanted to compensate for what he saw as social snubs against his family and held the country in thrall with John F. Kennedy's charm and intelligence. Despite the glamour and brilliance, however, "we did not move." Vidal observes that myth-making is essential to the future political ambitions of the Kennedy family, and deplores the fact that a spate of Kennedy books approach their subject in a religious, not political, tone. The deal by which Lyndon Johnson became vice-president has always been impenetrable. Former Kennedy press secretary Pierre Salinger, in his book *With Kennedy*, quotes JFK as saying, "'The whole story will never be known, and it's just as well that it won't be.'"

Salinger says "we could accept without complaint [JFK's] bristling temper, his cold sarcasm, and his demands for always higher standards of excellence because we knew he was driving himself harder than he was driving us—despite great and persistent physical pain and personal tragedy." Evelyn Lincoln, the late president's secretary, observes in her book *My 12 Years with John F. Kennedy* that the president was "'humble'" while demanding excellence.

Part of the Kennedy myth-making was the publication in *The New Yorker* of a profile of John Kennedy as war hero and captain of PT 109; Kennedy's own Pulitzer Prize-winning *Profiles in Courage*. Kennedy's swift political rise through Congress and Senate resulted from hard work and huge amounts of Kennedy money, Vidal says. "From the beginning, the holy family has tried to make itself appear to be what it thinks people want rather than what the realities of any situation might require," he says. Because Bobby Kennedy was thought to be ruthless, he must be photographed smiling with children, walking on the beach with his dog.

Vidal concludes that "in their unimaginative fierce way, the Kennedys continue to play successfully the game as they found it. They create illusions and call them facts, and between what they are said to be and what they are falls the shadow of all the useful words not spoken, of all the actual deeds not done."

"Barry Goldwater: a Chat" (1961)

"Barry Goldwater: a Chat" (1961) Summary and Analysis

Barry Goldwater, then-junior senator from Arizona ("a politically unimportant state"), is revealed as a shrewd, down-to-earth politician capable of growth and change in this interview with Vidal, originally published in *Life* magazine. Goldwater's success is "phenomenal" as a second-term senator with no significant legislation to his name, and by his own admission "he is not a profound thinker," according to Vidal. Goldwater was primarily a salesman in the family business, Goldwater's department store, before entering politics.

Goldwater tells Vidal he's not opposed to school integration but is opposed to federal interference with the rights of southern states to maintain segregation. This leads Vidal to retort by quoting a Tennessee politician that Goldwater has as much chance of getting the black vote as "a legless man in an ass-kicking contest." Goldwater favors breaking off diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union in favor of a confrontational approach, which makes even some of his conservative supporters nervous, Vidal reports.

Vidal says Goldwater is just the kind of man who could energize and embolden extremist groups, such as the John Birth Society, while also appealing to a majority because he already had attracted many extremists. He oversimplifies issues and "he is exactly the fort of charming man whom no one would suspect of Caesarism, least of all himself." Vidal says if an American dictator would arise, he would not be "a hysteric like Hitler," but rather "just plain folks, a regular guy, warm and sincere, and while he was amusing us on television storm troopers would gather in the streets."

In uncertain, uneasy times, a simplistic solution is often appealing to voters, and Goldwater, with his personal charm and lack of acquaintance with the world of ideas, is quite capable, Vidal says, of seizing power.

"The 29th Republican Convention" (1968)

"The 29th Republican Convention" (1968) Summary and Analysis

"Thanks to two murders within five years, Richard Nixon is again a presidential candidate," Vidal wryly observes. With a tone of weary foreboding, Vidal reports on the GOP convention in Miami; describes an absurdly late press conference with then-California Governor Ronald Reagan; the appearance of "the Chase Manhattan Bank made flesh" in the person of Nelson Rockefeller; and various celebrity talking heads. There is, however, little suspense and even less drama to the coronation of King Richard, Vidal says.

Nixon makes his deal with the late Sen. Strom Thurmond that his vice-presidential running mate would be someone pleasing to the South, and proceeds to pick Spiro Agnew of Maryland, "a lumbering man who looks like a cross between Lyndon Johnson and Juan Peron; his acceptance speech was thin and ungrammatical—not surprisingly, he favored law and order," Vidal writes. Even the conservatives are concerned, according to Vidal, that if Nixon should die in office, "a man with only one year's experience as a governor of a backward border state would become Emperor of the West."

Nixon, according to Vidal, was fully aware that the entire black vote plus the entire vote of whites under 25 is about one-fourth of the electorate. Since he had no chance of attracting either category, by choosing Agnew Nixon he signaled that he is "the candidate of that average 47-year-old voter who tends to dislike and fear the young and the black and the liberal; in fact, the more open Nixon is in his disdain of this one-fourth of a nation, the more pleasing he will seem to the remaining three-fourths who want a change, any change, from Johnson-Humphrey."

"Political Melodramas" (1973)

"Political Melodramas" (1973) Summary and Analysis

Irritated for the thousandth time by a television listing for his screenplay, *The Best Man*, which describes it as a "political melodrama," Vidal reflects in this essay on the many ways in which real world politics surpasses anything shown on stage or screen. For example, he recalls that in 1959 when he wrote the play the rivals for the presidential nomination of the Democratic Party were Adlai Stevenson, "who was being smeared as a homosexual," John F. Kennedy, "who was being smeared as an altogether too active heterosexual as well as the glad beneficiary of his wealthy father's ability to buy elections," and Lyndon Johnson, "who was known to take cash for any political services rendered."

When Vidal based the evil candidate in his play on Richard Nixon, who is smeared unjustly as a homosexual, he was attacked by a conservative columnist who claimed Vidal's characterization was "absurdly melodramatic" because no one could rise to the top of American politics if he were believed to be gay. Yet the same columnist, Vidal says, delighted in mentioning in print Adlai Stevenson's "lack of robustness." Vidal ticks off a litany of early American corruption: Alexander Hamilton "was almost certainly corrupt " during his years as Secretary of the Treasury; Hamilton and Benjamin Franklin were both British secret agents; and finally, Jefferson's commanding general of the American army, James Wilkinson, was "a Spanish agent."

In disgust with the current state of American politics, Vidal says he hopes for the early demise of the Nixon administration but also does not believe "the American system in its present state of decadence is worth preserving. The initial success of the United States was largely accidental. A rich almost empty continent was occupied and exploited by rapacious Europeans who made slaves of Africans and corpses of Indians in the process. Now the land is no longer rich enough to support the pretensions of the inhabitants."

"The Art and Arts of E. Howard Hunt" (1976)

"The Art and Arts of E. Howard Hunt" (1976) Summary and Analysis

There is a strange symmetry in the parallel lives, as well as names, of E. Howard Hunt and G. Gordon Liddy—cloak n' dagger Nixon dirty tricks guys who tried to live out some perverse James Bond-type fantasy that landed both in jail for their roles in the Watergate scandal. The latter got his macho kicks in biting off the heads of rats; the former in using multiple masks and guises as a government agent and as the author of a string of spy intrigue novels. In fact, Vidal says, it is Hunt's success in writing junk literature for the pulp readership market as well as his skill in writing phony diaries for about-to-be-discarded operatives that makes him interesting as a possible suspect in assassinations and attempted assassinations.

Vidal chronicles Hunt's literary and espionage careers, beginning with his dubious "Naval career" in World War II and his war novel, *East of Farewell*, published in 1943, which was followed by *Limit of Darkness*, in 1944. A key theme in H.H.'s work is "the enemy must be defeated once and for all so that man can live at peace with himself in a world where United Fruit and ITT know what's best not only for their stockholders but for their customers as well." Another novel published in 1946, *Stranger in Town*, describes the alienation of a World War II veteran returning home after the war. "The book failed," Vidal writes. "Too avant-garde. Too patriotic." At the same time, H.H. composes fake biographies for *Who's Who* to accompany his various *noms de plume*, including E. Howard Hunt, John Baxter ,Robert Dietrich and David St. John..

Bouncing between Europe, Latin America and the United States, H.H. was involved in the Bay of Pigs as a CIA employee, and "it is not impossible that his principal motive in getting into the cloak-and-dagger game was to keep the best company," Vidal says. "The hick from western New York who had gone not to Harvard but to Brown, who had not fought in the Second War but worked behind the lines, who had failed as a serious novelist found for himself in the CIA a marvelous sort of club where he could rub shoulders with those nobles whose *savoir-faire* enthralled him. After all, social climbing is one of the most exciting games our classless society has to offer."

In *Give Us This Day*, which Vidal characterizes as H.H.'s apology for his part in the Bay of Pigs, Hunt calls Lee Harvey Oswald, President Kennedy's assassin, "a partisan of Fidel Castro, and an admitted Marxist who made desperate efforts to join the Red Revolution in Havana." Vidal says, "This is what H.H. and a good many like-minded people want us to believe. But is it true. Or special pleading? Or a cover story? A pattern emerges." The man who was so adept at creating fictional characters in his spy thriller novels under a variety of masks may have revealed something very telling in *Give Us This Day* when he writes that he tried unsuccessfully to persuade the CIA to kill Castro

before the Bay of Pigs. In fact, according to columnist Jack Anderson, an attempt to kill Castro was made a month before the American invasion, and "it is known that Castro did become ill in March," Vidal says. "In February-March 1963, the CIA again tried to kill Castro."

Vidal explicates at length on the "diary" found in the effects of Arthur H. Bremer, who shot George Wallace, governor of Alabama, in an assassination attempt in 1972. It was known that Nixon worried that Wallace might seize the Republican presidential nomination. Vidal finds it strange that Lee Harvey Oswald, Sirhan Sirhan (the assassin of Robert Kennedy) and Bremer—none of whom had any interest in literature—would all keep diaries implicating them in their crimes and "explaining" why they wanted to kill their targets. He also notes that "a major growth industry" within the CIA involves the creation of phony documents and disinformation. Mere coincidences? "I suspect we may find out one of these days," Vidal speculates.

"An American Press Lord" (1970)

"An American Press Lord" (1970) Summary and Analysis

Just when it appears that The Trickster had lost his chops, Richard Nixon reasserts his preeminence as Clown Lord of American politics by naming Walter Annenberg ambassador to England, Vidal chuckles in this essay. Rich, powerful, and a huge contributor to the Nixon campaign, Annenberg is noted primarily as publisher of "a couple of bad newspapers in Philadelphia, all in all a perfectly unqualified appointee on the order of the late Joe Kennedy." When Annenberg presents himself at the queen's court and the laughs began.

At the palace, Annenberg forgets to remove a funny hat and royal footmen force the hat off his head. Then he is instructed how to approach the throne, left foot first. Starting with his right foot, he marches toward the monarch. "With that graciousness for which she is insufficiently paid," Vidal sneers, "Britannic Majesty asks is he is living at the embassy. Little does she know she is playing straight to a Nixon joke." Annenberg, like many Americans who inherit money and evade school, is less than eloquent and sputters: "We're in the embassy residence, subject, of course, to some of the discomfiture as a result of a need for, uh, elements of refurbishing and rehabilitation."

"Then a perfectly timed reaction shot of the queen looking as if a cigar has just exploded in her face," Vidal roars. "Back in Washington, Dick must have been on the floor as he watched her try to maneuver her way out of *that* one." The rise of Walter Annenberg is chronicled in *Annenberg: A Biography of Power*, by Gaeton Fonzi, which Vidal dissects in this essay. Walter's father, Mo, was sent to prison for income tax evasion but left his son controlling interest in Triangle Publications, which owned the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and *Daily News*. Annenberg sold these newspapers but kept ownership of *TV Guide*, which had the largest weekly circulation of any periodical in the world.

Vidal informs the reader that Walter Annenberg "dropped out of school as soon as he could" and craved his father's approval, as well as that of "the WASP establishment, which not only looks down on him, his profession, his religion, his manner, but also locked up his father." Desperate for acceptance, Annenberg gives money to charities, purchases art works and puts his money "on that onyx-hued horse Richard Nixon," which resulted in his ambassadorship. Like Nixon, Annenberg has his own "shit list," Vidal reveals, and uses his publications to punish those he doesn't like: Imogene Coca, Zsa Zsa Gabor and Dinah Shore.

Although Fonzi's book is praiseworthy for showing press corruption under "an ambitious, ignorant, and malicious owner" such as Annenberg, the truth is that "the media in America exist only to serve the financial interests of their owners," according to Vidal. "That is the way things are and have always been. There is nothing to be done

about Walter except defeat the jokester who appointed him and boycott ass Triangle publications. The first is possible; the second...so what?"

"H. Hughes" (1972)

"H. Hughes" (1972) Summary and Analysis

"Is Howard R. Hughes the most boring American?" asks Vidal, rhetorically. The answer, after admitting there is lots of competition in the field (more than 200 million), is Vidal's belief "that the more money an American accumulates the less interesting he himself becomes." However, Hughes creates his own unique chloroform with high droning voice, catatonic manner, absence of any humor, preoccupation with machinery and beautiful women "to no vivid end," and the bizzare eating habits.

Probably the best thing about Hughes is his withdrawal from the world, where "even in the shadows of his cloistered motels, the inept tycoon insists on pulling strings, making a mess of TWA, a disaster of RKO, a shambles of vice in Las Vegas, all while creating the largest unworkable plywood plane in the world at a cost to taxpayers of $22 million," Vidal writes. According to an account published by two Hughes assistants, Howard was never really interested in money, movies, airplanes or women. "A simple, uneducated man, interested in machinery, he never liked anyone very much—man or woman," Vidal deduces.

Skilled at getting government contracts by corrupting generals, there were times in the post-war period when "Hughes was not always himself," according to Noah Dietrich, one of the authors of the Hughes memoir. He recalls a telephone conversation "in which his employer repeated the same sentence 33 times," Vidal says. "When this dysfunction was drawn to his attention, Hughes allowed that his doctor was also concerned and promptly vanished for six months, to return in 1947 ready for his finest hour." When he returned, Hughes began a lengthy period of making political bribes for business favors, including a $12,500 cash payment to President Truman, according to Vidal.

Political corruption has been a part of America since its beginning and is not going away, but rather getting more concentrated in the "small group of legislators and bankers, generals and industrialists who own and govern the United States, Inc." Vidal predicts that, as people become more aware of the "moral nullity at the center of American life," instead of revolutionary zeal for reform it is more likely that a "deep contempt" for the nation and its institutions will develop.

"Richard Nixon: Not *The Best Man*'s Best Man" (1983)

"Richard Nixon: Not The Best Man's Best Man" (1983) Summary and Analysis

Was Richard Nixon "the only great president of the last half of the 20th Century?" In this essay, Vidal argues that Nixon deserves that status because of his successful policy of dytente, or creating a balance of power between the United States, China and the Soviet Union that prevented nuclear war.

"Nixon [was] the first president who acted upon the not-exactly-arcane notion that the United States is just one country among many countries and that communism is an economic and political system without much to recommend it," Vidal writes. "Simultaneously Nixon realized that coexistence with the Soviet Union is the only game that we can safely play. Nixon also saw the value of exploiting the rift between Russia and China."

Vidal calls Nixon "the most nearly autonomous of all my literary creations," referring to *An Evening with Richard Nixon* as well as *The Best Man*, whose lead character is based on Nixon. Vidal says Nixon was hardly unique in being "corrupt some of the time, and complex and devious all of the time." He says Nixon couldn't hold a candle in mendacity and corruption to his predecessor, Lyndon Johnson. Whereas John Kennedy thought war was fun, Nixon didn't but tried to act the "locker-room-macho" warrior, although evidently it was former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger ("a curious little man") who was tougher in prosecuting the Vietnam War.

All Americans are in Nixon's debt, according to Vidal, for seizing an opportunity in the Cold War "to make sense of close to one third of a century of dangerous nonsense." History will note Nixon's achievement, and "since we are all of Nixon and he is us, the fact that he went to Peking and Moscow in order to demonstrate to all the world the absolute necessity of coexistence proves that there is not only good in him but in us as well—hope, too."

"Homage to Daniel Shays" (1972)

"Homage to Daniel Shays" (1972) Summary and Analysis

At the conclusion of the Revolutionary War, a group of veterans in Massachusetts joined Capt. Daniel Shays in rebellion against the formation of a central government with the power to levy taxes. Hadn't they just fought London to achieve freedom and independence? The rebellion was promptly put down, but it marked the first evidence that America really has two parties—the Property Party (now the Democratic and Republican parties)—and the largely powerless common man, according to Vidal.

This analysis of power in America is essentially confirmed by publication of *Fat Cats and Democrats: the Role of the Big Rich in the Party of the Common Man* by G. William Domhoff, where the reader learns, according to Vidal that, "the country is governed by a small elite which knows pretty much what it is up to and coordinates its various moves in foreign affairs and the economy." Domhoff, a professor at the University of California, Santa Cruz, and former newspaper reporter, examines federal and private committees and advisory councils and the men who serve on those boards—the schools they attended, the banks they work for, and their political contributions. He then records the overlapping, or "linkage," Vidal writes.

The result: in 1968, for example, 51 of 285 trustees and honorary trustees of the Committee for Economic Development were also members of the Council on Foreign Relations, while 126 were members of the National Council of the Foreign Policy Association. Domhoff's analysis: "Policy formation is the province of a bipartisan power elite of corporate rich [Rockefeller, Mellon] and their career hirelings [Nixon, McNamara] who work through an interlocking and overlapping maze of foundations, universities and institutes, discussion groups, associations and commissions. Political parties are only for finding interesting and genial people to ratify and implement these policies in such a way that the under classes feel themselves to be, somehow, a part of the governmental process."

Vidal accepts Domhoff's thesis, but sees some hope because "the early response to [former Senator and presidential candidate George] McGovern is the first indication we have had that there now exists a potential American majority willing to see its best interests served not through the restrictive Constitution of the elite but through the egalitarian vision of Daniel Shays and his road not taken—yet."

"The State of the Union: 1975" (1975)

"The State of the Union: 1975" (1975) Summary and Analysis

As an itinerant author, social commentator and sometime politician, Vidal condenses and extracts his speaking notes for this essay originally published in *Esquire*. The piece is a wide-ranging commentary on American life, or a "state of the union" address from a non-office holder. There is only one political party in the United States—the Property Party. Eighty percent of police work in America is concerned with the regulation of private morals: legalizing gambling, selling all drugs at cost to anyone with a doctor's prescription, etc. More than one-third of the federal budget is spent on "open and secret wars." Cut the defense budget and eliminate the service academies.

Vidal says the first and second world wars destroyed the old European empires and created the American, so peace reigned for five years after the war, as America was the only country with the atomic bomb. However, as President Eisenhower predicted, a "vast military-industrial complex" emerged on the premise that it was needed to protect us from communism. "Actually," Vidal says, "it was to continue pumping federal money into companies like Boeing and Lockheed and keep the Pentagon full of generals and admirals while filling the pork barrels of congressmen who annually gave the Pentagon whatever it asked for, with the proviso that key military installations and contracts be allocated to the home districts of senior congressmen."

So, instead of using the vast wealth of the nation to improve the lives of citizens, the United States has poured its resources into maintaining a garrison state and prosecuting illegal wars, openly as in Vietnam and Cambodia, and secretly as in Greece and Chile, according to Vidal. "Wherever there is a choice between a military dictatorship like Pakistan and a free government like India we support the dictator, and then wonder why we are everywhere denounced as hypocrites." Vidal agrees with those who say our rulers are perfectly corrupt, but he adds that they are also very good at exercising power over those whom they have called "consumers," who may not be as stupid as the politicians think. When people know the truth, they are angry but "the consumers still have no idea who the enemy is, no idea who really is tearing the place apart.

"No one has dared tell them that the mysterious *they* are the rich who keep the consumers in their places, consuming things that are not good for them, and doing jobs they detest," Vidal writes. "True revolution can only take place when things fall apart in the wake of some catastrophe—a lost war, a collapsed economy. We seem headed for the second. If so, then let us pray that that somber, all-confining Bastille known as the consumer society will fall, as the *first* American Revolution begins. It is long overdue."

"The State of the Union: 1980" (1980)

"The State of the Union: 1980" (1980) Summary and Analysis

As a follow-up to his earlier essay on the state of the union published in *Esquire* in 1975, Vidal offers this piece to clarify and expand on some of his earlier ideas. Everyone in the United States—politicians, corporations, generals—works for "the Bank" or the owners of the country, "the gilded 4.4 percent who own most of the United States and owns 27 percent of the country's real estate, 60 percent of all corporate stock." Indeed, Vidal calls the Bank "the Cosa Nostra of the 4.4 percent. The United States government is the Cosa Nostra of the Bank."

Vidal says there have been three republics in America, but a fourth is needed for the union to survive. The first republic ("a loose confederation of 13 autonomous states") began with the Revolution in 1776 and ended with the adoption of the Constitution in 1788. The second republic began in 1881 when Lincoln "took the mystical position that no state could ever leave the union," according to Vidal. The third republic began in 1865 when the Civil War ended. "This republic was rich, belligerent, hungry for empire. This republic's master was the Bank. This republic became, in 1945, the world's master."

Vidal's assessment of the current state of affairs is sharp: "The fact that half of those qualified to vote don't vote in presidential elections is proof that the third republic is neither credible nor truly legitimate." Vidal says the time has come to hold another constitutional convention, and to divide the U.S. into autonomous regions, such as Northern California, Oregon and Washington State. The fourth republic should also abandon the presidential system for a parliamentary one. Also, in the fourth republic, churches should be taxed because of their extensive political activities.

Financial support for the fourth republic would come from abolition of secret agencies, which would save some $20 billion per year; reduction of the defense budget would save at least $50 billion; and "untold billions more by taxing religions" instead of the beleaguered individual taxpayer." When the Bank becomes the chief financial support of "a government grown gross and tyrannous," the Bank will enter into receivership so that citizens can create "the fourth, the good, the democratic republic."

"The Real Two-Party System" (1980)

"The Real Two-Party System" (1980) Summary and Analysis

Vidal claims in this brief essay there are only two American political parties: those who vote in presidential elections and those who do not vote. Vidal says he is a member of the latter and urges his readers to join him in order to force a new constitutional convention under Article Five of the Constitution, where "we can devise new political arrangements suitable for a people who have never, in 193 years, been truly represented."

Presidential elections, according to Vidal, are like the Grammy Awards "where an industry of real interest to very few people honors itself fulsomely on prime-time television." Forty-eight percent of the party that votes is made up of blue-collar or service workers, while the rest are white, middle-class and 21 years old or older. Seventy-five percent of the party that does not vote, Vidal says, is comprised of blue-collar or service workers in combination with most of the 18-to-20 year olds.

If the United States weren't in such deep trouble, it would be OK to treat the presidential elections like the Grammy Awards; but, as Vidal points out, America is a nation whose per-capita income has dropped to ninth in the world, whose discretionary income has declined, whose industrial plant has the lowest productivity growth rate in the world, whose economy is teetering on the verge of collapse and whose federal budget is bloated with "defense" spending as the national debt increases.

Vidal's solution? "I would suggest that those of you who are accustomed to vote join us in the most highly charged political act of all: not voting."

"The Second American Revolution" (1981)

"The Second American Revolution" (1981) Summary and Analysis

As provided for in the Constitution and anticipated by our Framers, the people of the United States should call a constitutional convention and re-shape the government into a parliamentary democracy somewhat along the lines of the government in Switzerland, Vidal argues. In fact, the passage of the property tax slashing Prop. 13 in California could be taken as the date of the start for the second American Revolution. There are strong parallels between the taxpayer's revolt in California and the Boston Tea Party, which set in motion the eventual separation of the 13 colonies from the British crown, Vidal says. It's now time for the people to complete the business of creating a real democracy.

Framer James Madison, in *The Federalist Papers*, wrote that the House of Representatives would naturally grow in size as the population of the country increased, but stressed that this should not be taken for granted as assurance that the voice of the people would always be heard. In fact, Madison warned that although "the countenance of the government may become more democratic, the soul that animates it will be more oligarchic [because] the greater number composing [a legislative assembly], the fewer will be the men who will in fact direct their proceedings."

Vidal calls the Supreme Court "the wild card in the federal apparatus" because it has assumed more powers than are specifically accorded it in the Constitution. For example, the court has no explicit constitutional power to review acts of Congress, although it has found acts of Congress unconstitutional. Chief Justice John Marshall even ruled that the Bill of Rights bind only the federal government—not the states. "The result of Marshall's decision was more than a century of arbitrary harassment of individuals by sheriffs, local police, municipal and state governing bodies—to none of which the Bill of Rights was held to apply," Vidal writes. Vidal finds the fact that the Supreme Court did not seriously apply the Bill of Rights to states until the 1930s despite the 14th Amendment "startling." Sadly, Congress has made only two attempts to reclaim its constitutional primacy over the Supreme Court in the late 1800s.

Perhaps the most egregious distortion of the government the Framers created has been the steady expansion of power in the executive branch, Vidal says. It began when Lincoln used the presidential oath to "preserve, protect and defend" the Constitution, from which have stemmed the notion of executive power and privilege and the executive order, which a president can use to side step both Congress and the Supreme Court. Vidal concluded: "The Third Republic is now at an end. The president is a dictator who can only be replaced either in the quadrennial election by a clone or through his own incompetency, like Richard Nixon whose neurosis it was to shoot

himself publicly and repeatedly in, as they say, the foot. Had Nixon not been helicoptered out of the White House, the men in white would have taken him away."

In the new Fourth Republic, which will make possible civilization, Vidal suggests the form of the first three republics should be retained but the presidency should be severely limited in authority and stripped of the executive order and executive agreement. The House of Representatives should be more representative of the people, and whoever controls a majority "will be the actual chief of government, governing through a cabinet chosen from the House." Additionally, the Supreme Court should be made "entirely subservient" to the law of the land, made by the House of Representatives, and judicial review by the court must be ended.

"Ronnie and Nancy: A Life in Pictures" (1983)

"Ronnie and Nancy: A Life in Pictures" (1983) Summary and Analysis

The Republican Convention, 1964, Cow Palace in San Francisco. Blue-haired women with leathery faces shout "Lover!" at Nelson Rockefeller for his communism and "indecently uncloseted heterosexuality." Meanwhile, a group of "seriously overweight Sunbelt Goldwaterites" chase TV anchorman David Brinkley through the kitchens of the Mark Hopkins Hotel. Another day in American politics, as seen through the sideways glance of Vidal, who was on the scene as a political commentator for Westinghouse. The pinnacle of the coronation for Barry Goldwater as presidential candidate: former President Dwight Eisenhower rises to deliver a speech attacking the press and "those commie-weirdo-Jew-fags who did not believe in the real America of humming electric chairs, well-packed prisons, and kitchens filled with every electrical device that a small brown person of extranational provenance might successfully operate at a fraction of the minimum wage."

Biographical factoids: Nancy's mother was an actress from Washington, D.C., and her father was Ken Robbins, a Virginian who worked for the Adams Express Company "where, 31 years earlier, John Surratt had worked...one of the conspirators in the Abraham Lincoln murder case," Vidal notes. They were divorced and Nancy was sent to live with her aunt to attend the Sidwell Friends School in Washington, D.C. Edith married Loyal Davis, MD, "a brain surgeon of pronounced reactionary politics," who adopted Nancy and gave her his surname. Nancy attended Smith College and found an acting career in Hollywood after a "blind date" with a vice president of MGM. Then Leamer's book cuts to the career of Ronnie ("Dutch") Reagan. Vidal laments: "This story has been told so much that it now makes no sense at all."

Capsule version, a la Vidal: "Father drank (Irish Catholic). Mother stern (Protestant Scots-Irish); also, a fundamentalist Christian, a Disciple of Christ. Brother Neil is Catholic. Ronnie is Protestant. Sunday School teacher. Lifeguard. Eureka College. Drama department. Debating society. Lousy grades. Lousy football player but eager to be a successful jock (like Nixon and Ike *et al*). Imitates radio sportscasters. Incessantly. Told to stop. Gets on everyone's nerves. Has the last laugh. Gets job as...sportscaster. At 22. Midst of depression. Gets better job. Goes wet. Meets agent. Gets hired by Warner Brothers as actor. Becomes, in his own words, 'the Errol Flynn of the B's'." During World War II, Reagan answered Uncle Sam's call...to make training films in Culver City. Before he stepped down as president of the Screen Actors Guild in 1952, Vidal says, Reagan granted the Music Corporation of America (a talent agency prohibited by agreement with the unions from producing films) "blanket permission to produce films."

Within a few years, MCA was "a dominant force within show business," Vidal quotes from the Leamer book, and by 1954 the head of MCA told Reagan about a possible role introducing a new weekly television series, "The GE Theater," as a direct result of the favor done by Reagan to MCA while president of SAG. Reagan was GE's host and occasional actor, as well as the corporate voice for GE's conservative viewpoint. "Gradually," Vidal writes, "Reagan became more and more right wing. Then Reagan was asked to pinch-hit for Barry Goldwater at a Republican fund-raiser at the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles, which launched his own presidential aspirations.

Vidal concludes his essay with another quote from the Leamer book, which he characterizes as "the true Reagan problem, which is now a world problem":

"What was so extraordinary was Ronnie's apparent psychic distance from the burden of the presidency. He sat in cabinet meetings doodling. Unless held to a rigid agenda, he would start telling Hollywood stories or talk about football in Dixon. Often in one-on-one conversations Ronnie seemed disconnected or withdrawn. 'If people knew about him living in his own reality, they wouldn't believe it,' said one White House aide. 'There are only 10 to 15 people who know the extent, and until they leave and begin talking, no one will believe it.'"

"Armageddon?" (1987)

"Armageddon?" (1987) Summary and Analysis

Vidal penetrates to the core of the mysterious Reagan indifference to things temporal in this essay, and points to a similar attitude in the administration of George Bush: a belief that Armageddon, the final contest between "the evil one" (Satan) and the true believers followed by the rapturous transport of the chosen to heaven are imminent. According to Vidal, Ronnie was having premonitions of this ultimate conflict even when he was governor of California, complete with the hellfire and brimstone foretold in the Book of Ezekial. "That is why Reagan's economic and foreign policies have never made the slightest sense to anyone who knows anything about either. On the other hand, there is evidence that, unlike his wealthy sponsors, he has a sense of mission that, like Jesus', is not of this world," Vidal writes.

Antecedents of this fundamentalist view of events include the Scofield Reference Bible, which was produced by Clyde Ingerson Scofield based on the teachings of an Anglo-Irish priest named John Nelson Darby, who claimed that Israel is "God's kingdom here on earth and the church (Christianity) is God's heavenly kingdom," Vidal writes. In the Scofield gospel, Christ will defeat the Antichrist at Armageddon (55 miles north of Tel Aviv), but before the battle the righteous will be lifted to heaven in "the Rapture" while the wicked will suffer horribly. Then God returns along with the Raptured Ones. This story is preached daily by such "American television divines" as Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, Jimmy Swaggart, Jim Bakker and others, according to Vidal. He cites a public opinion poll that indicated 39 percent of Americans (including Ronald Reagan) "believe in the death of earth by nuclear fire and rapture."

Items:

In 1970, an evangelical Christian named George Otis and a few friends visited Reagan when he was California governor. "They spoke rapturously of Rapture, all joined hands in prayer and Otis prophesied Reagan's coming election to the presidency."

In 1971, Governor Reagan asked Billy Graham to address the California legislature, and afterwards at lunch Reagan asked Graham if he thought Jesus Christ was coming soon, to which Graham responded: "Jesus Christ is at the very door."

Later in 1971, Reagan attended a dinner and sat next to California State Senate President James Mills and told him that since Libya had gone communist, just as foretold by the prophet Ezekial, it was a sign that "the day of Armageddon isn't far-off." Reagan said communists had to take over Ethiopia and oppose Israel for the prophecy to be fulfilled. Mills said he didn't think that likely; Reagan thought it inevitable. Three years later, Reagan was proved right when Ethiopia "went communist, or something very like it," according to Vidal.

Vidal recounts an exchange with Norman Mailer after listening to a speech by former Soviet Union President Gorbachev, when he told Mailer "there ought to be a constitutional amendment making it impossible for anyone to be president who believes in an afterlife." Mailer wondered if there isn't an afterlife, "then what's the point to all this?" but knew that Vidal would answer, "there is no point." Vidal adds his final confirming postscript: "Yes, that is what I would have said, and because there is no cosmic point to the life that each of us perceives on this distant bit of dust at galaxy's edge, all the more reason for us to maintain in proper balance what we have here. Because there is nothing else. No thing. This is it. And quite enough, all in all."

"The Day the American Empire Ran Out of Gas" (1986)

"The Day the American Empire Ran Out of Gas" (1986) Summary and Analysis

In this essay written before the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Vidal calls upon the United States and the USSR to "make common cause" and present a unified front against the emergence of "the Sino-Japanese axis that will dominate the future just as Japan dominates world trade today." The combination of the Soviet landmass with its natural resources and America with its technological know-how would not only benefit both societies, but the world, Vidal asserts.

The 71-year-old American Empire ended Sept. 16, 1985 when the Commerce Department declared that the United States had become a debtor nation because the U.S. empire rested on economic, not military, foundations, Vidal writes. The world money center shifted from London to New York in 1914 when the U.S. was an emerging nation and became a creditor rather than debtor nation. Before that, the world money center had shifted from Paris to London after the French Revolution.

After World War II, the power elite in the United States invented the Cold War to fuel the military-industrial complex, aided and abetted by fear-mongering politicians, Vidal says. In addition, the U.S. was put on a permanent wartime economy, which is why close to two-thirds of the government's revenues are constantly being siphoned off to pay for what is euphemistically called defense. Even as the power elite continues to get richer from this arrangement, the U.S. has slipped to 11th in world per capita income and 46th in literacy rates. "Now the long-feared Asiatic colossus takes its turn as world leader, and we—the white race—have become the yellow man's burden," Vidal quips.

American imperialism began from the outset of the republic with the massacre of the indigenous populations and the importation of black slaves. It continued with the seizure of what is now Texas and California, as well as southwestern states, from Mexico. Frustrated in our efforts to take over Canada, we continued expansion of our empire in the Caribbean and in the Pacific, fighting wars in Cuba and the Philippines under the leadership of Theodore Roosevelt who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in what Vidal calls an example of "Scandinavian wit."

The cost to the United States of maintaining an arms race with the Soviet Union, however, is just too great—in dollars and in social deterioration—to continue and must be halted by joining forces with the Russians, Vidal says in this essay which is, to use one of his favorite words, "prescient" of the collapse of the Soviet Union and small, feeble first efforts to establish friendly relations with the Russians.

"A Cheerful Response" (1986)

"A Cheerful Response" (1986) Summary and Analysis

After being attacked by two right wing columnists and pro-Israel advocates for his view that the U.S. and Soviet Union must unite to confront the coming Sino-Japanese world, Vidal concludes that America should withdraw all foreign aid to not only Israel but Arab states in the Middle East as well. His attackers are Norman ("Poddy") Podhoretz and his wife, Midge Decter, "that wonderful, wacky couple, the Lunts of the right wing." Vidal notes that "Poddy" denounced both him and Normal Mailer in *The New York Post* for belonging "to that mindless majority of pinko intellectuals who actually think that the nation spends too much on the Pentagon and not enough on, say, education."

Then Midge enters the fray with another attack on Vidal in *Contentions*. Like her husband, she prefers the *ad hominem* attack, Vidal says, calling them both "Israeli fifth columnists." Decter was "amazed" at Vidal's description of how the United States seized territories from Mexico and annexed Hawaii, Puerto Rico and the Philippines "where we slaughtered between 100,000 and 200,000 of the inhabitants...We stole other people's land. We murdered many of the inhabitants. We imposed our religion—and rule—on the survivors. General Grant was ashamed of what we did to Mexico, and so am I. Mark Twain was ashamed of what we did in the Philippines, and so am I."

"Midge [Decter] is not [ashamed] because in the Middle East another predatory people is busy stealing other people's land in the name of an alien theocracy. She is a propagandist for those predators (paid for?) and that is what all this nonsense is about," Vidal concludes.

"The National Security State" (1988)

"The National Security State" (1988) Summary and Analysis

Vidal offers five proposals to end the "National Security State" that began when the United States decided (with virtually no public awareness) to go on a permanent wartime economy and confront the "Red Menace" that was used as a bogeyman by President Truman after World War II. The tenets of this state were defined in the National Security Act of 1947: never negotiate with the Russians, develop the hydrogen bomb, rapidly build up conventional forces, enact a large tax increase to finance the garrison, mobilize the entire American society to fight communism, set up a strong alliance system directed by the United States (NATO), and make the people of Russia our allies.

Vidal dates the coup d'etat that brought about the national security state as January 1950, when Americans sacrificed control of their economy and civil liberties to a government that benefited "the economic interest of what is never, to put it tactfully, a very large group." With the United States facing a huge indebtedness to Japan, Vidal opines the nation to:

Limit presidential election campaigns to eight weeks and allow no paid political ads.

Drastically reduce "defense" spending to balance the budget.

Withdraw from NATO and stop all military aid to the Middle East.

Repeal every prohibition against the sale and use of drugs, thus eliminating the black market.

Join forces with the Soviet Union for mutual economic benefit.

"I see our economic survival inextricably bound up with that of our neighbor in the Northern Hemisphere, the Soviet Union," Vidal writes. "Some sort of alliance must be made between us so that together we will be able to compete with Japan and, in due course, China."

"Cue the Green God, Ted" (1989)

"Cue the Green God, Ted" (1989) Summary and Analysis

With television as a mass anesthetic to indoctrinate citizens into the corporate and military-industrial complex agenda, the question in America isn't whether dissent is stifled as whether Americans know enough in the first place to form a dissenting opinion. One indication of the dumbing down of Americans—with a parallel decrease in public debate over substantive issues—is the fact that, according to Vidal, "every war that we have fought since 1945 has been by executive (or National Security Council) order," and thus illegal since the Constitution grants only Congress the authority to declare war.

Vidal bemoans the fact that foreigners find it difficult to talk about much of anything to Americans "because we appear to know so little about much of anything." History is a mystery, geography is no longer taught in most public schools, foreign languages remain, well, foreign. Another indication of American decline can be found in the abject stupidity of the Sunday "press interview" shows on which "the opinion ranges from conservative to reactionary to joyous neofascist." Another sign of the disappearance of the American mind is the fact the average household keeps the TV on seven hours per day. "This means the average American has watched 350,000 commercials by age 17," Vidal sadly notes.

The invention of the television talk show was, at first, a promising development that was soon choked with commercials and monochromatic personalities with predictable opinions. Vidal, however, says "if you want to know what the ownership of the country wants you to know, tune into *Nightline* and listen to Ted Koppel and his guests." Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting ("a noble, doomed enterprise") studied who appeared on Koppel's show in a 40-month period from 1985 to 1988. "White male Establishment types predominated," Vidal writes, including Henry Kissinger, Alexander Haig Elliott Ambrams, and Jerry Falwell, "a certified voice of God whose dolorous appearance suggests a deep, almost personal grief that the 13th and 14th Amendments to the Constitution are not yet repealed."

The fact that 50 percent of Americans don't even bother to vote in presidential elections may be a good sign because "when a majority boycotts a political system its days are numbered," Vidal says. "The many are now ready for a change. The few are demoralised. Fortunately, the Messiah is at hand: the Green God. Everyone on earth now worships him. Soon there will be a worldwide Green movement, and the establishment of a worldwide state, which the few will take over, thus enslaving us all while forgetting to save the planet. That is the worst-case scenario. The best? Let the many create a *new* few."

"Gods & Greens" (1989)

"Gods & Greens" (1989) Summary and Analysis

Vidal has some words of advice for the Greens of the world: hang in there. In this essay, he demonstrates his sympathies with the pro-environment, pro-peace groups and advises them to "not allow our totalitarian-minded governors in the west to co-opt your movement. Start with the many. Let them convert the few. Meanwhile the clock is ticking. The new millennium is at hand."

After two millennia of recorded history, humans are once again in an apocalyptic state of mind, according to Vidal. There are 5 billion people on a planet that can sustain only about 1 billion comfortably, so the problem is which 4 billion are too many? Even if the billions of people that represent overpopulation were somehow to vanish, there is still the challenge of the earth with its pollution, our fouled air and water. As the destruction of the environment continues, Americans seek scapegoats. Desperate attempts are underway to "re-demonise" the Japanese, Vidal says.

"Think of earth as a living organism that is being attacked by billions of bacteria whose numbers double every 40 years," Vidal writes. "Either the host dies, or the bacteria die, or both die. That seems to be what we are faced with." Since we live not in liberal democracies but "quasi-totalitarian patriarchies," change will not be easy because "those who profit by destroying rivers and forests are not going to do much of anything until something vividly goes wrong. Now the climate is changing—vividly. The next battle-plan will be an attempt to coordinate all efforts in order to reverse the greenhouse effect. This will mean demonising some of our governors."

Vidal challenges opinion-shapers to address themselves to finding a new way of looking at life, and that a new religious sense be awakened that is a radical departure from the "truly terrible religions" under which mankind has suffered for two millennia. It's time for westerners to embrace more subtle religious and ethical systems, such as Buddhism, Vidal says. "For the Buddha, we are not here except to be gone from here. For Confucius, harmony within the state is all."

"Patriotism" (1991)

"Patriotism" (1991) Summary and Analysis

What does the politically incorrect term *patriotism* mean in today's America with its various warring tribes and a lack of consensus even on what it means to be an American? Vidal asks the question in this short but pointed essay. First of all, the term patriotism derives from the Latin word *pater, meaning* father; so where is the respect for mother, or, in Latin, *mater*? Vidal recalls a recent family reunion where he visited with fifth cousin Jimmy Carter and cousin Al Gore, former senator and vice president. Feeling instantly at home, Vidal reflects that tribe has become more important than nation.

In the absence of an agreed-upon national compact, America's many tribes and groups are "unfurling their standards and casting ever wider the webs of kinship for mutual support and defense against the state that no one loves," Vidal writes. If the vice president and secretary of defense chose not to fight for their country in Vietnam, why should anyone else feel obligated to fight for their country, Vidal asks rhetorically. "Suddenly, all our turkeys are coming home to roost; and the skies are dark with their unlovely wings while the noise of their gobbling makes hideous Sunday television."

"Monotheism and Its Discontents" (1992)

"Monotheism and Its Discontents" (1992) Summary and Analysis

Monotheism, or worship of what Vidal calls "the sky-gods," is at the corrosive heart of many of our world's evils. Worship of the sky-gods has produced endless wars, discrimination against blacks and women, despoilation of the environment, and totalitarianism. Vidal's judgment: "The great unmentionable evil at the center of our culture is monotheism. From a barbaric Bronze Age text known as the Old Testament, three antihuman religions have evolved—Judaism, Christianity and Islam. These are sky-god religions. They are, literally, patriarchal—God is the omnipotent father—hence the loathing of women for 2,000 years in those countries afflicted by the sky-god and his earthly male delegates."

Vidal notes that African slaves brought to the United States were allowed to organize "heavenly sky-god churches" as a surrogate for earthly freedom, while the migration of Roman Catholics into American provided a conduit for establishment of that church. Despite the First Amendment to the Constitution, which makes it explicit that this is not to be a sky-god nation with a national church like that of England, Christian evangelists have forced their superstitions and hatreds upon everyone through civil laws and general prohibitions, according to Vidal.

As the planet shows frightening signs of disturbance—climate change, poisoned earth and water—sky-godders are serene because "the planet is just a staging area for heaven," Vidal says, and asks, "Why bother to clean it up?" The monotheists won't allow anyone to ignore them because "they have a divine mission to take away our rights as private citizens." Despite hundreds of years of exhortations to Americans to, Oh Lord, come together and unite, Vidal suggests that everyone separate to see where they stand and *confront* the sky-godders. Jefferson's tree of liberty, needing refreshment with the blood of tyrants and patriots, "is all that we have ever really had," Vidal points out, with the hope that by facing the reality of what we are we can achieve a nation not under God but under our common humanity.

"At Home in Washington, D.C." (1982)

"At Home in Washington, D.C." (1982) Summary and Analysis

Vidal recalls his boyhood in the nation's capitol and reflects on its growth from a small town to an overwhelming empire. Vidal observes that "empires are dangerous possessions, as Pericles was among the first to point out. Since I recall pre-imperial Washington, I am a bit of an old Republican in the Ciceronian mode, given to decrying the corruption of the simpler, saner city of my youth."

For example, Vidal recalls when his blind grandfather, Senator T. P. Gore from Oklahoma, took him to a slum area of the city and told him that the land had originally belonged to the Gore family. Unable to visualize the land beneath the crumbling red brick buildings, Vidal says he was "not impressed;" but the Gores were an Anglo-Irish family originally from Donegal who intermarries with other Anglo-Irish families in Virginia and Maryland.

Although George Washington saw to it that the nation's capitol was built close to his Northern Virginia home—and named after him as well—the founding father did not have to give up any of his land bought as speculation in what was to become Washington, D.C., according to Vidal. Additionally, John F. Kennedy found the city a perfect combination of "southern efficiency with northern charm." The birth of empire came in the 1930s with the advent of air-conditioning, Vidal says, and great concrete and glass structures were built everywhere.

"On Flying" (1985)

"On Flying" (1985) Summary and Analysis

Did Amelia Earhart carefully plan her disappearance to a South Pacific island during her much-publicized trip around the globe? Vidal recalls a conversation between his father, Gene Vidal, the first aeronautics instructor at West Point, and Amelia Earhart during which the aviatrix drilled him with questions about how one could live on a remote island and how one could get fresh water and food. Vidal's father's belief was that Earhart had found an island, hit her drunken navigator over the head with a bottle, and landed. For years, scattered reports of a white woman on a Pacific island continued.

Four years before Earhart's last flight, she and Gene Vidal established what later became Northeast Airlines. Gene Vidal remained a director to the end of his life while still harboring a wish that he could mass-produce personal airplanes. Toward the end of his life, Gene Vidal "found modern civil aviation deeply boring [and] the gospel of flight that he and Lindbergh and Earhart preached was by then a blurred footnote to the space age."

Vidal recalls when, at the age of four, he flew in the first commercially scheduled airliner across the United States from New York to Los Angeles in 48 hours, with Charles Lindbergh at the controls and Amelia Earhart as fellow passenger. Although it took five years for the press to figure out exactly what the Wright brothers had accomplished at Kitty Hawk, it was not until Orville Wright flew a plane before a crowd of 5,000 just outside Washington "that the world realized that man had indeed kicked gravity and that the sky was only the beginning of the known limit."

Vidal reflects that while it is astonishing to marvel at the rings of Saturn as humans continue the exploration of space, "we have lost the human element; not to mention the high hope of those quaint days when flight would create 'one world.'"

"West Point" (1973)

"West Point" (1973) Summary and Analysis

Despite his familial and emotional ties to West Point, Vidal argues in this essay that "the first order of business in the United States is the dismantling of the military machine; the military budget must be cut by two-thirds and the service academies phased out." Vidal, son of the first aeronautics instructor at West Point, was born at the military academy and recalls fondly the silver baby cup given to him by generals at West Point who were friends of his father and notes that he finds their loyalty to each other "poignant—yes, even honorable."

The problem with West Point, however, is that it is an elitist institution that produces arrogant, narcissistic officers more interested in their own survival than in serving the country. Indeed, the academy's motto is Duty, Honor, Country, and all too often West Pointers literally placed the interests of their country last—just as is the order of the motto, Vidal says. The institution has produced leaders for a military establishment that has historically served the moneyed interests of a few with imperialist aims, according to Vidal.

In 1830, Congressman Davy Crockett introduced a bill to shut down the academy while in 1863 another bill introduced into the House also proposed abolition. In support of the latter bill, Senator B.F. Wade of Ohio said he knew of no other institution "that has turned out as many false, ungrateful men as have emanated from this institution," Vidal informs the reader. Not only has West Point produced an elite, ungrateful class of officers, but the Corps of Engineers—whose members come from West Point—initially supplied manpower to perform projects for business tycoons and came close to being used as a force to depose President Franklin Roosevelt at the behest of conservatives.

After the debacle of the Vietnam War, directed by West Pointers, it has become obvious that "the West Point elite have not served us well even though they have never disguised the fact that we are number three on their list of priorities," Vidal writes.

"The Oz Books" (1977)

"The Oz Books" (1977) Summary and Analysis

The richly imaginative works of L. Frank Baum and his Oz books are what hooked Vidal on reading and fueled an imagination that has made him both writer and iconoclast, the reader learns in this essay. Vidal recalls fondly the look and feel of the "dark blue covers, the evocative smell of dust and old ink," and the fact he could not stop reading and re-reading the Oz books.

Vidal finds it odd that writers, who owe much to Baum's worlds of the imagination, and librarians would pay him so little respect. Is it possible that, *because* of academic indifference to Baum, this important treasury of children's literature has survived? Vidal wonders. "The hostility of librarians to Oz books is in itself something of a phenomenon," Vidal says. "The books are always popular with children. But many librarians will not stock them." According to the chairman of the Miami Public Library, Vidal relates, "Kids don't like that fanciful stuff any more. They want books about missiles and atomic submarines."

Vidal disputes the opinion of science fiction writer Ray Bradbury that "Oz is muffins and honey, summer vacations, and all the easy green time in the world," while Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* is "cold gruel and arithmetic at 6 a.m., icy showers and long schools." Vidal says Carroll belongs not to high literature but to logic, and Bradbury's best take on the Land of Oz is contained in his short story, The Exiles."

Although to some extent the Oz books may have elements borrowed from real events (i.e., an 1893 cyclone that hit two Kansas towns and killed 31 people), they are neither political nor polemical, Vidal says. In the Oz books, there are no references to any republic, parliaments or congresses. There are no elections. The rulers are all feudal, except in the last book where a "Supreme Dictator" appears. Sexism, also, is not evident because "essentially, Baum's human protagonists are neither male nor female but children, a separate category in his view if not in that of our latter-day sexists," Vidal says.

In his Oz books, though, Baum "presents the pastoral dream of Jefferson (the slaves have been replaced by magic and good will); and into this Eden he introduces forbidden knowledge in the form of black magic (the machine) which good magic (the values of the pastoral society) must overwhelm. To the extent that Baum makes his readers aware that our country's 'practical' arrangements are inferior to those in Oz, he is a truly subversive writer."

"E. Nesbit's Magic" (1964)

"E. Nesbit's Magic" (1964) Summary and Analysis

Almost unknown in the United States, Edith Nesbit is the British author of a series of imaginative children's books—books about children, as Vidal notes. She is, after Lewis Carroll (author of *Through the Looking Glass*), "the best of the English fabulists who was able to create a world of magic and inverted logic that was entirely her own."

The daughter of the head of a British agricultural college, Nesbit began writing books about children to support her five children because her philandering husband was not able to support his family. One of her biographers said Nesbit didn't really like children, so her characters "are intelligent, vain, aggressive, humorous, witty, cruel compassionate just like adults," Vidal writes. In Edwardian England, children were seen as small, weak and unable to control their environment and hence developed a sense of community.

Although this didn't necessarily make them any kinder to each other, it helped children to see each other "with perfect clarity," Vidal says. "Nesbit's genius is to see them as clearly and unsentimentally as they see themselves." Her usual technique is to confront a family of children of various ages with either magical or realistic adventures; their exploits are narrated by one Oswald Bastable. In each of the Nesbit books, there is a domestic challenge: one parent is absent and there is not enough money.

Vidal prefers Nesbit's "magic books," specifically *The House of Arden* and *Harding's Luck*. He praises Nesbit as "extraordinary" because she realized that "each grown-up must kill the child he was before he himself can live." Vidal opines that it is the lack of richly imaginative works, such as those of Nesbit, that may account for the intellectual poverty of America. "Practical books with facts in them may be necessary, but they are not everything. They do not serve the imagination in the same way that high invention does when it allows the mind to investigate *every* possibility, to set itself free from the ordinary, to enter a world where paradox reigns and nothing is what it seems."

"Tarzan Revisited" (1963)

"Tarzan Revisited" (1963) Summary and Analysis

The pursuit of freedom through drugs, alcohol and other forms of indulgence stems from a boredom caused by the inability to exercise a healthy imaginative—or daydreaming—life in an ever-more confining society, according to Vidal. The Tarzan legend returns the reader to "that Eden where, free of clothes and the inhibitions of an oppressive society, a man is able, as William Faulkner put it in his high Confederate style, to prevail as well as endure."

Although Edgar Rice Burroughs, author of the Tarzan series, is as innocent of literature as his apeman and inept at reproducing human speech on the page, he has the rare ability to describe action vividly—something that stumps most writers, Vidal says. Most contemporary novelists usually tell their stories in the first person, "which is simply writing dialogue," according to Vidal. Thus, the author presents only an impression of what happened rather than the sense of what is actually happening. "In action Tarzan is excellent," Vidal writes.

Vidal calls Burroughs "an archetypal American dreamer" who was born in Chicago in 1875, and a drifter until the age of 36. He served briefly in the U.S. Cavalry, was a gold miner in Oregon, a cowboy in Idaho, and a failed businessman. "While he was drifting through the unsatisfactory real world, he consoled himself with an inner world where he was strong and handsome, adored by beautiful women and worshiped by exotic races." *Tarzan of the Apes*, ("Rousseau's noble savage reborn in Africa") was published in 1914.

Compared with the vivid imaginative tales of Tarzan, adult novels featuring the likes of Mike Hammer and James Bond "strike me as a most significant and unbearably sad phenomenon."

"Some Memories of the Glorious Bird and an Earlier Self" (1976)

"Some Memories of the Glorious Bird and an Earlier Self" (1976) Summary and Analysis

Tennessee Williams ("the Glorious Bird") was 37 and the most famous playwright in America when he met the 22-year-old Vidal in Rome in 1948. *Streetcar Named Desire* was still running on Broadway when Tennessee gave a party to inaugurate his new apartment, and the American playwright was described by Harold Acton as "a pudgy, taciturn, moustached little man without any obvious distinction."

In his *Memoirs,* Tennessee describes his meeting with Vidal as well as his 1973 talk before a group of Yale drama students: "The young faces before me were uniformly inexpressive of any kind of emotional reaction to my entrance," Tennessee remarks. To this, Vidal responds in his essay: "I am surprised that Tennessee was surprised. The arrogance and self-satisfaction of drama students throughout Academe are among the few constants in a changing world.

"Any student who had read Sophocles in translation is, demonstrably, superior to Tennessee Williams in the untidy flesh," Vidal snorts. "These dummies reflect of course the proud mediocrity of their teachers." Vidal recalls the difficulties Tennessee faced getting his career launched because during the 1940s and '50s "the anti-fag battalions were everywhere on the march. From the high lands of *Partisan Review* to the middle ground of *Time* magazine, envenomed attacks on real or suspected fags never let up."

Vidal recalls a luncheon with Tennessee and his mother, Miss Edwina, during which she mentioned a number of incidents from his life that actually appear in his plays. As Tennessee anxiously cleared his throat repeatedly, she asked: "Why do you keep making that funny sound in your throat?" Tennessee's answered, "Because, Mother, when you destroy someone's life you must expect certain nervous disabilities." Miss Edwina appears in various guises in his plays, as do other "Monster Women," as Vidal calls them.

"The Fourth Diary of Anaos Nin" (1971)

"The Fourth Diary of Anaos Nin" (1971) Summary and Analysis

With the publication of the fourth diary of Anaos Nin, Vidal—who once persuaded E.P. Dutton to publish two of her novels—says he's not so sure that her diaries would establish her as "a great sensibility." Reviewing his own appearance in her diaries, Vidal warns literary historians to deal gingerly with Anaos's "facts." For example, he points out to her that when they first met he was a uniformed warrant officer, not a lieutenant, and she "laughs gaily" but does not correct the error before publication.

Anaos Nin was born in 1903, the daughter of a Spanish composer-pianist, raised in France but "unhappily transplanted" to New York as a child where she began to keep a diary "in order to win her absent father's love." The diaries of Anaos Nin present a problem because the author deals with real people, and yet, Vidal says he would not recognize any of them had she not carefully labeled "each specimen." Her portrayal of the critic Edmund Wilson is "particularly devastating" because she disliked him but felt compelled to play at a loving friendship, according to Vidal.

Despite the limitations of the diaries, Vidal confesses it is fun to read about New York bohemian life in the 1940s and '50s and about Anaos Nin's ascent in the literary world. "If there is one theme in Volume Four, it is Anaos's formidable will to power," Vidal says, although he doesn't recognize her or himself in "these bitter pages." Finally, Vidal submits, "Yet when I think of her and the splendid times we had so many years ago, I find myself smiling, recalling with pleasure her soft voice, her French accent, and the way she always said 'yatch' instead of 'yacht.' That makes up for a lot."

"Writing Plays for Television" (1956)

"Writing Plays for Television" (1956) Summary and Analysis

This essay is one of the few in this collection in which Vidal strikes an unabashedly positive note. Thrilled at the prospect of writing plays for live television broadcast, Vidal says: "All things considered, I suspect that the Golden Age for the dramatist is at hand. There is so much air to be illustrated, so many eyes watching, so much money to be spent, so many fine technicians and interpreters at one's command, that the playwright cannot but thrive." This contrasts dramatically with Vidal's sentiments of several decades later when he deplores in essays the cultural and intellectual sinkhole that TV has become.

Vidal admits that he was reluctant at first to venture into the world of television, preferring the novel where the author could be in complete control of the world "fashioned by a single intelligence, its reality in no way dependent upon the collective excellence of others." Then, in "the black winter of 1953," Vidal writes that he realized the novel as a popular art form had died, partly because of the influence of television.

"By 1953, unpopular novelists like myself were living precariously on the bounty of reprint publishers, a bounty which ended when those jolly opportunists flooded the newsstands, sinking many, both good and bad," Vidal says. Since he doesn't write short stories or journalism or teach, Vidal feared he might have to go into "the fantasy world of business and get a job." Then he discovered television and by 1954 was "committed seriously to write for the camera."

He thereby found talented writers, actors, directors and technicians dedicated to bringing high quality drama to the television screen. For the first time, Vidal worked with others and found the experience pleasurable. While still holding up the novel as the ultimate literary form, Vidal calls playwriting "only a form of cleverness," but one that can reach a broader audience in the electronic age. He proposes a repertory system in TV both for actors and for the repackaging of plays that have proved their value.

"Visit to A Small Planet" (1957)

"Visit to A Small Planet" (1957) Summary and Analysis

Vidal reflects upon the impact of television and the movies on literature, even on playwriting, and finds the outlook not sanguine. For one thing, declining literacy rates mean that publishers now seek more than ever "the crudely recollected experiences of non-writers" rather than the polished works that come from a skilled writer and form a body of work "to be enjoyed by the common reader in continuity." Vidal estimates that the impact of the visual media has been to atomize any fixed set of common experiences or reference points that form the basis for readership of the novel.

A man who becomes a werewolf in Manhattan, Vidal's first play, has, he hopes, been consigned to the dustbin of history. His second, presented to Tennessee Williams in 1948, was declared one of the worst the playwright had ever read. Vidal's third, *Visit to a Small Planet*, became a successful stage play then a television drama. In this play a "charming hobbyist named Kreton" arrives from outer space with the intent to start a war —"the happiest of pro-war plays," Vidal says.

Although his play was a hit, Vidal believes the theater should be decentralized to smaller cities and to universities where creative writers have "the luxurious freedom to fail" and in so doing, produce better art.

"Who Makes the Movies?" (1976)

"Who Makes the Movies?" (1976) Summary and Analysis

Former screenwriter Vidal's answer to the rhetorical question posed in the title of this article: the director. To another rhetorical question, "Who should make the movies?" Vidal answers: the writer. Then television. With the challenge to the silver screen from the cathode tube, the directors ("icons") became, well, paramount and were seen as artists and the saviors of film. "Then out of France came the dreadful news: all those brothers-in-law of the classic era were really autonomous and original artists," Vidal observes.

The absurdity of this view is that "regardless of director, every Warner Brothers film during the classic age had a dark look owing to the Brothers' passion for saving money in electricity and set-dressing cut no ice with ambitious critics on the prowl for high art in a field once thought entirely low." Thus Film Noir was born. Vidal quotes liberally from *Some Time in the Sun*, by Tom Dardis, which examines the careers of five screenwriters—Scott Fitzgerald, Aldous Huxley, William Faulkner, Nathaniel West and James Agee.

Of this group, Faulkner "was the luckiest (and the most cynical)" and worked most often with Howard Hawks, a director who might actually deserve the title of *auteur*, Vidal says. Faulkner's public line was "I'm just a hired hand who does what he's told." The 20-year period when the producer was supreme is only a memory, "the ascendancy of the movie stars was brief, the directors have now regained their original primacy. This situation might be more acceptable if the film directors had become true *auteurs*. But most of them are further away than ever from art—not to mention life. The majority are simply technicians," according to Vidal.

"*Gore Vidal*" (1968)

"Gore Vidal" (1968) Summary and Analysis

All in all—as Vidal would say—*Gore Vidal* by Ray Lewis White, a professor at the University of North Carolina, does justice to the Subject, as Vidal refers to himself in this essay. White is to be commended for resisting the popular current of presenting an author's work only as a key to his personality, instead of the most important aspect of the writer's life, Vidal says. White's book is "most interesting, astonishingly exact in detail and often shrewd in judgment," according to the Subject.

However, the subject did achieve great initial literary success with his first novel, *Williwaw*, "still regarded by certain romantics as a peak he was never again to scale," Vidal says. "Among the other five novels, only *The City and the Pillar* and perhaps *A Search for the King* have much interest for anyone today except perhaps as paradigms of what was then the national manner: colorless, careful prose, deliberately confined to the surface of things."

After that initial period (1945-49) came the second period and the flowering, according to White. Between 1950 and 1953, the subject produced *The Judgment of Paris*, *Messiah* and *A Thirsty Evil*. "There are no revelations," the subject says of the book. Vidal commends White, however, for his "meticulous" presentation of facts chronologically, which leaves him feeling disquieted by "what a lot of time the subject misused or simply wasted." Vidal frets that White's detailed plot outlines of the subject's novels and plays may dissuade people from reading them.

In this essay, Vidal's awkwardness in reviewing a book about himself and his work is apparent. His ambivalence is evident, too, since a criticism of the book might be construed by readers as a criticism of himself.

"Hollywood!" (1982)

"Hollywood!" (1982) Summary and Analysis

Indecent Exposure, a Hollywood tell-all exposy that descends into bathos as it seeks the high moral ground, tells the story of a power struggle between a floundering movie studio and a powerful New York investment firm. As Vidal says, "The power and the money are in New York; the studio and the glamour are in Hollywood." The book, by journalist David McClintock, is a re-telling of a scandal that involved David Begelman, chief of production at Columbia Pictures, who forged actor Cliff Robertson's name on a check from the studio.

Vidal faults McClintock for failing to recognize that not everyone in Hollywood is a millionaire, although the author vows that his book is "real." The deeper McClintock goes into the Hollywood maze, the less it is clear what is reality. "Since workers in Hollywood often make many hundreds of thousands of dollars a year, there is a tendency to think of them as rich," Vidal writes. "They are not, or as John O'Hara once said of the best-selling writer, 'He has the income of a millionaire without the million dollars.'"

In sorting out good guys and bad guys in the Begelman studio scandal, McClintock lapses into black-and-white characterizations that make Vidal wonder whether or not the author knows that corruption in "this nation of hustlers" is also rampant in Detroit and Washington, D.C. The real moral of Indecent Exposure is not the story that the book tells, but the book itself as artifact, Vidal says. "[The book is] the work of a writer who believes that he can take real people and events and remake them, as it were, in his own image. Worse, he is so filled with an odd animus toward most of his characters that he repeats accusations he knows to be untrue so that he can then recant them."

"Remembering Orson Welles" (1989)

"Remembering Orson Welles" (1989) Summary and Analysis

Rosebud was what William Randolph Hearst called his friend Marion Davies' clitoris. Perhaps only by reading this essay in which Vidal recalls Orson Welles, who used the name Rosebud as a pivotal image in his film *Citizen Kane*, would the reader come to learn this bit of film arcana. The essay is more a personal recollection of the legendary filmmaker, actor and director than an academic expostulation of a theme, but the reader is grateful for Vidal's first-hand account of the corpulent, irrepressible Welles in later life—a man of big ideas, big cigars, big movies and never enough cash to carry out all his projects.

Starting with the Mercury Theater of radio where Welles staged a frighteningly realistic invasion from Mars, Vidal briefly traces his friend's ascent into Hollywood. After making several films such as Macbeth, Othello and Chimes at Midnight, Welles "also invented, as much as anyone did, the so-called film noir with Journey into Fear (1943), The Lady from Shanghai (1948) and Touch of Evil (1948)," according to Vidal.

"Everything that Welles touched as director has a degree of brilliance, here and there, but he was always running out of money not to mention leading ladies, who kept mysteriously changing in his films because he was often obliged to shut down for long periods of time and then, when he started again, actors would be unavailable."

Vidal sketches an amusing scene of himself having lunch with the orotund Welles, seated next to his "totally unprincipled small black poodle called Kiki," in a smaller chair. They discuss politics and the movies, while Orson laments his difficulty getting around, climbing in and out of airplanes and Kiki bites the waiter. Three years later, Orson is dead and Vidal reflects that Welles was "a magician, fascinated with legerdemain, tricks of eye, forgeries, labyrinths, mirrors reflecting mirrors."

"Contagious Self-Love" (1974)

"Contagious Self-Love" (1974) Summary and Analysis

After an encounter with the Seventh Earl of Longford (or "Frank," as Vidal calls him) on British television, Vidal penned this satirical/sarcastic essay poking fun at the vanities of the English upper class. In that brief encounter, "I was depraved and corrupted by the sort of blind self-love that is so communicable that one is transformed...hopelessly dominated by the fact of the Seventh Earl who made me love him as he loves him."

Frank's latest book—after *Humility*—is *The Grain of Wheat, an Autobiography*, in which the Seventh Earl admits to being an intellectual although Vidal believes "the contents of Frank's mind are well worth a detour. Frank avers "my special kind of brain is well above average in literature," and shares with the reader his triumphs as amateur banker and leader of the House of Lords, although feeling that he was "largely wasted in the Cabinet." Vidal responds: "But, Frank, that's the point, isn't it? To be humiliated in order that you may be able to grow as a human being, to learn compassion so that you can help us outcasts across that awful gulf?"

"Nasser's Egypt" (1963)

"Nasser's Egypt" (1963) Summary and Analysis

This essay demonstrated how a skilled, resourceful writer such as Vidal can make lemonade when all he has to work with is lemons. In this instance, Vidal was sent to Egypt to interview President Gamal Abdul Nasser for *Esquire* magazine. Although the interview never materializes because of ever-shifting political and bureaucratic currents, Vidal captures a vivid portrait of life in Egypt at a time when the Soviet Union supplied manpower and technical expertise to help build the massive Aswan Dam.

Vidal repeatedly and obliquely asks several Egyptians how many Russians are in their country, but is always answered with the question: "What you say?" He tries to take a stroll through the neighborhood near his hotel but is driven back by the shouts of off-duty policemen from their homes, telling him he could be arrested. Vidal is puzzled by the almost smiling acceptance of death—often-violent death—that Egyptians experience under the Nasser regime, as well as the Egyptians' obsession with acquiring wealth and technology.

The site of the Aswan Dam project is foreboding. "Ten thousand men work three eight-hour shifts," Vidal relates. "Most of the heavy work is done in the cool of the night. Off to the left of the road I noticed a fenced-in compound containing a number of small, modern houses. 'The Russians,' my guide said. It was a pleasant scene: women chatted in doorways while through uncurtained windows one could see modern kitchens where dinners were cooking. A large sign forbade the taking of photographs. 'How many Russians are there in Aswan?' I asked. He looked at me bewildered. 'What you say?'"

Vidal concludes that since America already has pursued the path of empire, it is in the United States' interest to support even such a disagreeable and unreliable nation as Nasser's Egypt because it "increases our sphere of influence, expands our markets, maintains our worldly empire."

"Mongolia!" (1983)

"Mongolia!" (1983) Summary and Analysis

Yurtas, Mongolian hotpots, and the badlands of the Gobi Desert figure in this essay, as Vidal and a photographer ("Snaps") the Great Gobi National Park for the World Wildlife Fund. Among the group are ornithologists, "tall, slender, and bearded so that they can stand for hours imitating kindly trees, as they watch for birds." Also in the group is an English-born, Nairobi-based representative of the United Nations Environmental Programme named White Hunter.

From Moscow, the group flies to Ulan Bator on the edge of the Gobi Desert, where they are to travel deep into the national park area. Soon they are in a jeep, "lurching over rough terrain." The young driver wears a denim jacket and smiles as he crashes over boulders. Black and brown gravel, not sand, is the most common landscape, with occasional white salt slicks. All sorts of shy plants grow after a rain or near one of the rare springs," Vidal writes. "Actually, there is water under a lot of the Gobi, in some places only a few feet below the surface. For those who missed out on the journeys to the moon, the Gobi is the next best thing."

The group stops at an oasis and learns that a nearby watering hole is where the snow leopard goes to drink. They find no snow leopard, but lots of gazelles. Impressed with what they see, "we agreed that the Great Gobi National Park was a serious affair and not a front for Soviet missiles or, worse, a hunter's paradise with Gobi bears and snow leopards as the lure."

"At Home in a Roman Street" (1985)

"At Home in a Roman Street" (1985) Summary and Analysis

This delightful painterly-like sketch of the Rome where Vidal rented a small penthouse on top of the Origo Palace takes the reader on a sensory and cultural trip through Old Rome. The palace itself is on a busy intersection where, below street level, three classical temples are home to "a colony of cats," serving as a reminder that the location was once sacred to the cat goddess Isis. His penthouse itself is "a small, square, rickety, 20th Century addition to the palace."

Vidal describes how the sun drops behind Saint Peter's, swifts appear and do their aerial acrobatics, snow falls on the lemon tree, villagers are obsessed with healthcare but not sex, and the outdoor produce markets are right where they have been for 2,000 years. There's the flower lady who steals fresh flowers from the nearby graveyard, reshuffles them into new arrangements, and sells them on the street, and the small man in the three-piece suit who pauses to ask, "What time is it?" This routine has gone on for decades, but the man never says anything else.

"Literature? Two blocks to our north, back of the Pantheon, Thomas Mann lived and wrote *Buddenbrooks*. Nearby George Eliot stayed at the Minerva Hotel. Ariosto lived in Pantheon Square; Stendahl was close to us. Daffodils, tulips, and Mimosa. What time is it? The same."

"Reflections on Glory Reflected and Otherwise" (1991)

"Reflections on Glory Reflected and Otherwise" (1991) Summary and Analysis

Vidal reflects on his familial connections with various politicians on his mother's side, such as Senator Thomas Gore of Oklahoma, and through her remarriage into the Auchincloss family to John F. and the other Kennedys. Aside from the "excellent novelist" Louis Auchincloss, there are in that family numerous lawyers, stockbrokers and doctors whose Cosa Nostra is the Presbyterian Hospital in New York, Vidal says. He recalls Hugh D. ("Hughdie") Auchincloss when, "early in life, at Yale, in fact, Hughdie's originality was revealed; *he was unable to do work of any kind*."

Hughdie started a brokerage firm in Washington, D.C., and became a political "groupie," although he had little interest in politics except as a way to gather clients. "For Hughdie, the Senate's Reflected Glory (RG) was sun enough for him." Vidal's mother, Nina Gore Vidal Auchincloss. "left him for Love, and he was promptly married for his money by one of her ladies-in-waiting, who brought him two very poor but very adorable frizzy-haired step-daughters to take my place in his ample heart."

Vidal fondly recalls the Gore family home in Rock Creek Park to the trans-Potomac home, Merrywood. Although he'd become RG ("Reflected Glory"), Vidal tells the reader "I knew from the start I was out for Glory. So, too, was Henry Adams at my age." Vidal sees parallels between his own life and those of Henry Adams and Henry James, in searching for the art from life, the only true glory.

Characters

Paul Bowles

Abraham Lincoln

Ulysses S. Grant

H.L. Mencken

President John F. Kennedy

Barry Goldwater

President Richard Nixon

President Ronald Reagan

Senator T.P. Gore

Amelia Earhart

Howard Hughes

Truman Capote

Henry James

Tennessee Williams

Anais Nin

Gore Vidal

F. Scott Fitzgerald

Seventh Earl of Longford

Gamal Abdul Nasser

Edmund Wilson

President Eisenhower

Norman Mailer

Thomas Wolfe

Frederick Prokosch

Nathalie Sarraute

Objects/Places

Washington, D.C

.

Vidal's family home and the focus of some of his early childhood experiences, as well as the locale of some of his political satire, such as *An Evening with Richard Nixon*. Vidal reflects that the monstrous growth and expansion of the nation's capitol in his lifetime is evidence of the rise of the American Empire.

Los Angeles

Los Angeles is Vidal's most recent residence, and for a while he lived part-time in Italy and part-time in L.A.

New York City

As the hub of book publishing and theater, New York plays an important part in Vidal's life as both novelist and playwright. In his essays, he discusses the closed New York literary community as well as the ephemeral nature of theater.

West Point

Vidal's birthplace, where his father Eugene was the first instructor of aeronautics. West Point and the military elite of America are examined in a Vidal essay in light of the self-perpetuating military-industrial complex. Vidal favors elimination of the service academies, such as West Point.

Oz

The setting for the series of children's books by L Frank Baum that Vidal loved as a child; also a symbol for the imagination and the threats some adults perceive in any kind of alternative reality. This is evident, Vidal says, in the fact the Baum books do not appear in most public libraries.

Hollywood

As the home of the television and movie industries, Hollywood symbolizes many things—including the shift from a print to visual culture that figures prominently in Vidal's essays. He also worked in Hollywood for several years as a screenwriter.

London

As the hub of British book publishing, London is the place most associated with Henry James whom Vidal admires, as well as other important writers—both British and American.

Cairo

The capitol of Egypt is where Vidal goes for an interview with President Gamal Abdul Nasser, which never materializes. Instead, he comes away with an informative essay about the state of economic development in this Arab nation.

Gobi Desert

On a magazine assignment, Vidal travels to the Gobi Desert to file a story on the Great Gobi National Park. He observes that the Molgols' encampments smell of mutton fat, the people themselves do not.

Rome

Rome is where Vidal lived for a number of years, in a rented apartment within walking distance of other authors such and artists.

Vietnam

The Vietnam War takes center stage in American politics of the 1960s and thus is an important element in most of Vidal's political essays about that period.

New Orleans

The "Big Easy" was the literary as well as the physical home to playwright Tennessee Williams and figures prominently in his works, just as Tennessee himself figures prominently in Vidal's life. New Orleans is also where psychiatrist Robert Coles conducted a study of "rich kids" profiles in one of Vidal's essays.

Miami Beach

The gaudy, glittering resort where the show biz production called the Republican National Convention takes place and where Vidal first notices Ronald Reagan rehearsing his future role as president as he studies President Eisenhower's speech.

Themes

Death of the Novel

Throughout the first section of this collection, Vidal repeatedly refers to the death of the novel in English as a *fait accompli*. He points to the decline in general literacy (half of Americans, he says, have never read a newspaper) and the rise of television and other electronic media—including the movies—as reasons for the destruction of the readership for novels.

He recalls in one essay a time around the beginning of the 20th Century when a visiting writer drew considerably more public interest in a small Ohio town than a visiting president. Vidal mentions the "new novel, the "novel of ideas," and literary developments on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean that have no reverberations n the United States. He strikes a pitiful note in describing a courageous gay novelist whose book has received good reviews in Europe, and who asks Vidal if he can expect the same in America. Vidal is at pains to tell the writer that his work will most likely be ignored. Vidal himself turned from literary fiction after his first two novels (*Williwaw* and *The Pillar and the City*), writing Hollywood screenplays, live television dramas, stage plays, essays, and historical fiction.

Another development on the literary scene is the takeover of the business of writing and teaching novels by what Vidal calls "the hacks of Academe." He mentions such writers and teachers as John Barth, John Gardner and Thomas Pynchon as examples of the in-growth of literary fiction, a kind of cottage industry of Academia. The result, according to Vidal, has been that novelists write books that no one wants to read, while books professors assign to their own students in a hermetically-sealed world divorced from the larger world. The novels that do sell millions of copies are those print analogues to the movies and TV, action thrillers, supernatural tales and an avalanche of books on topics such as "how to find God and make money." In his essay, "The Bookchat of Henry James," Vidal says of the novel, "In our post-literary time, it is hard to believe that once upon a time a life could be devoted to the perfecting of an art form, and that of all the art forms the novel was the most—exigent, to use a modest word. Today the novel is either a commodity that anyone can put together, or it is an artifact, which means nothing or anything or everything, depending on one's literary theory."

The American Empire

Vidal identifies several stages in the growth of the American Empire: "In a sense, we have had three republics. The first, a loose confederation of former British colonies, lasted from 1776 to 1789 when the first Congress under the Constitution met. The second republic ended April 9, 1865 with the South's surrender. In due course, Lincoln's third republic was transformed (inevitably?) into the national security state where we have been locked up for 40 years. A fourth republic would be nice."

Wittingly or not, America is now the preeminent world power, and domestically the powerful wealthy and political elite continue to widen the resources gap. American has only one political party ("the Property Party") with two wings, Democratic and Republican. "Republicans are a bit stupider, more rigid, more doctrinaire in their laissez-faire capitalism than the Democrats, who are cuter, prettier, a bit more corrupt and more willing than the Republicans to make small adjustments when the poor, the black and the anti-imperialists get out of hand," Vidal says.

America continues to build more prisons and Vidal submits that every war since World War II has been unconstitutional because they all were undertaken by executive decree and all lacked Congressional declarations of war. The rise of the "military-industrial complex" forewarned by President Eisenhower has created self-perpetuating bureaucracies and political interest groups that threaten the budget and survival of the United States, Vidal says. Some of his ideas for righting the ship of state include taxing churches, making all drugs except prescription drugs available for sale to the public at will, legalizing gambling, reigning in American consumption of natural resources that has made us an oil-dependent nation, and regulating child-bearing by issuing a kind of permit.

Presciently, Vidal writes of America's suicidal political involvement in the Middle East (supporting Israel, depending on Arab oil, etc.), and calls for controls over the FBI to stick to domestic crimes and the CIA to "subvert wicked foreigners, not lively homebodies." As a corollary to American Empire, Vidal mentions the rise of "paranoid politics" that will seek and find other enemies when and if the communist cold war lapses.

Homosexuality

Is homosexuality (or, bisexuality) the true natural expression of human sexuality as Vidal asserts? In numerous essays, Vidal takes the viewpoint that homosexuality as practiced by the ancients was neither perverse nor unhealthy until it was labeled as such by the Christians and banished from "decent" society. Instead of the terms "heterosexual" and "homosexual," Vidal uses "heterosexualist" and "homosexualist" because of his belief that humans are not one or the other. Their sexuality can only be defined in terms of behavior. Thus there are only homosexual or heterosexual acts—not persons.

Occasionally, Vidal refers to other gay writers in vernacular terms. For example, Somerset Maugham is "that old fruitcake," and he is not averse to using terms like *fag*, *sissy* or *queer*. In these essays, Vidal assiduously avoids discussing his own sexuality except to note that when his novel *The Pillar and the City* (dealing with homosexuality) was published, at least one New York literary critic refused to review it and would never review any of his books afterwards. Likewise, Vidal mentions the fact that *Time Magazine* from about 1945 to 1961 waged an all-out campaign against everything produced or published by Tennessee Williams—undoubtedly because of his homosexualist lifestyle.

In "Sex Is Politics," Vidal cites a national opinion poll in 1979 that found 47 percent of respondents felt "homosexual relations were morally wrong," while 43 percent thought they were alright and 10 percent didn't know. Yet 56 percent said they would vote for legislation guaranteeing the civil rights of homosexuals, and 70 percent said they believed there should be no laws, either federal or state, regulating sexual practice. Nevertheless, as Vidal points out, "some 20 to 40 percent of the population are moral absolutists" who condemn promiscuity, adultery, homosexuality, masturbation "long hair and fluoride," Vidal said. In many respects, Vidal's opinions and observations on this issue seem decades ahead of their time.

Style

Tone

Vidal's tone in this collection of essays runs the full gamut from sarcastic to satirical to despondent to exuberant. For example, in "Book Report" he assumes the voice and persona of a middle-aged woman describing a book to her peers in a "book club" reading group. His depiction of the unsophisticated, child-like mind of this woman is both revealing of literacy levels in the United States, and hilarious. When he describes the "Hacks of Academe," those English professors who write novels and review each other's writings in a kind of cottage industry, his tone is sarcastic. When Vidal traces the lines of power in what he calls the "American Empire," his tone is satirical and sometimes even bitter with the realization of how the existence of this elite contrasts with our ideals of freedom and equality.

Often there is a despondent tone to Vidal's essays, particularly when he reflects on the state of literature, literacy and the novel in America and concludes that the audience for the novel is dead and that no one in the future will know or care what writers wrote in earlier times. This trend is the result of the rise of the visual media—television and movies— according to Vidal. Occasionally, Vidal writes in an exuberant tone, as when he describes the fun he had hanging out with playwright Tennessee Williams, or the hope he had for the future of live TV dramas.

Language and Meaning

Vidal's use of language is one of the delights of reading these essays. Not only is he a master of prose style, he also has a sly sense of humor that can be expressed in puns, oblique and absurd references. His straightforward declamatory prose is lucid and powerful, compelling in its logic and design. Although Vidal's fiction (novels, stage and screenplays, television dramas) is filled with symbolism and metaphor, the essays contained in this collection are basically straightforward, as the literary genre requires. The range of Vidal's knowledge of art, literature, politics, culture, religion and much more is on brilliant display in this collection. As he bemoans the decline of beautiful, meaningful language Vidal demonstrates and creates that very language for the reader. His allusions to classical literature, including Roman and Greek mythology, adds a depth and richness to his essays that forms a good balance with his rhetorical skills of humor and sarcasm.

Quotes

"But now the tide is in. The course is set. The charts are explicit, for we are not the first to make the voyage out: the poets long ago preceded us into exile, and one can observe them up ahead, arms outstretched to greet the old enemy, their new companions at the edge of the known world." (Chapter 3, pg 25)

"Works of fiction, at best, create not arguments but worlds, and a world by definition is an attitude toward a complex of experience, not a single argument or theme, syllogistically proposed." (Chapter 5, pg 38)

"From the beginning, the American civilization has been simultaneously romantic and puritan." (Chapter 6, pg 43)

"Reading these 10 books one after the other was like being trapped in the 'Late Late Show,' staggering from one half-remembered movie scene to another." (Chapter 10, pg 88)

"Apparently the novel is no longer what [Henry] James conceived it, a story told—in Professor [John] Halperin's happy phrase—from 'the limited perspective of a single sentient consciousness.' And so, in dubious battle, unconscious sentiencies clash in the English departments of the West with insentient consciousnesses." (Chapter 11. Pg 113)

"American literature, such as it is, has never been the work of schoolteachers. Admittedly, each year it is harder and harder for a writer to make a living from writing, and many writers must find the temptation to teach overwhelming." (Chapter 12, pg 139)

"But the academic bureaucracy, unlike the novel, will not wither away, and the future is dark for literature. Certainly the young in general are not going to take up reading when they

"Since the serious novel is written by middle class, middlebrow whites, political activists, intellectuals, members of the ruling classes, blacks seldom make appearances in these books except as the odd flasher." (Chapter 13, pg 148)

"Virtuosity of any kind is so rare in the arts that other artists tend to be fascinated by it." (Chapter 14, pg 163)

"Our universities are positively humming with the sound of fools rushing in." (Chapter 32, pg 358)

"The fact that America's English departments are manned by the second-rate is no great thing. The second-rate must live, too. But in most civilized countries the second-rate are at least challenged by the first-rate. And score is kept in literary journals. But as McDonald's drives out good food, so these hacks of Academe drive out good prose." (Chapter 32, pg 363):

"Just as Williams never really added to his basic repertory company of actors, he never picked up much information about the world during his half-century as an adult. He never tried, consciously at least, to make sense of the society into which he was born. If he had, he might have figured out that there is no such thing as a homosexual or a heterosexual person. Most people are a mixture of impulses if not practices, and what anyone does with a willing partner is of no social or cosmic significance." (Chapter 42, pg 442)

"One-third of the American population claim to be twice-born Christians. Although redemption is big on the evangelical Christian circuit, punishment of sinners is even bigger. To the fundamentalist Christian mind, evil is everywhere and every day is a lovely day for an *auto-da-fy*. According to hard-core white fundamentalists, Jews are forever guilty of the murder of our Lord. As children of Ham, blacks are eternally inferior to whites." (Chapter 57, pg 627)

"Is everyone reasonably sane? No. Some people will always become drug addicts just as some people will always become alcoholics, and it is just too bad. Every man, however, has the power (and should have the legal right) to kill himself if he chooses. But since most men don't, they won't be mainliners either. Nevertheless, forbidding people things they like or think they might enjoy only makes them want those things all the more. This psychological insight is, for some mysterious reason, perennially denied our governors." (Chapter 59, pg 642)

"Happily enough, it would appear that the United States is destined to be the last empire on earth (in the best if not the apocalyptic sense), and there are now stirrings within the camp of the Great Khan at Washington to the effect that new necessities do not always require military force. Barring unexpected catastrophe, the hordes may soon achieve, if not peace, an uneasy stasis which one hopes should endure until the human race begins the infection of other worlds. For more and more do we resemble a proliferating virus, destructive of other organisms, incapable of arresting itself, and so destined—manifestly!—to prevail or vanish furiously in space and time." (Chapter 68, pg 772)

"I fear the United States has always been a nation of ongoing hustlers from the prisons and disaster-areas of old Europe. Our grand British heritage is now wearing thin but can still be observed in our racism as well as in the spontaneous hypocrisy with which our public men respond to inconvenient disclosures and the self-serving rhetoric that swirls about them in time of crisis like squid's ink." (Chapter 77, pg 854)

"But the pure of heart can take some consolation in the fact that newspapers in America are less and less read. A recent Gallup Poll caused muck clucking in the press: apparently 45 percent thought the press biased. How could the good people be so suspicious of the American press which (because it is American) has to be the world's best, serving the Bill of Rights with lonely fervor? Yet the real surprise was that 37 percent are so stupid as to think that the press is objective." (Chapter 79, pg 891)

"The young appear to have difficulty expressing themselves with words. Teachers tell me that today's students cannot read or write with any ease (having read the prose of a

good many academics, I fear that the teachers themselves have no firm purchase on our beautiful language. Is television responsible? Perhaps. Certainly if a child does not get interested in reading between six and 13, he will never be able to read or write (or speak) well and, alas, the pre-pubescent years are the years of tube addiction for most American children." (Chapter 83, pg 936)

"The carnival of our presidential election goes on and on, costing tens of millions of dollars, while the candidates smile, shake hands, and try to avoid ethnic jokes and the demonstration of any semblance of intelligence. Although the economy is in a shambles and the empire is cracking up, the political system imposed upon us by the Bank does not allow any candidate to address himself seriously to any issue." (Chapter 84, pg 941)

"Once- and twice-born Christians haven't been on such a rampage since World War I when they managed to add an amendment to the Constitution making it a crime for Americans to drink alcohol." (Chapter 85, pg 953)

"The corporate grip on opinion in the United States is one of the wonders of the Western world. No First World country has ever managed to eliminate so entirely from its media all objectivity—much less dissent. Of course, it is possible for any citizen with time to spare and a canny eye, to work out what is actually going on, but for the many there is no time and the network news is the only news even though it may not be news at all but only a series of flashing fictions intended, like the avowed commercials, to keep docile huddled masses, keep avid for products addled consumers." (Chapter 92, pg 1031)

"Currently, another American candidate for demonisation is the one billion Muslims in general and the Arabs in particular. Since America's Israel lobby controls American foreign policy in the Middle East, and since terrorist elements within Israel now control the Israeli government, we shall see Arabs more and more depicted as sub-human killers, never so happy as when blowing up a school. But, again, I don't think that the Muslims will make a suitable enemy. For one thing, there are too many of them. For another, they control too much of the world's oil supply." (Chapter 93, pg 1041)

"Amelia Earhart was very much a part of my life. She wrote poetry and encouraged me to write, too. She had a beautiful speaking voice. Since she usually dressed as a boy, it was assumed that she had what were then called Sapphic tendencies. I have no idea whether or not she did but I do know that she wore trousers because she thought her legs were ugly; and if she were truly Sapphic, I doubt that she would have been so much in love with my father. She had milk-white eyelashes." (Chapter 97, pg 1075)

"For more than a century, West Pointers have returned the compliment. They do not like civilians, while their contempt for politicians is as nearly perfect as their ignorance of the institutions of the country that they are required to serve—after duty, that is; after honor. Specifically, my father's generation—the empire makers— disliked Jews, regarded blacks as low comedy relief, politicians as corrupt, Filipinos as sly. The West Pointers regard only one another with true reverence." (Chapter 98, pg 1085)

"For the Librarian of Detroit, courage and affirmation mean punching the clock and then doing the dull work of a machine while never questioning the system. Our governors not only know what is good for us, they never let up. From monitoring the books that are read in grade school to the brass handshake and the pension (whose fund is always in jeopardy) at the end, they are forever on the job. They have to be because they know that there is no greater danger to their order than a worker whose daydreams are not of television sets and sex but of differently ordered worlds." (Chapter 99, pg1097)

"From 1945 to 1961, *Time* attacked with unusual ferocity everything produced or published by Tennessee Williams. 'Fetid swamp' was the phrase most used to describe his work. But, in *Time*, as well as in time, all things will come to pass. The Bird is now a beloved institution." (Chapter 102, pg 1136)

"I have never known any writer with the exception of the artistically gifted and humanly appalling Carson McCullers who cared so much about the opinion of those condemned to write for newspapers. Uneasily confronting a truly remarkable hunger for absolute praise and total notice, Tennessee admits that, when being interviewed, he instinctively 'hams it up in order to provide good copy.'" (Chapter 102, pg 1137)

"I doubt if many Americans could identify a single character in a work of modern fiction, but there are few who could not describe in exact detail the latest comedian's joke on television." (Chapter 105, pg 1161)

"In literary matters, Orson was encyclopedic, with an actor's memory for poetry. I have known few American writers who have had much or, indeed, any enthusiasm for literature. Those actors who do read are often most learned, even passionate, when it comes to literature. I think that this unusual taste comes from a thorough grounding in Shakespeare combined with all that time waiting around on movie sets." (Chapter 109, pg 1201)

"The principal source of irritation between Nasser and the United States is Israel, a nation in which we have a large economic and emotional interest. But I got the impression from members of the Egyptian that the continual tirades against Israel are largely for home consumption." (Chapter111, pg 1230)

"Although Mongolia smells of mutton fat, the Mongols smell not at all, even though the Russians go on about the great trouble they have getting them to bathe. Men and women are equally handsome: tall, narrow-waisted, with strong white teeth. Some wear the national tunic with sash and boots; others wear the international uniform of blue jeans." (Chapter 112, pg 1236)

Topics for Discussion

Vidal proposes legalization of non-prescription drugs, taxes on churches, and legalized gambling as ways to help correct what he sees as ills of the American Empire. How would these measures change the problems he identifies? Would they be politically viable?

What is Vidal's point in substituting "homosexualist" and "heterosexualist" for homosexual and heterosexual? Does historical evidence support Vidal's claim that bisexuality is natural in humans?

Although in this collection of essays (1952-1992) Vidal addresses many sexual issues directly, he never makes a direct assertion in favor of gay marriage. Why?

What does Vidal believe is responsible for the decline of the readership of novels in the United States? What can be done about it? Should anything be done about it?

Do you agree or disagree with Vidal's assertion that there is only one political party in the United States—the Property Party—with two wings, Democrat and Republican?

How does Vidal support his claim that Richard Nixon was the only great American president of the last half of the 20th Century? Do you agree?

Vidal says America has been, from its inception, both romantic and puritanical. Does this explain our fascination with pornography, with guns?

America needs a second revolution to rearrange the power structure in a more democratic fashion. He says the Founders envisioned a need for this from time to time. What is the likelihood this might actually occur?

Many of the writers Vidal admires (Italo Calvino, Paul Bowles, George Meredith) are practically unknown to most Americans, readers or not. Why?

Vidal discusses the Adams family of Massachusetts as superior contributors to the evolution of American letters and politics. What common trait did the members of this family have in common that facilitated their greatness?

Does Vidal's characterization of modern America as a security state where workers are kept in line to do the work of our corporations and military, punished for civil disobedience and any kind of sexual deviancy, seem correct or an exaggeration?

Why does Vidal believe imaginative children's literature like the Oz and Tarzan books is so important? And why does "the establishment" seem to feel threatened by it?