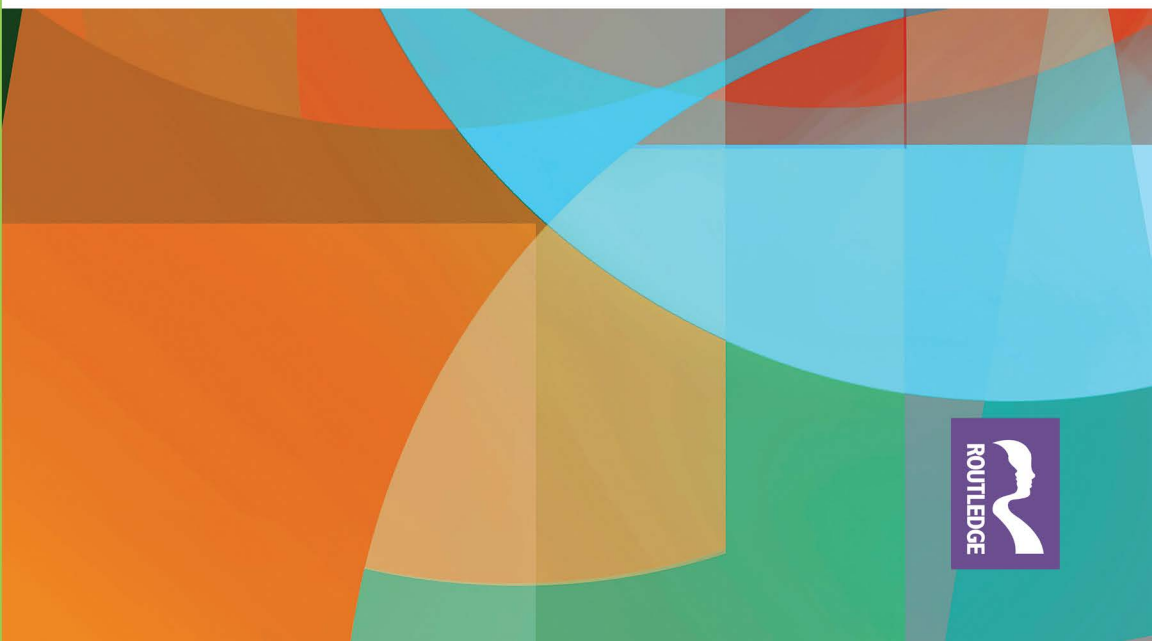
GORE VIDAL AND ANTIQUITY

SEX, POLITICS AND RELIGION

Quentin J. Broughall



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This book examines Gore Vidal's lifelong engagement with the ancient world. Incorporating material from his novels, essays, screenplays, and plays, it argues that his interaction with antiquity was central to the way in which he viewed himself, his writing, and his world. Divided between the three primary subjects of his writing – sex, politics, and religion – this book traces the lengthy dialogue between Vidal and antiquity over the course of his sixty-year career.

Broughall analyses Vidal's portrayals of the ancient past in novels such as *Julian* (1964), *Creation* (1981), and *Live from Golgotha* (1992). He also shows how classical literature inspired Vidal's other fiction, such as *The City and the Pillar* (1948), *Myra Breckinridge* (1968), and his *Narratives of Empire* (1967–2000) novels. Beyond his fiction, Broughall examines the ways in which antiquity influenced Vidal's careers as a playwright, an essayist, and a satirist, and evaluates the influence of classical authors and their works upon him.

Of interest to students and scholars in classical studies, reception studies, American politics and literature, and the work of Gore Vidal, this volume presents an original perspective on one of the most provocative writers and intellectuals in post-war American letters. It offers new insights into Vidal's attitudes, influences and beliefs, and throws fresh light upon his patrician self-fashioning and his mercurial output.

Quentin J. Broughall is a classicist and writer from Ireland. His research interests are centred on the reception of antiquity in the Anglophone world during the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries, especially regarding changing perceptions of imperial Rome in Britain and the United States. He is currently writing a novel.

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For my parents, Denis and Imelda.
All that I am, or hope to be, I owe to them.

Contents

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When I conceived the idea for my first book, I could never have imagined that I would write it during a global pandemic. Of necessity, this stymied some of my research plans and curtailed others. Like many, however, I found a way. But this is in no small part due to the kindness and generosity of others, near and far, who provided me with invaluable help during the course of this project.

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Introduction

> The end depends on the beginning.
>
> Manilius, *Astronomica*, 4.16

> I am a Stoic, a Roman, a classicist.[1]
>
> Gore Vidal (1979)

The last of the Romans

On the evening of 31 July 2012, Gore Vidal died at his home in Los Angeles at the age of eighty-six. Aptly, for one who had for so long cultivated an image of himself as a Roman patrician, he was eulogized in classical terms. In its obituary, the *New York Times* proclaimed Vidal to have been an 'Augustan' figure, while the *Boston Globe* suggested that he had been 'to the toga born'; *Salon* titled its piece 'Gore Vidal: the Virgil of American Populism'; and *The Nation* paid tribute to its long-time contributor with a piece entitled 'Hail and Farewell, Gore Vidal'.[2] In his article for *Thought Catalog*, 'The Last Roman: What Gore Vidal Taught Us', Mark Dery drew attention to Vidal's Roman credentials, writing that '[t]he index to [his 1992 essay collection] *United States* reads like Suetonius' idea of the *Yellow Pages*: Agrippa, Augustus, Caligula, Cato, Catullus, Claudius, Juvenal, Lucretius, Nero, Petronius, Seneca, Vespasian, Virgil'.[3]

Nor were all of these pieces uncritical of Vidal. Tom Junod's piece for *Esquire*, 'Gore Vidal, American Roman', took him to task for writing out of 'entitlement' and for 'advantage', while presenting to the public an artificial Roman mask and delighting in alleged American decline. He remarked that Vidal reminded him of 'a man who might have been asked to play a corrupt Roman Senator in [an] epic from the Fifties'.[4] Junod wondered 'what kind of American wants to be a Roman?': 'What kind of American goes through life as if he were to the toga born, and his life's greatest tragedy is that he has to endure it wearing slacks?'[5]

Mark Dery thought that Junod's obituary portrayed Vidal 'as more Caligulan than Ciceronian, a truculent old crank gloating over American decline'.[6] He admitted in his own article, however, that '[b]y the time the curtain fell, Vidal's Last-Roman-Senator-Quoting-Suetonius-Amid-the-Ruins routine had begun to pall'.[7] Even Vidal's one-time protégé Christopher Hitchens had suggested in 2010 that,

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'[f]or some years now, [Vidal's] stock-in-trade has been that of the last Roman'.[8] But, having written one of his most acclaimed novels about Julian the Apostate, another claimant for the title of *ultimus Romanorum*, or 'the last of the Romans', Vidal would have revelled in the sobriquet, however it was applied.[9]

Although Gore Vidal cultivated an image of patrician superiority throughout his career, he was, in certain ways, 'born in a toga'.[10] He characteristically both encouraged and dismissed any myth-making surrounding his birth on 3 October 1925 with a classical reference, writing, '[c]ontrary to legend, I was born of mortal woman, and if Zeus sired me, there is no record on file at the Cadet Hospital at the US Military Academy, West Point'.[11] But this 'small, blond [boy], with a *retroussé* nose as yet unfurled in all its Roman glory'[12] was born into a well-connected Washington political family, and enjoyed extraordinary access to the corridors of American power throughout his youth.

To emphasize his democratic lineage, Vidal liked to say that he came 'from a long line of tribunes to the people'.[13] His maternal grandfather, Thomas Pryor Gore, was a three-term senator for Oklahoma and a controversial, isolationist Democrat.[14] Senator Gore was the single greatest influence on his grandson, helping him to forge a political identity as populist as it was patrician. Vidal grew up at his grandparents' home in Rock Creek Park in the northern suburbs of Washington D.C., where he read to his blind grandfather and regularly accompanied him to the Senate. And it was in Senator Gore's library of eight thousand volumes that Vidal first gained a 'rigorous education in history, political science and classical literature'.[15]

Here, Vidal could be found 'reading into the night, working his way through Greek and Roman history, [and] the Founding Fathers of the American Republic'.[16] He claimed that the first 'grown-up book' he had ever read there at the age of seven was *Tales from Livy*.[17] Since there were 'about a hundred books about the Roman Empire'[18] in his grandfather's library, he gradually advanced to the major Roman authors in translation, including Tacitus, Ovid, and Suetonius. These presented far livelier fare than the 'dreary'[19] passages of Julius Caesar and Cornelius Nepos he was soon forced to study in Latin class at school. Vidal's fascination with classical Rome was further fuelled by the Hollywood films he watched throughout his childhood, such as *Roman Scandals* (1933) and *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1935).[20]

Modelled on ancient Rome in its neo-classical layout, architecture and monuments, Vidal's hometown represented a 'Roman theme park'[21] to him throughout his youth. He explained that, '[o]nce I got interested in Greece and Rome, I used to haunt that part of Washington [around the Lincoln Memorial], imagining myself in ancient Rome'.[22] While not yet the *caput mundi*, or world capital, it would become after the Second World War, Washington continued to be transformed into a 'New Rome' during Vidal's childhood. Despite the Great Depression, major new government buildings in the city's characteristic neo-classical style were constructed, most of which the young Vidal perceived as 'Roman palaces'.[23]

But, although already a confirmed Romanophile, Vidal did not neglect the Greeks. As a child, one of his favourite books was Caroline Dale Snedeker's *The Spartan* (1912).[24] Her novel relates the story of Aristodemos, an Athenian boy

taken to Sparta, who must redeem himself after he is accused of cowardice at the Battle of Thermopylae. When asked a few years before his death to choose the book that had had the most influence upon him, Vidal selected Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*.[25] He first read the work as a teenager, and regularly re-read it throughout his life. Vidal also later invoked Greek mythological analogies when discussing the family troubles that marred his childhood, calling himself 'the Kid from Colchis' and claiming to have been 'brought up in the [H]ouse of Atreus'.[26]

It was in the Roman world, however, that Gore Vidal found his identity.[27] Once asked what made him 'such a Roman', he responded simply, with a shrug, 'Rome'.[28] When he moved there in 1963, he explained that it was because '[i]t was always the city that settled things for me. [. . .] Rome and only Rome'.[29] Believing himself to come from 'Roman stock', he avowed an atavistic sense of homecoming that transcended mere cultural or intellectual affinity: 'I was a Roman. It was in my blood, in my ancestry'.[30] He traced his surname back to the Latin word *vitalis*, or life-giving, and claimed to be descended through his paternal Swiss ancestors from Roman Raetians 'placed in the Alps by Tiberius to defend the frontiers'.[31] Far-fetched though such a genealogy was, Vidal's identification with a hardy Alpine tribe who became loyal citizens of Rome at the birth of its empire was typical of his abiding efforts to connect himself to Roman civilization.[32]

Many physical descriptions of Vidal from throughout his life observed a classical likeness, if not always a Roman one. The author Cecilia Sternberg noted that the young Gore Vidal 'look[ed] like an archaic Apollo [. . .][,] whose face was curiously of the antique world, like a Greek mask, but by no means a tragic one'.[33] The actor Anthony Quinn remarked that he 'looked so Roman[,] [. . .] like somebody who had once been the emperor', while Martin Amis suggested that Vidal looked like 'Rock Hudson meets the Emperor Hadrian'.[34] His friend Michael Mewshaw echoed these descriptions: 'In profile, Vidal's face might have been a cameo carved on an ancient medallion – high forehead, aquiline nose, and slightly swollen, slightly insolent mouth', though Vidal joked that by the time they met in the mid-1970s he had become 'just another classical ruin'.[35]

For most of his career, Vidal lived in Italy, dividing his time between an apartment in Rome and a villa in Ravello, each of which possessed its own classical associations.[36] Just down the street from the Pantheon, his Roman penthouse overlooked the ancient temple complex of the Largo di Torre Argentina, where Julius Caesar was assassinated.[37] He also chose to live in the historical heart of Old Rome, rather than the Janiculum, traditionally the American quarter of the city.[38] Asked in Federico Fellini's *Roma* (1972) why he chose to live in Rome, Vidal suggested that there was no better place to watch the end of the world than from a city that called itself eternal.[39]

La Rondinaia, or the 'Swallow's Nest', was a lavish villa set into the lofty cliffs of the Amalfi Coast above Ravello. It boasted a Roman floor plan and a panoramic view of the Gulf of Salerno, including the distant ruins of Paestum.[40] Amid such Arcadian surroundings, Vidal said that he felt 'ancient life all around', claiming that the area had once been sacred to Pan, and that the cave of Polyphemus lay below

his villa.[41] It was perhaps the fact that Ravello had been part of Magna Graecia, or Greater Greece, in antiquity that most attracted Vidal, giving him a permanent residence whose historical resonances combined Greek and Roman history. He once said the literary award he most valued was the Greek Cultural Association's International Prize, which he received from 'the cities of *Magna Graecia*' for his 'contribution to the classical world' with his novels *Julian* (1964) and *Creation* (1981).[42]

But it was in the summer of 1939, on a school trip to Europe, that Vidal first consummated his love affair with Greco-Roman antiquity. He later described his first, two-week visit to Rome as '[t]he highlight of my school days', feeling 'ecstatic' throughout and '[a]t last [. . .] where I belonged'.[43] Calling it 'a dream come true', he said that 'everything in my life had prepared me for Rome; all my reading, quite a few movies; I felt I was home'.[44] While attending an opera performance at the Baths of Caracalla, Vidal even came face to face with Benito Mussolini, fascist Italy's own 'sawdust Caesar'.[45]

One day, while visiting the Roman Forum with his school group, Vidal stopped at the site of its ongoing excavations and discovered the head of a small statue poking out of the ground at his feet. He alleged that he had dug out the artefact and hid it beneath his jacket. But his attempted theft did not go unnoticed and his teacher forced him to put it back. Whether Vidal embroidered, or even invented, this tale, it speaks of his longing to own a piece of the classical past, by whatever means possible. Although stymied in his efforts on this occasion, Gore Vidal would arguably spend the rest of his life trying to possess antiquity in one form or another.

Gore Vidal's Greece and Rome

Despite being a mediocre classics student at school and never attending university, Vidal became a passionate amateur scholar of the ancient world. He possessed a genuine interest in classical art, archaeology, history, literature and philosophy (though not the Greek or Latin languages, except in basic terms).[46] Vidal went so far as to refer to his passion for antiquity as 'the engine room' of his thought, praising one scholar, Marcie Frank, for capturing the importance of the 'universalism'[47] he derived from it. Although his multivalent life and career resist reduction to one concept or theory, Vidal's engagement with the classical world stands out as one of the chief intellectual mechanisms powering his mercurial intellect and its multifarious output.

During his prolific, sixty-year career, Vidal returned repeatedly to the subject, and the setting, of classical antiquity in his essays, novels, and works for the stage and screen. Starting with *The Judgment of Paris* (1952), Vidal's literary career is marked, as if with milestones, by works of fiction depicting antiquity in a variety of guises. At the heart of these classically-set works is his acclaimed novel *Julian* (1964), although *Creation* (1981) also enjoyed its own popularity. Many of his other novels betray debts to ancient literature in their plots, themes or structures, such as *Myra Breckinridge* (1968) and *Two Sisters* (1970), while his numerous essays refer liberally to the classical world.

In addition, Vidal came to prominence in the post-war era, when classical knowledge was starting to become a marginalized discourse in literary and intellectual circles in the United States.[48] Throughout this period, American classics continued to develop into a professional academic discipline in a process that had begun during the nineteenth century.[49] With the fulcrum of the discipline turning – using Vidal's terminology – from the 'Agora' to 'Academe',[50] Greece and Rome assumed a profile increasingly polarized between their often-facile portrayal in Hollywood films and their more rarefied appreciation in university scholarship. Though not unique in post-war literature, Vidal's classicism was unusual in its ability to bestride the popular and the scholarly strands of American classical reception.[51]

Samuel F. Pickering has suggested that, 'for most readers [of Vidal], Suetonius, Plutarch, and Herodotus sound like the names of pizza restaurants and reek more of pepperoni and the St Pauli girl than they do of history'.[52] But the critical and commercial success of *Julian* and (to a lesser extent) *Creation* epitomize Vidal's accomplishment in transmitting the continued importance of the ancient world to the American public. The impressive sales figures of both novels emphasize the sheer numbers who read Vidal's portrayals of antiquity.

Julian was selected for the Book-of-the-Month Club, which helped it to the top ten of the *New York Times* bestseller list for thirty-two weeks; *Creation*, meanwhile, sold over 120,000 copies upon its publication and spent four months on the American bestseller list, still remaining one of his most-read works a decade later.[53] Even works written by Vidal that foundered commercially, such as the movie *Caligula* (1979) or his novel *Live from Golgotha* (1992), achieved a popular profile, if only through coverage of the controversy they provoked.

But arguably just as important as the success of Vidal's fictional portrayals of antiquity was his fantasy of himself as a Roman patrician. Robert F. Kiernan has proposed that Vidal was 'less a storyteller than a performer', and '[t]he Vidalian persona, *con brio*, [wa]s the ultimate achievement of Vidal's art'.[54] Vidal's character and voice are stamped all over his works, an inescapable feature of his fiction as well as non-fiction, and his late-blooming career as a cameo actor in Hollywood testifies to a genuine talent for performance. In media appearances, Vidal presented himself in the form of an arrogant, informed and witty patrician, enjoying insider knowledge, even as he trumpeted his outsider status. Few understood the power of television as well as Vidal, and he exploited it mercilessly in the name of publicizing his profile and propagating his opinions. By embodying, however artificially, the perceived characteristics of a Roman aristocrat, his performance of the stoic, world-weary Roman senator brought alive the classical past in a memorable fashion that has remained an essential component of his image.

Although early novels, such as *The City and the Pillar* (1948), contain vague allusions to antiquity, Vidal's works from the 1950s betray an increasingly evident debt. In 1950, he set himself an extensive course of classical reading (in translation), the results of which, he claimed, were nothing less than 'revelatory', and had left him 'stunned'.[55] In only four months, he asserted that he had read 'all of Plato' and 'all of Vergil',[56] as well as Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*.

The influence of this epiphany on Vidal's aesthetic and intellectual development was immediately manifested in his next novel, *The Judgment of Paris* (1952). Its title and structure derived from the eponymous Greek myth, and its closing chapter contained lengthy classical quotations interspersed with its text.[57] Being 'oversteeped'[58] in classical literature in this way also inspired Vidal's first published essay, 'The Twelve Caesars' (1959 [but possibly written in 1952]), which examined the confluence of sexual and political power in its ancient and modern forms.[59]

Although it took another decade to be realized, his epiphany's most important legacy was in providing Vidal with the idea for his novel *Julian*, a fictionalized biography of Julian the Apostate. In the interim, he worked uncredited on the screenplay for the Hollywood film *Ben-Hur* (1959) and adapted the Friedrich Dürrenmatt play *Romulus* (1962), each set at opposite ends of the history of the Roman Empire. Owing to the combined success of his bestselling novels *Julian* (1964), *Myra Breckinridge* (1968) and *Burr* (1973), Vidal's hectic writing schedule did not allow him to return to portraying antiquity for a decade. But it remained at the back of his mind and, in the meantime, percolated into his other writings.

From the beginning of the 1970s, Vidal planned a novel set in the fifth century B.C.E., which became *Creation* (1981), his most wide-ranging panorama of the ancient world. Less successfully, he also spent the second half of the decade working on his *Caligula* project, a film biopic of the controversial Roman emperor, only to disown the completed 1979 movie. By then, however, Vidal's focus had shifted to American history and the task of completing his *Narratives of Empire* (1967–2000) series of novels. His last work set in antiquity was *Live from Golgotha* (1992), an irreverent satire on Christianity. A number of Vidal's other classically themed projects never saw the light of day, including a planned film adaptation of *Julian*, as well as his screenplays *The Golden Age of Pericles* and *Count Belisarius*.[60]

Gore Vidal alleged that his first question upon arriving as a student at Phillips Exeter Academy was 'When do we study the Roman Empire?'[61] But, instead of learning about Roman imperial history, he was 'persecuted with Julius Caesar's *Gallic Wars*' and 'subjected to Latin irregular verbs for four years'.[62] As a result, after some initial success in the subject, his grades in Latin never travelled far above a D.[63] In 'The Bride Wore a Business Suit' (1943), an early short story, he depicted a protagonist, like himself, who is preoccupied with whether or not he will pass Latin and graduate.[64] Vidal also had little or no Greek beyond the basics, admitting in his memoir *Palimpsest* (1995) that, for years, he had been wrongly pronouncing the word 'palimpsest' and misunderstanding its meaning.[65] He was a long way from President James Garfield, whom he once portrayed as having the ability to 'write Greek with one hand and Latin with the other'.[66]

Although he suggested that he had 'forgotten eight years of Latin',[67] Vidal's occasional use of the language suggests some level of retention. In his play *Romulus* (1962), he has the eponymous emperor suggest that '[o]ur ablatives, our subjunctives, our genitives are all that we have left to pass on to future generations'.[68] In his novels, Vidal sometimes made ironic use of Latin for character names, as

in *Messiah* (1954), where the surname of the self-proclaimed prophet John Cave translates as 'beware', and the first name of his obfuscating sibyl Clarissa Lessing as 'most clear'. In his essays, he often sought clarification for a political term such as 'radical' or 'liberal' by tracing their Latin origins.[69] Vidal also expressed a distaste for the misapplication of Latin grammar, such as popular use of the term 'media' in the singular, and once took Clive James to task for confusing 'ad hoc' with 'de facto'.[70]

Whatever his limitations as a linguist, Vidal had a clear command of the Greek and Latin authors in translation. After his extended programme of classical study in the early 1950s, he never ceased to read about the ancient world. At the conclusion of *Julian*, for instance, he included a partial bibliography of texts he had consulted. These included the main ancient sources on the subject, such as the works of Julian, Ammianus Marcellinus and Libanius, as well as classic, multivolume histories of the period, such as Edward Gibbon's *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776–88) and John Bagnell Bury's *History of the Later Roman Empire* (1889–1923). But his research also included contemporary classical scholarship, such as Glanville Downey's *Ancient Antioch* (1962) and Maarten J. Vermaseren's *Mithras: The Secret God* (1963).

Despite a lifelong aversion to the 'scholar-squirrels'[71] of academia, Vidal struck up friendships with a number of classicists over his career. These ranged from Moses Finley, whose Homeric scholarship was a major influence on *Creation*, to James Tatum, who was the first to write at length about Vidal's passion for ancient Rome.[72] Vidal also completed the research for *Julian* and *Creation* at the American Academy in Rome, whose classical library of over 100,000 volumes provided him with a rich scholarly resource. He defined his process there as 'looking for little, bright, glittering bits of porphyry and gold-leaf to put together in a pattern'[73]; a description unfair to the depth of his research, even as it captures Vidal's interest in finding colourful facts to complement his fiction.

In his novel *Empire* (1987), Caroline Sanford is depicted having once been advised that 'one ought always to be ready with an apt classical allusion in order not to use it'[74] – but this was not advice Vidal took. Like mica glittering in granite, classical references abound in his prolific oeuvre, appearing in abundance even in works not set in antiquity. At times, these furnish merely surface decoration, but they could also present sophisticated allusions worthy of a professional classicist. In *Creation*, for instance, Vidal portrays the obscure ancient figure Pigres of Halicarnassus rewriting Homer's *Iliad* centuries later, a scene that he uses to make 'a metafictional joke about authorial belatedness'.[75] He also demonstrates a sure command of the chronological span of antiquity and its connectedness, depicting in *Julian* the young emperor-to-be examining the Persian shields still on display in the Painted Portico in Athens, eight hundred years after the Greco-Persian Wars.[76]

Considering the diversity of Vidal's output, however, it can be challenging to define his aesthetic approach and his guiding sensibility. He acknowledged as much himself, remarking that, owing to its varied subjects and periods, 'the general pattern [of my career] isn't easy to work out'.[77] He suggested that his

novels could be divided into his own self-defined categories of 'reflections' and 'inventions'; by which he meant his historical fiction, such as the *Narratives of Empire* novels, and his experimental fiction, such as *Myra Breckinridge*.[78] But he observed there was 'a Roman cast' to the classicism of the former, and that the latter owed more to the ancient novel than to its modern cousin.[79]

In his 1974 study of his works, Bernard F. Dick argued that Vidal's 'vast reading' had 'made his standards rigidly classical' as a novelist:

> When it comes to fiction, Vidal is a classicist; his novels are as plot-centred as Aristotle would want them to be – traditional, often intricate, but rarely innovative. It is his classicism, not his expatriation or even his charmed life, that sets him apart from his contemporaries. [. . .] Even [*Myra Breckinridge*], which supposedly reflected the sexual freedom of the sixties, had more in common with the Age of Petronius than it did with the Age of Aquarius.[80]

But Vidal's engagement with antiquity extended far beyond his structural approach to fiction. When one looks at the totality of Vidal's works, a number of themes recur, which further help to illuminate his writings and clarify their relationship to the ancient world.

On its most fundamental level, the primary theme of Gore Vidal's writing is power: who possesses it, how they use it, and what it means. Admitting that '[he] never wrote about "the little people"', Vidal explained that he '[did not] write about victims, so much as [. . .] about the people who have power', claiming to be 'one of the few [writers] who understands how power works'.[81] He called it 'a fascinating theme' and suggested that 'American writers have shied away [. . .] from [. . .] dealing with power': 'With most people, it is isn't love they want, it isn't even sex they want; what they really want is power over another person'.[82] Set down in black and white, Vidal's obsession with power appears imperious and insensitive, not to mention out of touch with contemporary sensitivities about social justice.

Although he championed his credentials as a populist, Vidal enjoyed a life of extraordinary privilege. His parents were each from well-to-do families, and, from the ages of ten to sixteen, he was the stepson of Hugh D. Auchincloss, one of the wealthiest men in the United States. Living what he unapologetically called 'the life of a very rich prince', Vidal claimed to have grown up 'unconscious of class differences'.[83] But it is race, rather than class, that has been identified as Vidal's 'greatest blindness'.[84] Apart from his civil rights-themed play *Weekend* (1968), the works of Gore Vidal portray a mostly white world of exclusivity and power, as Bernard F. Dick noted: '[M]ost of Vidal's characters [. . .] belong to that raceless, creedless, and colourless aristocracy where names are honorifics with no trace of an immigrant background or an ethnic association'.[85]

Coupled with Vidal's condescending and narcissistic persona, this tendency has led to him being perceived as an unsympathetic elitist. But, as Dennis Altman has argued, much of this reputation is due to Vidal not taking proper account of the social structures and conditions behind power, owing to a

combination of his devotion to the American cult of individualism and his lack of a 'sociological imagination'.[86] To Altman, these faults occluded the overlaid strata of social, racial, and sexual identity in Vidal's top-down analyses of power: 'The very features of Vidal's work which make him attractive to libertarians of both the left and the right are those that limit his appreciation of how inequality and inferiority are maintained through complex social and psychological factors'.[87]

But, despite the inherent bias of his approach, Vidal seems, in his own mind, to have been seeking a universal model that transcended class, race and gender. In an early interview, he remarked that his writing had two preoccupations:

> [George Bernard] Shaw once said that the only two subjects that need concern grown men are politics and religion. Politics meaning how people make a society work, how we get on with one another; religion in the sense of what is proper preparation for death. I would say those are pretty much my two concerns.[88]

Anyone with even a passing acquaintance with Vidal's works would add sex to these concerns, since his writings portray a candid interest in exposing the diverse realities of human gender and sexuality.

Christopher Hitchens noted the specific thrusts of Vidal's interest in this tripartite, elemental amalgamation of religion, sex, and politics:

> Three Vidalian commitments seem to undergird what he writes on any topic. The first is the curse of monotheism: enemy of pleasure and foe of rational inquiry. The second is the blight of sexual stereotyping. (He insists that *acts*, not persons, are homo- or heterosexual.) The third is the awful temptation of America to meddling and blundering overseas: imperialism, to give it the right name. This Trinity sometimes becomes One in his polemics.[89]

Each controversial in its own right, these subjects were united in Vidal's primary theme: power, whose erotic, political and spiritual dimensions he perceived as lying at the heart of the universal human experience. Owing to his deep-rooted fascination with antiquity, he derived many of his fundamental opinions on these subjects from classical literature, history and thought.

Another important strand in Gore Vidal's works was his enduring obsession with twins and the double.[90] He claimed that 'doubleness has always fascinated me, as mirrors do, as filmed images do'.[91] In his most Janus-faced novel, *Two Sisters* (1970), Vidal defined this inclination as an interest in 'the doubleness of things, the unexpected paradox, the sense of yes-no without which there can be no true intelligence, no means, in fact, of examining life'.[92] Others have agreed with this reading. Christopher Hitchens suggested that Vidal's works are divided between 'love and death[,] [. . .] literature and politics, America and the world, the ancient and the modern, the sacred and the profane'.[93] Peter Conrad has added that

Vidal's literary personae also come in pairs: 'the American and the Roman, the historian and the formalist, the candidate for political office and the propagandist for bisexuality'.[94]

One finds this tendency expressed throughout Vidal's oeuvre, as with the apparent twinning of many of his novels, such as *Myra Breckinridge* (1968) and its sequel *Myron* (1974).[95] A similar argument can be made for the pairing of *Julian* (1964) and *Creation* (1981), his two major novels set in the ancient world, and *Messiah* (1954) and *Kalki* (1978), his two science-fiction novels exploring religious belief. Likewise, Jay Parini has called *Empire* (1987) and *Hollywood* (1990) 'one novel appearing in two instalments'.[96] Often, Vidal's novels themselves are divided in half, such as *The City and the Pillar* (1948), which is split into two parts, 'The City' and 'The Pillar of Salt'. But Vidal cautioned critics not to imagine that 'there is ever ONE theme to a writer's work (even if the ONE is TWO and so duality)', suggesting that '[t]he best writers [. . .] are various'.[97]

Although Vidal seemed to believe in the basic equality of all periods, remarking that 'the essential problems of life remain the same from generation to generation',[98] the classical world stood out for him. His favourite authors were Apuleius and Petronius, in whose works he claimed to find his 'roots', since his 'spiritual home [was] classical', rather than the 'romantic[,] woolly tradition of American writing'.[99] Much of Vidal's brisk, elegant prose, with its detached, ironic perspective, can be traced to the styles of Thucydides, Tacitus, and Suetonius. His well-polished epigrams also owe a clear debt to the laconic phrases of classical literature, from the *Greek Anthology* to Martial.[100] In addition, he derived much of the inspiration for his literary experiments, such as *Myra Breckinridge* (1968) and *Duluth* (1983), from Menippean satire and the ancient novel.

But the United States took precedence in Vidal's imagination and writings, above even Greece and Rome, since he identified himself as its self-proclaimed 'biographer'.[101] Agreeing with historians of the period, he believed that the United States had been founded by 'good classicists' and modelled on 'the pre-Julius Caesar Roman Republic'.[102] This allowed Vidal to connect his twin passions for Roman and American history, while casting himself in the incongruous role of a Cato and a Caesar; always urging his country to return to its original republican principles, even as he advocated wide-ranging socio-political reforms perhaps only possible under his own benevolent dictatorship.

One of Vidal's central beliefs about American history was that the United States had directly followed classical Rome's historical trajectory in transforming itself from a republic to an empire.[103] In developing his critique of American imperialism, he drew upon ancient critics of imperial expansion, such as Thucydides, Sallust and Tacitus, as well as later historians of Roman imperialism, such as Edward Gibbon.[104] Vidal identified his nation's tragic flaw to be its combination of exceptionalism and expansionism, which he saw as having set the United States on the fatal road to empire and inevitable decline. But, despite advocating a nexus of parallels between ancient Rome and the United States, he once claimed (slightly disingenuously) that he did not 'work the analogy, nor do I *really* think that we are the Roman Empire', since 'history does not repeat itself'.[105]

William L. Vance has argued that Vidal belongs to a long tradition of American artists, writers and intellectuals, who lamented the imperial direction of their republic with reference to classical Rome:

> There have always been Americans ready to assume, with greater or less seriousness, the togas of Cicero or of Cato the Younger, imagining themselves already living in the last days of the Republic. They extend from the [. . .] oratorical senator from Kentucky, Henry Clay [. . .] to the novelist-essayist Gore Vidal, who, perhaps observing that the banal wickedness of Washingtonians as yet failed to live up to Caligulan standards, took up residence in Rome itself in anticipation of the end.[106]

Nor was Vidal the last of such figures in his own day. Senator Robert C. Byrd, for instance, gained a reputation for invoking classical Rome in his denunciations of American foreign policy.[107] In 1993, the populist Democrat delivered fourteen hour-long speeches to the Senate on the lessons of ancient Rome for the United States, which he called his 'Philippics' after Cicero's fourteen speeches condemning Mark Anthony.[108]

The roots of Gore Vidal's classicism may be traced to two nineteenth-century traditions: Old-Whig American republicanism and Southern planter culture, each of which possessed its own devotion to Greece and Rome.[109] He referred to himself as 'a republican with a small "r" ' and claimed to be a Southern writer, despite his libertarian political identity and cosmopolitan background.[110] Like Vidal, the Old Whigs have been defined as anti-Caesarist 'angry patriots, furious over their country's slide into imperialist decadence and filled with nostalgia for the rustic old Republic, when ways were simpler and people were braver, more courageous and more honest'.[111] The second positioned Vidal as heir of the more complex, racially-bound traditions of the American South, connecting him to its alternative, post-Civil War history of defeat, guilt, poverty and racism versus the North's contrasting dominance, innocence, affluence and liberalism.[112] Together, association with these two cultural heritages allowed Vidal to present himself as both an insider and an outsider, a Northerner and a Southerner, while reinforcing his intellectual devotion to the classical past.

In this context, Gore Vidal's vision of antiquity appears to represent an obsolete, even antagonistic, form of classical reception: a proud, patrician celebration of the Greco-Roman tradition in Western culture centred on his projection of himself as a neo-Roman figure. John Weightman once suggested that Vidal perceived himself as 'a dissident patrician [. . .] in the decadent American Empire, upholding pagan decency [. . .] in a corrupt and hypocritical society'.[113] James Tatum has similarly claimed that Vidal used ancient Rome to forge an 'ironic mode' and a 'powerful weapon' to employ in his writings, allowing him to bring 'an authentic Roman view to bear on the American scene'.[114] Although often the subject of derision, Vidal's Roman affectations gave him a fitting platform from which to make his subversive and iconoclastic commentary on his homeland. But delve beneath the arrogant egotism of his public image as America's self-proclaimed