Visit to a Small Planet Study Guide

Visit to a Small Planet by Gore Vidal

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BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

If a visitor from another galaxy happened to land on earth to observe the United States firsthand, what kind of impression would the country make on a complete stranger to the human race? This is the question posed in Gore Vidal's *Visit to a Small Planet*, a comedy subtitled as *A Comedy Akin to a Vaudeville*. Originally presented as a television play in 1957 (it had a New York City stage premiere in the same year), the satirical play follows the exploits of Kreton, an alien who lands on Earth, hoping to catch a glimpse of the American Civil War only to find that "something went wrong with the machine"; he has landed in the Manassas, Virginia, of the mid-twentieth century, outside of the Spelding family's home. Upon learning that it is not 1861, Kreton nevertheless decides to stay and observe human behavior. "You are my hobby," he tells the Speldings, "and I am going native."

Unlike film aliens such as E.T. or the creatures in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, Kreton is no lovable Martian, Arrogant, selfish, and patronizing, he is determined to make his stay memorable by starting a full-scale war between the United States and the Soviet Union (the setting being the days of the Cold War, when trust between the U.S. and U.S.S.R. was distinctly lacking). "I admttTmleap-ing into this on the spur of the moment," he admits at the end of Act I, "but we're going to have such good times!"

Vidal's play pokes fun at the post-World War II fear of Communism and the "Red-baiting" (Senator Joseph McCarthy's house hearings on Un-American Activities) common in the late 1950s, as well as military paranoia and the rising importance of television in American life. Using Kreton as the satiric personification of America's ugly underbelly, Vidal's play employs a common science-fiction scenario to explore not alien but American life.

Author Biography

Describing himself as America's "current biographer," Vidal's work has been widely applauded for its depth of satire and biting wit. Named Eugene Luther Vidal upon his birth October 3, 1925 at the United States Military Academy in West Point, New York, Vidal grew up in an elite family, the son of an aeronautics instructor and the grandson of Oklahoma Senator Thomas P. Gore. As a child, he attended the Phillips Exeter Academy in New Hampshire and enlisted in the Army upon his graduation in 1943. World War U proved to be the inspiration for his first novel, *Williwaw* (1946), a critically well-received look at a military transport ship during the war. His next novel, *In a Yellow Wood* (1947), was similarly received; it was the publication of *The City and the Pillar* (1948), however, that gained him his first taste of notoriety (due to the novel's frank depiction of homosexuality). Although he was now a somewhat controversial figure, his next five novels were neither critical or financial bonanzas.

1964's *Julian*, however, helped Vidal gain new critical and popular success. The first of his many historical novels, *Julian* is the "autobiography" of the fourth-century Roman emperor who tried to abolish Christianity. Vidal's method of mingling historical fact and his own brand of wry fiction became one of his trademarks: other historical novels such as *Washington, D.C*. (1967); *Burr* (1973); *1876* (1976); *Lincoln* (1984); *Empire* (1987); and *Hollywood* (1990) feature this fact plus fiction approach to exploring and satirizing contemporary issues. His 1992 novel. *Live from Golgotha: The Gospel According to Gore Vidal*, imagines the effects of television coverage of Christ's crucifixion in order to satirize today's media and press. In addition, Gore has written numerous plays, screenplays (including an adaptation of Tennessee Williams' *Suddenly Last Summer*), twelve books of essays (such as 1992's *Screening History*), and a series of mysteries under the pseudonym Edgar Box. He has also written a memoir. *Palimpsest*, which was published in 1995.

Vidal has always been interested in the connections between public and private life as well as the ways in which history is shaped by those whose motives seem (at best) questionable upon ciose examination. His outspoken manner and penetrating wit soon earned Vidal a status that goes beyond author. He is thought of as a social commentator, a celebrity as much as a writer. Although *Visit to a Small Planet* is not his most famous or critically favored work, it is representative of Vidal's wit and desire to satirize American political, sexual, and social life.

Plot Summary

Act I

Visit to a Small Planet opens with a view of television news commentator Roger Spelding's comfortably middle-class home near Manassas, Virginia. General Tom Powers, a friend of Roger's, is explaining to him that an Unidentified Flying Object (UFO) has, for the last twelve hours, been spotted hovering over the Spelding's home. When Roger dismisses the idea, Powers convinces him to look outside which he does, seeing the craft. Roger, who was planning to announce to a television audience that UFOs do not exist, panics and asks Powers for permission to break the story. The general refuses, stating that this information is "classified."

Ellen, Roger's nineteen year-old daughter, then appears on the terrace with her boyfriend Conrad Mayberry, whom Roger dismisses as "the boy farmer." She and Conrad discuss their plans for the future; these plans are interrupted, however, when the UFO lands outside the house. The hatch opens and Kreton, the visitor from outer space, enters the room. He looks very human, sporting side-whiskers and the garb of an 1860s gentleman. Kreton asks the Speldings to take him to General Robert E. Lee. After some confusion, Kreton explains that he has been studying the inhabitants of Earth as a "hobby"; he hoped to see the Civil War Battle of Bull Run. He soon realizes, however, that he must have set the wrong coordinates for his time-traveling spacecraft. Invited by Roger (who hopes to interview him on his television show) to come inside, Kreton accepts, thrilled with the prospect of seeing "a real house."

General Powers returns with an aide and in Roger's study begins questioning Kreton. We learn that Kreton is not only from another planet but from another dimension, one where its inhabitants do not die and have the power to read minds a power that Kreton demonstrates on the general. After being ordered by Powers to search Kreton's ship, the aide returns, explaining that the door has been shut and that there has been "some kind of invisible wall" constructed around it. When asked by Powers how he managed to create this force field, Kreton dryly responds, "I don't think I could ever explain it to you." Powers then announces that no one present is allowed to leave the house. The general presses his investigation of Kreton, speculating that he "has been sent here by another civilization for the express purpose of reconnoitering prior to invasion." Kreton denies that he has been "sent here" by anybody but then explains that he intends to "take charge" of the entire world. When Powers attempts to arrest him, Kreton surrounds himself with another invisible force-field. The curtain closes as the audience hears all of the characters' thoughts and Kreton saying, "Tomorrow will be a wonderful day for all of us. Sleep tight!"

Act II, Scene 1

The next morning Kreton is found in the living room examining a globe and talking to Rosemary, the Speldings' cat, whose thoughts he can also read and understand. Roger has left for Washington with General Powers, Reba (Roger's wife) has received permission to go shopping and Conrad is still asleep upstairs. Ellen brings Kreton his breakfast, which he refuses because he never eats. He also tells Ellen that the inhabitants of his world have given up reproducing, since they never die. Finally, he explains that after they "wiped out" diseases such as scarlet fever, mumps, and the common cold, the inhabitants of his planet rid themselves of "the ultimate disease:" passion. As a result, Kreton explains "We feel nothing. We do nothing. We are perfect." Ellen learns that this lack of passion or any strong emotion is what initially led Kreton to travel to earth and escape his dull commander, Delton 4.

Ellen and Kreton grow friendlier, and Ellen convinces the alien to give her a lesson in the mind-tricks that he has been using throughout the play. Eventually, she is able to levitate a vase over the fireplace mantle for a few seconds, much to the surprise of Conrad, who watches in awe. Kreton next begins thinking about how he will take over the planet, deciding against "drying up one of the smaller oceans" or "monkeying around with the moon" in favor of a more subtle trick. At that moment, the audience sees the aide (who is stationed on the porch) watch in disbelief as his rifle leaps from his hands into the air. Kreton explains that he has just made *all* of the rifles in the world levitate for fifteen seconds.

General Powers returns and tells Kreton that he has been recently "classified as a weapon" and that the United States government expects him to furnish "a comprehensive list" of his "various mental powers." Roger enters with the alarming news that "at eleven twenty-six this morning every rifle in the Free World was raised fifteen feet in the air and the lowered again." Never considering the possibility that this was one of Kreton's tricks, Roger concludes, "It's the Russians, obviously." Kreton then explains the real purpose of his latest trick to the cat: "Well, I do believe I have started a war.... After all, that's what I came down here to see!"

Act II, Scene 2

Roger delivers a newscast from his study, interviewing General Powers, who tells the viewing audience that "it doesn't look good." Upstairs, Kreton enjoys his first bath while Roger informs Conrad an avowed pacifist who hates all forms of war that he should enlist in the Army. Conrad refuses and asks Ellen to marry him, but she refuses on the grounds that Conrad lacks "drive." Kreton comes downstairs, wearing full Confederate Army garb, and begins testing Conrad's pacifism by singing a series of patriotic songs. Conrad remains unmoved. As a last resort to incite Conrad's "primitive" urge to tight, Kreton broadcasts the mind of Powers's aide as he looks at Ellen; when Conrad hears these thoughts that refer to Ellen as "the babe with the crazy build," he attacks the aide and Kreton watches the fistfight, delighted. Ellen is also impressed and agrees to marry

Conrad because of this display of love. As the young lovers exit, Powers enters and is told by Kreton that he has (again using the powers of his mind) "arranged a sneak attack" of United States bombers on Russia. In exactly forty-seven minutes, the world will reach "zero hour."

Act III

It is a half-hour later, and Kreton has transformed the Speldings' living room into a command center, using toy planes and soldiers to simulate the upcoming destruction. Powers reports that the Russian military is "completely mobilized" and enjoys a last drink with Kreton. Conrad and Ellen beg Kreton to stop the upcoming war, but Kreton explains that "war is not only fun," but "creative," since so many of humanity's great inventions were made during wartime. Ellen then tricks Kreton into telling her how he would contact his leader, Delton 4, if he so needed; Kreton's answer, •'concentration," inspires her to attempt a "mind-trick" similar to the one she performed in Act II. As the cast rushes about the stage, Ellen sits on the sofa repeating, "Delton 4 ... Delton 4 ... Delton 4," until Kreton's leader arrives in answer to this call. Dressed in a suave morning suit, Delton 4 thanks Ellen for the warning and explains that Kreton "is a rarity" among those of his planet, for "he is morally retarded and, like a child, regards this world as his plaything." He also tells the cast that Kreton had "escaped from his nursery" and that he will take him back home. Kreton says goodbye, remarking that he actually envies earthlings for "being so violent... so loving ... so beautifully imperfect" and "so much happier" than they realize. Once the aliens leave, time shifts back to the exact moment before Kreton arrived, leaving the characters widi no memory whatsoever of the events that have just taken place.

Act 1

Act 1 Summary

Set in Maryland, in the home of the Spelding family, the play takes place in the near future. The scene opens in the living room where Roger Spelding delivers a TV broadcast, while his wife sits knitting and their daughter, Ellen, listens to her father. Roger delivers a news report reassuring the public that the object reported in the sky was a meteor rather than a space ship or new high-tech weapon. At the close of his broadcast, he poses with his wife and daughter.

The TV technicians leave and Mr. Spelding accuses Ellen of not listening to his broadcast. She has been distracted, waiting for her beau, John. The two parents tease her about the boy, saying that he lacks motivation. Ellen defends John with his plans to run his farm once they are married. Mr. Spelding extols the virtues of marrying a man with money rather than a farmer of walnuts.

John bursts into the living room out of breath and beckons the family outside. They watch in disbelief as a spaceship lands. Mr. Spelding runs inside to call General Powers, whom he had quoted in his earlier broadcast. The shiny exterior of the craft draws John to take a closer look. A door opens and a man steps out, dressed in an old-fashioned suit. The man introduces himself as Kreton and remarks about his costume being in the wrong style. The Speldings invite him into their house. Kreton seems surprised by the surroundings. Mr. Spelding inquires about Kreton's homeland and he is assured that Kreton does not hail from Mars, but somewhere very far away. Kreton denies his request for a television interview. He informs them that his visit is merely a recreational one, confessing that studying earth has been his hobby for some time. He indicates to the family that their civilization has only just begun.

General Powers enters and Mr. Spelding introduces him to Kreton. The general proceeds to interrogate the visitor while his aide attempts to investigate the spacecraft. At Mr. Spelding's inquiry about delivering the story, General Powers declares the house under Martial Law.

In the study, Kreton tries again to explain to the General that he is from another planet in another solar system, in another dimension. Kreton also warns him that he is able to hear what goes on inside the human mind. At the General's insistence on taking apart the spacecraft, Kreton decides to place a protective field around it. Kreton admits that most people from his world do not have any interest in earth's society at that point in their history. He assures them that his visit is not hostile, though he would like to take charge of the world. A bit delirious from the overwhelming and primitive thoughts of the humans, Kreton retires upstairs to lie down.

Act 1 Analysis

The play opens on the living room of the Speldings, a white, stereotypical mid-century American family. The Speldings live in Maryland, likely because of the proximity to Washington, D.C. and the governmental and political authorities. The temporal setting for the play is described as the near future, but like any piece of work, begins to appear dated as time passes. The Spelding family consists of a small nuclear unit: Mr. Spelding, Mrs. Spelding and their daughter Ellen. Mr. Spelding is a TV reporter and does his broadcasts right from the family living room. This family-centered approach to news delivery reflects the intended white, middle class suburban audience. It can also be seen as a metaphor for the familiarizing of the news, projecting the obvious bias of the source and the questionable integrity of the content.

While Mr. Spelding delivers his broadcast warning the public not to fear the unknown object reportedly soaring through the sky, his wife sits knitting and Ellen listens. At the close of the program, the family poses together for the camera, driving home the value of the 'American family unit.' Once the cameramen leave, Mr. Spelding begins to chastise Ellen for not listening attentively. He teases her about being preoccupied with thoughts of her boyfriend, John. Mr. Spelding criticizes her choice of suitor, claiming that John is unmotivated to accumulate wealth. Mrs. Spelding defends Ellen's right to make her decision with her heart, before Mr. Spelding extols the virtues of the money-driven man, clearly with the intention of wanting 'the best' for his daughter.

The conversation is broken by an abrupt entrance from John, who calls the family outside to see something in the sky. They all watch the spaceship land. Mr. Spelding as the figure of authority runs into the house to telephone General Powers. Earlier in his broadcast, he quoted Powers to reassure the public of the strange object's harmlessness. When the spacecraft opens, a man dressed in a century's old clothing emerges. After initial introductions, the Speldings invite Kreton into their home. In response to the families' questions, the visitor indicates that he hails from a much more advanced civilization and that he has made a hobby of studying the primitive existence on Earth.

When General Powers arrives, he attempts to take control of the situation in a militaristic fashion. He interrogates the visitor to no avail. Kreton, unable to describe the location of his world, can merely indicate that it is situated in another solar system in another dimension. Kreton also warns his hosts that he is able to hear what goes on inside the human mind. This allows him to expose the inconsistencies in their behavior, adding another level to the narration of the play.

General Powers attempts to dismantle the spacecraft with the intention of trying to understand it, but his destructive efforts are squashed before he can begin by Kreton's superior defense capabilities. At the close of Act 1, Kreton assures everyone that his visit is not hostile, that rather he is 'going native' to study the barbaric human society at this point in history. He announces his plan to take charge of their planet and retires upstairs for a nap.

Act 2

Act 2 Summary

The second act opens in the guest bedroom the next morning. Mr. Kreton is lying fully clothed on top of the bed, chatting with the cat. Ellen brings in a tray of breakfast and Kreton informs her that he does not eat food, but rather pops a pill in his mouth and is done. Ellen confesses to him that everyone is very confused about his plans to take over. Kreton tells her that he has summoned the President to discuss it.

Downstairs in the study, General Powers tells his troops to give up trying to get through the force field around the ship. He tells his captain that the whole matter will soon be in the hands of the World Council.

In the living room, Mrs. Spelding questions her husband about asking Kreton to move his spaceship from her rose garden. He dismisses her request. John enters and apologizes for his extended visit. Due to the Martial Law placed over the household, no one is allowed to come or go from the premises. Ellen and Kreton enter. He addresses each of their thoughts and promises Mrs. Spelding that he will move his ship from her flowers.

Kreton erroneously summoned the President of Paraguay, and he thus sends him back with a wave of his hand. General Powers asks Kreton to join him in the study and informs him that the matter has been turned over to Paul Laurent, the Secretary-General of the World Council. Mr. Laurent arrives and questions Kreton, who by way of demonstration floats all of the guards' rifles for a moment to prove that he intends on governing without violence. At this, Mr. Laurent becomes excited about the possibility of removing boundaries between countries, uniting the world and putting an end to war. Kreton reminds him that war is an undeniable aspect of humanity; he describes the civilization as savage, and admits that raw emotion is what intrigues him. Kreton tells them that he has not come to help them, but to revel in their murderous savagery. He reveals his plan to do so through secretly advising the world council and announces that his first project will be a giant war. Mr. Laurent refuses, but Kreton insists that someone who will concede will simply replace him.

Act 2 Analysis

Act 2 opens in the upstairs guest bedroom where Kreton lies fully clothed on top of the bed, apparently holding a conversation with the family cat. The Spelding's precocious daughter Ellen brings in a breakfast tray for the visitor. Kreton informs her that the food is unnecessary because he consumes all of his day's nourishment in the form of one capsule. This can be interpreted as a comment on society's increasing infatuation with pills and is especially relevant given the recent growth trend of pharmaceutical companies.

In an effort to reassure Ellen and the entire household of his benevolent intentions, Kreton announces that he has summoned the President for a discussion. The president who arrives, however, is a bewildered head of Paraguay. This mistake is a foreshadowing of the problems to come. If Kreton has superior intellect in all capacities, it would seem unlikely that he should make such a simple mistake. It is indicative that things are perhaps not what they seem.

General Powers, in his frustration, has begrudgingly handed the matter up the chain of command to the World Council. Mrs. Spelding, also frustrated by the spaceship that has landed in her rose garden, repeatedly asks her husband to request that Kreton move it. Her concerns are dismissed by her husband as being petty, but Kreton with his mind-reading skills, acknowledges her concern and promises to relocate his ship. In this way, he has exposed the internal power struggle between husband and wife in middle class suburbia.

Mr. Laurent, the head of the World Council, joins the scene and after an initial demonstration of Kreton's extraordinary powers, becomes excited about the possibilities of peacefully removing boundaries between countries. With his bluff called, Kreton must remind both generals how essential war is to the human existence. He admits that the raw emotion of human's savage nature is what so intrigues him. His true desire to revel in the murder of war is uncovered and he begins to plot his first project, rearranging the chain of command to suit his purpose.

Act 3

Act 3 Summary

The third act opens in the study, two weeks later. Kreton is seated in front of a map, playing with model airplanes. Mr. Powers enters. Kreton requests some data from him and then questions why he so strongly dislikes him. Kreton suggests that Powers could be jealous about a foreigner's success at their game. Powers replies that the new World Council is merely paralyzed to act against him, rather than supporting his efforts toward an enormous war.

John and Ellen sit in the living room, where she confesses her sense of helplessness. She is overcome with anger when Powers and Kreton enter the room. She declares his motive nothing but sport and claims that his greed is destroying everything. Kreton reminds her that the humans have the power to stop fighting. He exposes this inertia with the example of the Spelding household, saying that her mother dislikes her father, but is too tired to change things and that her father dislikes the lot of them and disapproves of John as a suitor because he wants someone of a better social stature for a son-in-law. Ellen is furious, but unable to argue.

In the study, fifteen minutes before the bombs that will begin the war are due to go off. The entire family, Powers and the new aide all watch as Kreton announces the beginning of the destruction. The family hurls questions at him, but they are interrupted by another ship landing in the yard. A new visitor marches directly to Kreton in the study. Ellen decides that she has held her tongue long enough and interrupts the dialogue. Before she can speak, the new visitor agrees with her that Kreton has no right to interfere with the past. He informs everyone that he and Kreton are the future descendents of humans and that changing the past would change them in the future. He announces that there will be no war and that no one will have any memory of these events.

Kreton, disappointed, tells them that he was merely having fun and the new visitor tells them Kreton is retarded,remaining child-like, having escaped from his nursery to travel back in time. Kreton admits that he had intended to land in 1860 and warns them that the future is terribly boring. The new visitor pulls him back to their space ships and the hands on the Spelding study clock begin to spin backwards.

The Speldings stand in the living room as in the first scene. The initial dialogue repeats.

Act 3 Analysis

The third and final act of the play takes place two weeks following the previous scenes and opens on Kreton playing with model airplanes which suggests a more childlike nature than had previously been indicated. Kreton begins a conversation with General Powers regarding the cold reception of his actions. Powers informs Kreton that while no

one supports his war effort, everyone is paralyzed to act against it. This conversation is a direct metaphor for the political powerlessness inherent in government.

Ellen further verbalizes this sense of helplessness in an expression of anger toward Kreton. In response, he informs her that each person involved has the power to stop fighting. By way of example, he exposes the inertia within the dynamic of the Spelding household, shedding light on a decrepit, though socially acceptable pattern of behavior.

As the countdown to the war continues, tensions mount. Before the scene climaxes, attention is diverted by a second spaceship landing in the yard. A second visitor joins them, ceases Kreton's actions and explains that Kreton did not have the right to mess with the past. He indicates that hey are the future species of humans and that any change in the course of history would alter their own existence. The new visitor denounces Kreton's war and assures the earthlings that they will retain no memory of the preceding events. He further exposes Kreton as being retarded, very childlike in his maturity and irresponsible. Kreton admits having escaped from his nursery and having originally intended to land in 1860. He warns them that the future is terribly boring before being whisked away. As they leave, the hands on the clock begin to spin backward indicating the reversal of time and the first scene of Act 1 begins again with the Speldings discussing the marriage possibilities for their daughter.

The final scene confronts the notion of history, who owns it and who is responsible for maintaining it. Kreton's meddling with the transcribed procession of events is very taboo because it calls into question the linear foundation of our understanding of cause and effect and our very conceptions of time.

Characters

Delton 4

A leader of Kreton's unidentified home planet, Delton 4 is an alien who enters the play at the end, after he is summoned by Ellen Spelding. He explains that Kreton is "morally retarded" and "was able to escape from his nursery." He apologizes for Kreton's actions and takes him home.

Kreton (kree-tahn)

Arriving on Earth from a distant planet in another dimension, Kreton is the "visitor" alluded to in the play's title. Like others who inhabit his home planet, Kreton never needs to eat, is immortal, and never has sex immortality has negated the need for reproduction, and their culture has eliminated passion (sex for pleasure) as a societal evil. Through the powers of his mind, he is able to read the thoughts of others, create invisible force-fields, and cause objects to levitate. Kreton arrives hoping to witness a Civil War battle, but because of a navigational error, he lands in 1957. He invades the home of Roger Spelding and shows a great interest in the day-to-day lives of earthlings, calling them his "hobby." In order to create some excitement for himself, Kreton plays a prank that, he is sure, will cause a worldwide nuclear war. He sees the earth as a playground and hopes that a war will allow him to see the ways that "primitive" humans behave. As a character, he is a curious mix of super intellectual and wide-eyed child.

Conrad Maybery

Ellen's boyfriend, Conrad, is a mild-mannered young fanner. A pacifist (who resents all forms of war), Conrad contrasts the political views of both Roger Spelding and General Powers. One of the play's comic scenes features Kreton attempting to provoke feelings of agression within Conrad which he eventually does, with a soldier whose thoughts about Ellen are broadcast by Kreton. Vidal uses Conrad to lampoon those who conveniently use pacifism as an excuse for their lack of direction and laziness.

General Tom Powers

General Powers is the Army commander assigned to investigate the spacecraft seen hovering over the Speldings' home. Complaining that he doesn't want this assignment and would rather return to his "Laundry Project" (where he oversees the washing and drying of the military's uniforms), Powers suspects that Kreton may be a "hostile alien" who has been sent by a "foreign power" to begin an invasion of the United States. His character is frequently used by Vidal to poke fun at paranoid military attitudes, officious bureaucrats, and the prevalent fear of Communism found in 1950s America.

Ellen Spelding

Ellen is Roger's daughter, a bored college student who wishes for the opportunity to do "something important" like "save the world." She convinces Kreton to teach her how to perform some of the "tricks" with her mind that he can do, and she eventually uses these skills to contact Kreton's superior, Delton 4, and halt the war that Kreton has planned. She also focuses her romantic attentions on Conrad, a local farmer of whom her father disapproves. Ellen is the embodiment of youthful optimism and idealism. She is the only character that Vidal abstains from making look foolish.

Reba Spelding

Reba is Roger's wife and Ellen's mother. Her biggest concern in the play is that fact that Kreton's spacecraft has landed in her rose garden. In Reba, Vidal is making fun of the 1950s ideal of the perfect housewife, a domestic-minded woman obsessed with presenting the perfect image embodied by everything from her delicious apple pie to her beautiful, well-behaved children.

Roger Spelding

A news commentator who believes that UFOs do not exist, Roger's opinions are immediately reversed when his home is visited by an alien from another dimension. He is constantly thinking about the possible ratings his television show will receive when he "breaks" the story of Kreton's visit. When not thinking about his own potential fame, Roger is found scolding Ellen, his daughter, for her choice of a boyfriend. Roger represents the growing role that television has in American society. Already by the 1950s, television had become an important source of information, bestowing considerable status and power on those who controlled it. This explains Roger's eagerness to interview Kreton; his first instinct is not to protect his family from possible harm but to secure the television rights to the alien visitation.

Themes

Politics

The plot of *Visit to a Small Planet* concerns Kreton, an alien visitor, who invades a middle-class home in 1957 America. After he announces his plans to engage the world in a full-scale war for his own entertainment, the characters respond to this threat in ways that reveal their political ideas and ideals. Kreton has used his powers of mind to levitate all of the rifles in the world for fifteen seconds and both General Powers and Roger Spelding assume the Russian Army is behind the stunt. Roger explains to his television audience that the Russians have "launched a new anti-gravity force which suspended all the nfles in the free world some fifty feet off the ground." He continues by stating, "late this afternoon ... Moscow, in an obvious move to avert suspicion, accused the United States of lifting all the nfles in the Communist world one hundred seven feet off the ground." Later, Powers asks Kreton if the United States can officially announce his arrival, for they would like him (and themselves) to "get the best possible break, publicity-wise." These are only some of the ways in which Vidal mocks the United States/Soviet rivalry as well as the then-prevalent Amencan fear of Communism.

Earlier examples of political paranoia occur when Kreton is interviewed by Powers. He tells the alien, "you'll die if it turns out you're a spy or a hostile alien or something like that" and that he suspects Kreton to be "sent here by an alien race to study us, preparatory to invasion." Kreton, however, is above such trivial concerns as land acquisition, and his cool indifference to Powers exacerbates the General's rage. Later, Powers informs Kreton that he has been "classified as a weapon" and that the Pentagon expects a detailed list of his "powers." *Visit to a Small Planet* satirizes politics, revealing the insincerety of its highest ranking officials. Vidal presents politics as little more than a forum for ego-satisfaction and personal gain. Ultimately, Vidal's play invites viewers to notice the fear and suspicion that play such a large role in modern politics while also highlighting what he seems to see as a contradiction in the phrase, "military intelligence."

Patriotism

Closely connected to Vidal's political issues is his examination of patriotism. While author Samuel Johnson once defined patriotism as "the last refuge of a scoundrel," *Visit to a Small Planet* shows how different people define "love of one's country." When he first suspects Kreton of being the representative of a foreign country, General Powers attempts to display his patriotism by telling him, "if your people are thinking of an invasion they should know that we're ready for them. We'll fight them with everything we've got. We'll fight them with the hydrogen bomb, with poison gas, with broken beer bottles if necessary. We'll fight them on the beaches; we'll fight them in the alleys." Powers equates "patriotism" with military might and assumes that his definition of the term and his fervid devotion to American will intimidate Kreton.

After Kreton's threat of war becomes more of a possibility, Roger tells Conrad that he should enlist in the Army; Conrad, however, refuses because he "doesn't want to fight anybody." His pacifism directly opposes General Powers's display of "rough and ready" American spirit. This shocks Kreton, who asks, "Do you love your country?" When Conrad says that he does, Kreton's response shows his own understanding of American patriotism: "Then don't you want to slaughter its enemies'" After Conrad shakes his head, Kreton states, "that's the wrong answer. That is not a proper mid-twentieth century sentiment." Vidal is using Kreton as a way to illustrate Conrad's pacifism and suggest that not *all* patriots and "good Americans" equate "loving one's country" with a desire to "slaughter its enemies." Kreton begins singing old military songs in order to stir patriotic emotions within Conrad; when these fail, he begins evoking names from popular legend and entertainment: "Davy Crockett stood by his guns! Remember the Alamo! Remember the Maine! Remember Errol Flynn on the Burma Road!" However, none of these have any effect. Conrad's attitude towards war is meant to be seen as a more reasonable form of patriotism than that offered by General Powers. Kreton's inability to understand Conrad's ideas shows the alien's simplistic view of what patriotism entails.

Sex

A subplot of the play involves Conrad and Ellen's love affair. When the play begins, they are planning to check into a hotel under the names "Mr. and Mrs. Ollinger"; they have even filled a suitcase with old telephone books and plan on telling Roger that they are "going to the movies." Their furtive sexual scheming is mocked by Kreton, who tells them that, on his planet, sex does not exist, since they have rid themselves of all forms of passion. Throughout the play, Vidal explores American attitudes toward sex by having Kreton attempt to discover why Americans make such a fuss over it. When he asks Ellen if he can watch (for scientific purposes) her "tangle" with another man and is informed by her that his request is "disgusting," the mind-reading alien responds, "but... but it's on your minds so much I simply assumed it was all quite public." Ellen explains that, in America, "we do *think* an awful lot about sex, but we're not supposed to talk about it and we only do it when nobody's looking." This attitude toward even the mention of sex is questioned by both Vidal and Kreton, who remarks, "these primitive taboos. You revel in public slaughter, you pay to watch two men hit each other repeatedly, yet you make love secretly, guiltily and with remorse." This conversation is one in which the audience is invited to question what Vidal sees as a contemporary contradiction: talking about violence is perfectly acceptable and decent, while sex is a forbidden topic and is reduced to a "primitive taboo."

Style

Satire

"Satire" is any work of art that uses ridicule, humor, and wit in order to criticize and provoke change in human nature or social institutions; satire can be found anywhere from Shakespeare (*Measure for Measure*) to an editorial newspaper cartoon. Vidal is widely known as a satirical writer, and *Visit to a Small Planet* is a work that strengthens such a reputation: when Kreton, an alien visitor, invades a middle-class Virginia home, the characters react to him in ways that showcase their fears and frustrations with their own lives. The play examines (and pokes fun at) contemporary ideas about war, the fear of "foreign" invasion, and attitudes toward sex. Vidal ridicules military bureaucracy and paranoia through General Powers, the influence of television on American life with Roger Spelding, and, in general, the irrational, "primitive" impulses that often govern our lives. Through the eyes of Kreton, an alien with little understanding of American life, Vidal is able to offer his viewers an "objective look" at our society and attitudes as well as a commentary on how odd (or even silly) these ideas and attitudes may be.

Setting

Rather than offer his audience a play about aliens that occurs on another planet, Vidal offers his viewers a look at how we would seem "alien" to an extraterrestrial visitor. To accomplish this, Vidal sets his play in a modest, middle-class home, allowing Kreton, the alien, to see a "typical" American family whose concerns are television, college, sex, marriage, and patriotism. Doing so emphasizes how odd many Americans would seem to a "visitor " unaccustomed to our quirks, values, and everyday way of life.

Stereotype

One of Vidal's most prominent satirical targets here is the United States military (and in a larger sense, that American government) and the way that it approaches any form of alien (or foreign) life. In drama, a "stereotype" character is an exaggeration of a certain type of person, such as the lovelorn poet, the disaffected teenager, or the dorky nerd with tape holding his glasses together. General Powers is a stereotype of the American military commander, and Vidal forms this stereotype with a variety of traits. For example, the play begins with him complaining to Roger Spelding that he has been assigned to investigate the appearance of Kreton's spaceship: "Strat-Air tosses it to Major General Spotty McClelland (he's Com Air Int now) who lobs it straight at me so by the time I get back from luncheon I find I've been TD'd C.O.S. Priority 1-A the hell and bloody UFO deal dumped right in my lap." The General's use of so many acronyms and jargon-laden speech parodies the language employed by the military. Adding to this stereotype is the General's complete fear and suspicion of anyone foreign. At first suspecting Kreton of being "a spy sent here by an alien race," the General eventually

accepts the fact that Kreton is from another planet, but not before he tells him that the Pentagon has "classified him as a weapon" because he can create force fields that will "put radar out of business." The General's inability to see Kreton as anything except a possible weapon to be used against enemies of the United States marks him as a stereotype of one-track military minds.

To a certain extent the other characters, with the exception of Ellen, represent stereotypes as well. Roger is a typical broadcaster, more interested in the next "big story" that will elevate his status than he is with the welfare of his family. Likewise, his wife, Reba, is more concerned with the family's outward appearance and how others in the neighborhood will perceive them (her worries that Kreton may have trampled her garden when he landed) than any real threat to their lives. Reba is a stereotype of the unrealistic 1950s housewife ideal like June Cleaver on the *Leave It to Beaver* television series a woman who cooks, cleans, and gardens, yet still looks fresh as a daisy twenty-four hours a day. While Vidal sympathizes more with his views than the other characters, Conrad is still the butt of many jokes about unmotivated young men who halfheartedly fly the flag of pacifism.

Black Humor

"Black humor" refers to comedy created by means not usually regarded as proper subjects for laughter. For example, although *Visit to a Small Planet* is a comedy, the plot concerns an impending nuclear war and the destruction of the entire world for one person's amusement. Although this seems like an odd subject for a series of jokes, Vidal uses the characters' reactions to this event to satirize modern attitudes towards warfare and violence. Vidal's play seems to suggest that any objective visitor to our nation would find many of our ideas and actions ludicrous and, therefore, funny. By using a "typical American family," Vidal also turns the mirror to the audience, letting them see how ridiculous they might act in a similar situation.

Historical Context

McCarthyism and American Life

The mid-1950s marked the height of Americas' "Red Scare" a widespread fear of Communism that reached its peak in the investigations of the House Un-American Activities hearings, led by Senator Joseph McCarthy (a Republican from Wisconsin) In 1950, McCarthy advised President Harry Truman that the State Department was staffed with many Communists and Communist sympathizers. In addition, he suspected that a great number of Communists were working in fields that might influence public opinion, including the film and television industries. In the following years, McCarthy performed what was often called a "witch hunt" to prove the degree to which he felt Communists had infiltrated levels of American society. His hearings grew into popular, televised events where he and others would "Red-Bait" the accused; many entertainers and writers found themselves "blacklisted" (refused employment) either for their often inconsequential Communist affiliations or for refusing to cooperate with what they saw as McCarthy's unconstitutional methods. Events such as the Soviet Union's 1956 invasion of Hungary served to fan McCarthy's fire. McCarthy died in 1957 but not before receiving the formal censure of the United States Senate for his hearings on alleged subversion in the U.S. Army.

Like Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* (1953), *Visit to a Small Planet* attacks (although in a more comic vein) this prominent fear of Communism. On his newscast announcing the impending war with the Soviet Union, Roger Spelding warns, "[Soviet Premier] Nikita Krushchev and his gang" that "Moth-er-and-Father-America are ready." General Powers suspects Kreton of being an "alien spy" sent to the United States to "reconnoiter preparatory to invasion"; his fear of Kreton's origins is a metaphorical look at the red-baiting occurring in the McCarthy hearings. The characters' overall paranoia provoked by Kreton's visit reflects the prominent fear of Communist invasion found in 1950s America, described by Kreton as "the wonderfully primitive assumption that all strangers are hostile."

Nuclear Weapons and Warfare

While nuclear power is now a part of contemporary American life, such was not always the case. Electric power was first produced from atomic energy in Idaho in 1951 and the first United States hydrogen bomb was exploded, at Edniwetok Atoll in the Pacific, in 1952. At this point, nuclear power was something strange and frightening to many Americans; however, atomically generated power was first used in the United States (in Schenectady, New York) in 1955. A growing concern over what nations possessed the knowledge and resources necessary for creating "the bomb" became a routine topic for newscasters, writers, and citizens. Underground "bomb shelters" were also being sold to American homeowners who wanted to avoid the dangers of a possible atomic attack.

Visit to a Small Planet reflects the growing American concern over the possibly of nuclear war. When Kreton's initial attempt at triggering a global war succeeds, General Powers warns him that the Russians "got the bomb, too," to which Kreton replies, "Oh, I hope so!" His attitude toward atomic warfare as "exciting" and a cause for delight contrasts the terror of such an event taking place in the 1950s. Even more indicative of this fear is the way that Kreton begins the war: by causing every rifle in the world to levitate for a few seconds, Kreton plays a prank that causes the two major world powers to prepare for war. The idea of a war being started over such a "minor" event reflects the popular idea of "the button," which would, in the imagination of many Americans, be pressed by a mad foreign leader for an insignificant reason. The fear being that the fate of millions lies in the hands of one or two men's hands.

Critical Overview

Visit to a Small Planet was originally written as a television script; its success in this medium convinced Vidal that it could be reworked for the stage. The play premiered on Broadway in 1957 to critical and commercial success. Brooks Atkinson, writing for the *New York Times*, wrote that, "as a writer of comedy, Gore Vidal is foolish and funny." Atkinson called the play "uproarious." He also noted the fact that, although Vidal had to make his television script longer for the stage, "the padding does not show," for Vidal "makes us look ridiculous in a low comedy carnival that has its own insane logic and never runs out of ideas." Atkinson concluded his review by remarking that *Visit to a Small Planet* is "a topsy-turvy lark that has a lot of humorous vitality. The tone is low; the entertainment highly enjoyable."

After its New York success, the play was made into a film starring Jerry Lewis as Kreton, the alien visitor. However, acclaim for the film was not sung as loudly as before. Writing for the *New York Times*, Howard Thompson stated that while he viewed the play as "fairly contrived stuff, cleverly turned on one obvious, running gag," the film version falls below the play for several reasons. The first is Lewis himself, who offers only "business as usual, the Lewis way." Complaining that Lewis lacked the talent to fill Kreton's role, Thompson writes that, "Mr. Vidal's brightest idea of all that the visitor is a highly civilized bird, curious about us bumbling earthhngs is cut right down to Lewis size." A second reason for the film's failure is that General Powers, "the target of the playwright's devastating cracks aboutPentagon static," has been removed entirely from the film.

The film's lack of success, however, did not hurt Vidal' s reputation (the fact that he did not write the screenplay also helped him escape critical censure). In fact, praise of his wit has been something to which the versatile writer has grown accustomed throughout his career. Called "a scathing critic of every aspect of American life," (according to *Magill's 'Survey of American Literature*) and a writer whose work is described in *The Cambridge Handbook of American Literature* as both "tart" and "penetrating," Vidal has enjoyed a great amount of success and time in the literary spotlight. He is routinely praised for his "outspokenness in satirizing social mores and institutions," whether this satire arises in his plays, novels or essays. While not categorized as a major American playwright, Vidal is certainly regarded as a major American literary figure who, for forty years, has produced a body of work that is noted for its sheer volume, breadth of topics and genres it covers, and the lively critical discussions that it has engendered. While *Visit to a Small Planet* never received the acclaim or amount of criticism that his historical novels or essays on American history have, it nonetheless stands as a representative example of Vidal's satirical mind and desire to uncover the attitudes and assumptions of Americans.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Moran is an author and educator. His essay discusses Vidal's facility with satire.

Gore Vidal once labeled himself America's "current biographer," and *Visit to a Small Planet* can certainly be read and enjoyed as a satirical chapter in the political and cultural biography of the United States. Satire creates its effects by mocking human behaviors and assumptions in an effort to raise a reader or viewer's awareness of what the satirist sees as their foolishness. The satire of this play hits many "targets," such as American attitudes toward sex, military incompetence, bureaucracy, and paranoia. It also pokes fun at the fear of "Communist infiltration" and slogan-spouting patriotism. By using an alien visitor, Vidal is able to provide a "fresh look" at what he sees as modern American issues that deserve our examination. The play's humor derives largely from its suggestion that any such objective look at Americans would reveal them to be very silly people, "absolutely" as Kreton, the alien, observes, "wallowing in the twentieth century."

The play's opening scene immediately establishes its satirical tone. General Powers is complaining about his position to Roger Spelding, and his fear that other military staff members "mean to destroy" his career: he speaks of Lieutenant General Claypoole's assigning him the investigation of a possible UFO because it is "too hot" for him to handle. He sees himself as "the innocent victim of conspiracy and intrigue" because "Claypoole has been trying to get [his] corner office with the three windows and the big waiting room." Powers would rather spend his time on what he sees as the Army's more "important" work the new "Powers Mobile Laundry Unit-K" project. *This* is Powers's chief concern, and the earnestness with which he describes it reveals the Army's love of bureaucracy and emphasis on seemingly unimportant matters: "Lot of big decisions to make in that area: kind of soap to use, things like that. Decided finally on snow-chip flakes. Fine lather. Good detergent. Doesn't harm the fabric *andhas* bluing already built in." The silliness of Powers's concerns are heightened when, fearing that the United States will go to war with the U.S.S.R., he states, "if there's one thing that destroys an army's morale and discipline, it is a major war" because the soldiers "lose more damned sheets and pillowcases." To General Powers, no fate is worse than discovering that "your laundry's a wreck"; to the audience, his "militarization " of the laundry is seen as a satirical jab at the concerns of military leaders.

A second theme raised in the opening conversation is the value that we inhabitants of this "small planet" place on television and the publicity it can create. When he hears of Powers's investigation, Roger (a newscaster) begs him for permission to "break the story," which Powers refuses due to the "Revised Espionage Act." However, Roger is not the only character concerned with his public image. Later in the play, Powers tells Kreton that the United States would like to "announce [his] arrival ourselves" in order to "get the best possible break, publicity-wise." Roger, too, tells Kreton that he "would certainly like to interview" him on television while he's "down here"; his news ratings are more important to him than the fact that his own home has become the site for an extra-terrestrial visitation or that this visitor wants to watch humankind destroy itself. The most obvious mockery of the way that television operates is when Roger begins his

broadcast in which he plans to announce the impending war between the world' stwosuperpowers with "Mother-and-Father America, have you had your milk today? Pour yourself a glass of Cloverdale, the milkier milk" and then segues into the topic at hand with, "and what sort of a day has it been? Well, it's been quite a day. Not since those dark hours before Munich has the free world been so close to the precipice of total war." The banality with which Roger speaks of possible atomic destruction is an exaggeration of the way in which modern newscasters speak of two completely different topics (such as milk and nuclear war) in the same breath and with the same gravity ("A fire killed several hundred people today ... and here are tonight's winning lottery numbers!"). After interviewing Powers (who chuckles and admits that "it doesn't look good"), Roger concludes his broadcast as he began it: after describing the upcoming war as a test of "the morale of a free people," he smoothly asks, "Mother-and-Father-Amenca, have you had your milk today?" Clearly, no disaster can supersede or displace the truly powerful force of American advertising.

Despite these jokes and jabs, it is Kreton, the visitor, who supplies most of the play's satirical attacks. Dressed in the outfit of an 1860s gentleman, he enters the play hoping to witness the Civil War's Battle of Bull Run but instead sees something more amazing: an everyday American family. Explaining that, in terms of his own planet's evolution, civilization on earth is "just beginning," Kreton decides to "go native" and study the "primitive" earthlings. His first observation is one that highlights the pettiness that makes up so much human interaction: "I expected to hear everybody talking about great events: battles, poets, that kind of thing, but of course you don't. You just squabble among yourselves." More "squabbling" ensues when Kreton attempts to learn about sex: when he is told by Ellen that his scientific interest in seeing her make love to Conrad is "disgusting," the mind-reading alien responds, "oh? But... but it's on your minds so much I simply assumed it was all quite public." Ellen explains that earthlings are very private about their sexuality and Kreton's response, "you pay to watch two men hit one another repeatedly, yet you make love secretly, guiltily and with remorse," illustrates the apparent contradiction in American morality: violence is a perfectly acceptable topic (and even a form of entertainment) but sexuality (and the act of human creation) is a "primitive taboo." Like General Powers!s emphasis on the Laundry project, Vidal is again highlighting what he sees as an odd distribution of values.

The values of Conrad, Ellen's boyfriend and a confirmed pacifist, are also placed under scrutiny. One of Vidal's "set-pieces" in the play is Kreton's attempt to evoke Conrad's "primitive" side through the mention of patriotic slogans and the singing of patriotic songs; he believes that "all primitives can be lashed to fever-pitch by selected major chords" and that even a "peace-loving man who grows English walnuts" can be made to embrace the idea of total war. Kreton begins by singing a few verses of "There's No Place Like Home"; when this fails, he switches to "Yankee Doodle," "When Johnny Comes Marching Home" and the World War n anthem, "Comin1 in on a Wing and a Prayer." Vidal's satire here is aimed against the "patriotism " found in such songs, which, when sung by the alien, seem hollow and silly: as the unmoved Conrad says after Kreton tells him, "it's for Mother," "Then let Mother go fight." However, Kreton does discover a way to incite Conrad: by broadcasting the thoughts of a soldier guarding the house who desires Ellen Conrad starts a fistfight which Kreton finds thrilling. Conrad is

then characterized by Kreton as "a pacifist with a hard right, a stealthy left jab and a sly knee to the groin." Even the most staunch pacifist can display "blood lust," and the human tendency to resort to violence (described by Kreton as "complete reversion to type") is offered to the audience as a topic worthy of mockery and humor.

Despite his apparent perfection, however, Kreton possesses a major fault that serves as Vidal's final word on the play's issues. When talking to Ellen, Kreton says that, on his planet, the inhabitants can control time with their minds, communicate tele-pathically, and have rid themselves of every disease (including the common cold). But they have also wiped out "the great killer itself: passion," in an effort to eradicate "love-nest slayings, bad temper" and "world wars." The effects of this destruction of passion are described in Kreton's remark, "and now... we feel nothing. We do nothing. We are perfect." Perfect as they may seem, the inhabitants of Kreton's planet also find life "terribly dull" which inspires Kreton to travel to earth and begin a world war in the first place. In one of his conversations with Rosemary, the Speldings's cat, Kreton explains that he "dotes on people" because of their "primitive addiction to violence" and "because they seethe with emotions" which he finds "bracing and intoxicating." His desire to "wallow shamelessly in their steaming emotions" reveals Vidal's attitude toward his characters and their values: despite the fact that they may behave in ridiculous ways and engage in irrational fighting, at least human beings have emotional lives that, at the very least, make life *interesting*. At the end of the play when Kreton is retrieved by his superior, Delton 4, he tells the Speldmgs, "oh, how I envy you.... For being so violent... so loving ... so beautifully imperfect. And so much happier than you know." Even a "Laundry Project" coordinator or a bumbling broadcaster has a more fulfilling existence than the most "perfect" of aliens. Despite all of the jokes at humanity's expense, it is Vidal's fondness for humanity as a whole that prevents the satire from ever becoming too bitter or the faults he points out from being seen as irredeemable.

Source: Daniel Moran, in an essay for *Drama for Students*, Gale, 1997.

Critical Essay #2

In the following review, New Yorker *drama critic Gibbs offers a mild endorsement for the expanded stage production of Vidal's television play*.

There is enough material in *A Visit to a Small Planet*, by Gore Vidal, for roughly an hour and a half of fine, fantastic comedy. It is somewhat unfortunate that the play at the Booth is obliged to go on for about fifty minutes longer than that, forcing the author to fill in this considerable gap either by stretching out genuinely comic situations almost to the breaking point or by writing in scenes that seem to contain rather less humor than desperation. The extra stuffing, presumably to be explained by the fact that the script is an expansion of one that was originally employed on television, is frequently irritating, but it isn't really calamitous, and I'm sure that you'll have a very pleasant time with Mr. Vidal's cheerful little report on the day the Spacemen came. In neither style nor invention can A *Visit to a Small Planet* be compared with Noel Coward's *Blithe Spirit*, which also dealt with supernatural callers but did so with a precise, sustained, and chilling wit certainly beyond Mr. Vidal's powers and probably even a trifle foreign to his natural disposition. Within its limitations, however, his play is a remarkably lively and agreeable piece of work, and it has the further merit of providing two highly if not, indeed, outrageously gifted comedians, Cyril Ritchard and Eddie Mayehoff, with parts just about perfectly suited to their talents.

The story you are asked to contemplate is concerned with the dreadfully disturbing things that are going to happen sometime next summer in a charming old house belonging to a celebrated newscaster near Manassas, in Virginia, The trouble begins with the landing of a flying saucer on the lawn and the emergence from it of a fascinating stranger, whose name is Kreton. This man is not from Mars, a planet that, in fact, he regards as almost impossible socially, but from some immensity beyond our present poor conception of time and space, and he belongs to a race that, having abolished food and sex, along, of course, with death, inevitably has a good deal of time for travel. His own hobby, as it happens, is the Earth, whose inhabitants amuse him in many ways but especially in their unique capacity for violence. Having hoped to arrive m time for the Battle of Bull Run, he has come equipped with the appropriate costumes, including an extremely handsome Confederate uniform, but his navigation proved faulty, and though he hits the right place, the date, to his embarrassment, is nearly a hundred years off. Deprived of the quaint old war he came to look in on, he can think of nothing to do but start a nice new one of his own, and he has just about finished his arrangements when, happily, his superiors whisk him back to the infinite.

It is quite a plot, combining, as you can see, satire with fantasy, and on the whole Mr. Vidal has done very nicely with it. His achievements are fairly difficult to describe. One particularly enchanting scene, for instance, shows Kreton trying to arouse the proper martial ardor in a young man by singing him a medley of the most terrible war songs ever written; another, involving some interesting sound effects, demonstrates his ability to read a whole stageful of minds simultaneously; another finds him m an intimate conversation with a cat, agreeing with her, as I got it, that it is no more disgusting to eat

mice than to eat bacon; and still another pictures a Pentagon general doing his desperate best to fill in naturally, in quadruplicate a set of official forms classifying his guest and explaining the purpose of his visit in suitable military language. I might go on with these notes indefinitely, but it is obvious that the quality of the original is almost completely lacking in them, and it seems both superfluous and unkind to tax you further. It is probably enough to say that while I could do without a few things, such as a burlesque newscast that struck me as at once tedious and familiar, and a couple of not too exhilarating sequences devoted to young love, I found most of the play considerably funnier than anything else that has turned up this year.

The performances given by Mr. Ritchard, as Kreton, and Mr. Mayehoff, as the general, are in hilarious contrast. Although the action of the play takes place in 1957 and his own garb is that of 1861, Mr. Ritchard's conduct is basically that of a Restoration fop, and this wonderfully mannered elegance is the best of all attitudes for a man engaged in what can only be described as a slumming expedition. Mr. Mayehoff's technique is broader, being modelled more or less on that of the grampus, and no one is better equipped to impersonate a soldier whose tongue can never hope to keep up with one of the slowest minds in the world. At one point, for reasons that escape me now, he has occasion to imitate a mobile laundry unit, and not since Reginald Gardiner gave his famous impression of the sounds made by wallpaper has the art of mimicry reached a more peculiar height. The others in the cast, which Mr. Ritchard took the professional risk of directing himself, include Philip Coolidge, as the newscaster; Sibyl Bowan, as his empty-headed wife; and Sarah Marshall and Conrad Janis, as a pair of young lovers, whose sexual abandon Kreton finds very stimulating a point of view I couldn't always share. They are all quite satisfactory in these subordinate assignments.

Source: Wolcott Gibbs, "Out of Nowhere" in the *New Yorker*, Vol 32, no 52, February 16,1957.

Critical Essay #3

In the following review of the original television broadcast of Visit to a Small Planet, *Gould offers a favorable appraisal of Vidal's play.*

Visit to a Small Planet, seen on Sunday evening via the National Broadcasting Company, was welcome good fun, something off the beaten path in television drama. Not only was it satirical fantasy, a most rare video commodity but also it was satirical fantasy in which all the pieces fitted together.

Gore Vidal, the author, wrote about a gentleman from another dimension who is fascinated by the helpless earth people. Cyril Ritchard portrayed the visitor with great style and relish. And Jack Smight, the director, made sure everyone in the control room kept tongue in cheek. The fruit of their labors was a production that on the whole was an amusing adult lark, a decided credit to the Television Playhouse.

In Mr. Vidal's play the gentleman from some place else is Mr, Kreton, who doesn't disclose his home planet but merely notes he certainly doesn't come from dreary Mars. He arrives in a flying saucer that contains only a straight chair, not elaborate instrument panels. Electronics, it seems, are for primitives.

Upon landing in the back yard of a news commentator's home, Mr. Kreton, who is attired in the dress of the Civil War period, takes over first the household, then the United States Army and finally "the world organization." He has the power to know what other people are thinking, which proves especially sticky for an Army general accustomed to having a situation m hand Kreton has less luck in penetrating the mind of the world body's secretary general; constant attendance at international conferences has muddled the secretary's thoughts.

Mr. Kreton explains to the earth people that they will not be civilized for a thousand years and will thrive only on violence and savagery. To keep them contented and happy he will start a war and the children may stay up a little late to see the bombing. He is deaf to the entreaties of the earth people, including the general, that they are trying to outgrow war.

In the nick of time another emissary arrives in a saucer. Kreton has broken the rules of some place else; it is forbidden to tamper with the past because the residents of the neighboring planet are descendants of earth people. Poor Mr. Kreton made a mistake and thought he was coming to earth in 1860, not 1960.

Kreton takes his leave somewhat sorrowfully. After all, with a little luck, he might go back into history and restage the Civil War so that this time the South won. But the earth people of today can only face a thoroughly dull existence, just peace and more peace,

Mr. Vidal got across his points of social commentary but never lost his sense of humor and light touch. Much of his dialogue was extremely bright and his characterizations rang true.

As Kreton, Mr. Ritchard was a perfect choice. He lent credibility to the visitor from outer space yet at the same time made his audience feel party to a theatrical romp. Alan Reed caught both the humor and poignancy of the general and Theodore Bickel was persuasively sincere in the small yet vital role of the world organization secretary. Edward Andrews was straightforward as the news commentator.

Mr. Smight's direction was inventive and deft and responsible for many a chuckle in its own right This was especially apparent in the closing shot of one flying saucer hopping and skipping through the sky with carefree abandon.

Source: Jack Gould, in a review of *Visit to a Small Planet* in the *New York Times*, Vol 104, no 35536, May 11,1955, p. 42

Adaptations

Visit to a Small Planet was adapted as a film by Edmund Beloin and Henry Garson, with Jerry Lewis as Kreton. Released by Paramount in 1960. Available on video.

Topics for Further Study

Vidal's subtitle for the play is A *Comedy Akin to a Vaudeville*. Locate sources that describe what vaudeville theater was like and explain how the play resembles this faded American theatrical form.

Research the McCarthy trials and the impact they had on American life. Compare and contrast your findings with the way that Vidal presents the fear of Communism in his play.

The nuclear war that Kreton almost causes can be compared to the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962, a nuclear standoff between the U.S. and the Soviet Union. Research this topic and compare the role that then President John F. Kennedy played in averting this disaster.

Compare and Contrast

1950s: American fear of Communism increases, spurred by the U.S.S.R.'s signing of a 30-year pact with Communist China (in 1950), North Korea's invasion of South Korea (1950), the passing of the McCarran Act which calls for severe restrictions against allowing Communists into the United States or of immigrants who have belonged to totalitarian organizations (1950), and the mid-decade McCarthy hearings that attempt to uncover Communist infiltration m all levels of American society.

Today: Communism has ceased to be viable world power. The former Soviet Communist empire is now broken into smaller nations, each with its own form of government. The Communist-controlled state of East Germany faded with the reunification of East and West Germany and the fall of the Berlin Wall. China remains the only large country to still employ Communist principles.

1950s: Nuclear power rises as both a global and national concern; the United States tests the Hydrogen bomb in 1952 and electric power is first created by atomic means in 1955.

Today: Although the threat of nuclear devastation has been somewhat allayed by the breakdown of the Soviet Union, many politicians and leaders still call for increased disarmament. Nuclear power has become more a part of American life, despite a horrible 1979 scare at Three Mile Island, Pennsylvania and, in 1986, the world's worst nuclear accident at the Chernobyl Power Station (in the Soviet Union), where 133,000 are evacuated and clouds of fallout affect all Europe.

1950s: Science-fiction becomes a popular (although somewhat critically dismissed) art form: initially sparked by Orson Welles's 1938 radio production of H. G. Wells *The War of the Worlds*, which caused considerable panic, American interest in extraterrestrial life is found in Ray Bradbury's successful collection of stories, *The Martian Chronicles*.

Today: Science-fiction is an established genre for many writers and filmmakers: novelists such as the late Robert A. Heinlein and Arthur C. Clarke are popular favorites; films such as *E.T., the Extra-Terrestrial* (1982) and the re-release of the *Star Wars* trilogy break box-office records; *The X-Files*, a television show about FBI agents investigating alien and other unexplained activity on earth, becomes a highly-rated and critically-successful series (ironically, the show plays upon paranoia and suspicion of government conspiracy elements prevalent in the red-baiting 1950s).

1950s: Television becomes a major force in American political and social life: in 1955, there are 33,5 million television sets in American homes. In 1957, NBC presents the first videotaped national broadcast: the Eisenhower/Nixon inauguration.

Today: By 1995, there are 95.9 million television sets in American homes; cable TV and satellite dishes are offering greater services, choice of programming and access to worldwide news. The American public has become more and more demanding about

the immediacy of their information. Live events such as the O. J. Simpson murder trial are watched by millions worldwide.

Research the history of American television and explain what major changes in broadcasting took place in the 1950s.

What Do I Read Next?

Arthur Miller's 1953 play *The Crucible* presents the chaos of a Salem witch trial as a way to explore the effects of McCarthyism on the lives of Americans.

Eugene Burdick and Harvey Wheeler's suspense novel, *Fail-Safe*, was an incredible success when published, largely because of its theoretical look at what would happen if an accident caused six American atomic bombers to attack the U.S.S.R. without the chance of being recalled.

Julian is Vidal's 1965 novel that made him a celebrity. This is the first of his historical fiction works; in it, readers follow the exploits of the fourth-century Roman Emperor who tried to abolish Christianity.

Vidal's *Washington* D.C. (1967) is a historical novel that spans the eras of the New Deal and McCarthyism.

The Best Man: A Play of Politics is Vidal's I960 play (revised in 1977) that looks at a campaign race for political office and those affected by it.

Live from Golgotha, Vidal's 1992 satire of the television industry in which he imagines modern "coverage" of Christ's crucifixion.

Rita Kleinfelder's *When We Were Young: A Baby Boomer Yearbook* (1993) contains interesting information about the political, social, and cultural lives of mid-twentieth-century Americans.

Jeff Kisseloff s *The Box: An Oral History of Television* (1995) presents the history of the medium in a conversational, easy-to-follow format.

Breakfast of Champions, Kurt Vonnegut's 1973 novel, offers (like *Visit to a Small Planet*) a top-down satirical look at American politics, government, and sexual mores.

Further Study

Contemporary Literary Criticism, Gale (Detroit), 1985, pp. 402-12

A critical overview of many of Vidal's works, this reference entry addresses the author's background and his work in a variety of genres

Pemberton, William E "Gore Vidal," in *Magitt's Survey of American Literature*, Vol. 6, Marshall Cavendish, pp. 1998-2008

Another overview of Vidal's career with critcal analysis of the author's major works

Bibliography

Atkinson, Brooks. Review of *Visit to a Small Planet* in the *New York Times*, February 8,1957, p. 18.

Salzman, Jack, editor. "Gore Vidal," in *The Cambridge Handbook of American Literature*, Cambridge University Press, p 248.

Thompson, Howard Review of *Visit to a Small Planet* m the *New York Times*, April 14,1960, p 34.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Drama for Students (DfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, DfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of DfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of DfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in DfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by DfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

DfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Drama for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Drama for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Drama for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from DfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from DfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of DfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Drama for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of DfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Drama for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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