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A Study of Gore Vidal's *The City and the Pillar* Sexual Orientation and Personal Agony

G. Dhanavel, M.A., M.Phil.



Courtesy: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gore_Vidal

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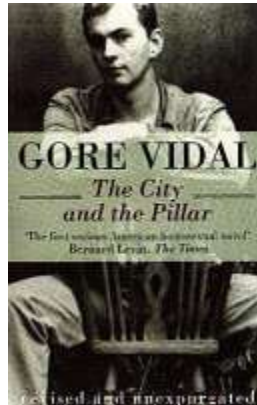
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Gore Vidal was born in 1925. He was an American novelist, essayist, short story writer, screen play writer and critic. He died in June 2012. The world which Vidal sees in his novels revolves around love, sex, war, politics, religion, myth, homosexuality and heterosexuality. He also wrote social, political, economic and historical novels.

The City and the Pillar



The novel taken for the present study is Gore Vidal's *The City and the Pillar*. The novel deals with two young men's homosexual life in the American society. The two young men, Bob and Jim love each other deeply and are homosexuals.

Robert J. Corber in his article "Gore Vidal and the Erotics of Masculinity" says:

"Vidal's novel shows that, although gay male subjectivity is constituted differently from straight female subjectivity, gay men, like straight women, nevertheless have a stake in dismantling the discourses and institutions that regulate the production of gender" (50).

A Regular Young Man

The hero of the novel, Jim Willard, is presented as any regular young man, different only in his sexual liking of men. He does not like having sex with women. Jim Willard has the experience of sexual satisfaction at the age of seventeen, with a boyfriend in

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Virginia. Jim is a son of the Willard family. He has an elder sister and a younger brother. Jim gains his friendship with Bob Ford, an eighteen year-old boy from high school.

In order to escape from his short-tempered father and his weak mother, Jim spends one weekend with Bob in an empty cabin outside the town.

Realizing that Bob must leave home to find work in New York, Jim wants sexual satisfaction for the first time to live with Bob. They naturally and happily enjoyed it.

The subject matter of the novel is homosexuality, but the larger theme is concerned with emotional difficulty that makes love impossible.

Being a sportsman, Jim becomes an instructor. Jim's acceptance of his homosexuality is shown by his frequent sexual attraction toward other men. Jim makes relationships with so many men afterwards in the army. He makes relationships with Shaw, Sullivan, and Maria. Jim and Sullivan dislike army life.

Claude J. Summers in "*The City and the Pillar as Gay Fiction*" places this novel in the context of Post-war gay fiction:

Prime among the novels that challenge the widespread Anglo-American contempt for homosexuality and homosexuals is Vidal's pioneering work, which is one of the first explicitly gay fictions to reach a large audience. Emphasizing the normality of gay people, *The City and the Pillar* traces the coming out process of a young man as ordinary and American as apple pie. Coming at the beginning of the post-war decade, the novel is an important and exemplary contribution to the emerging popular literature of homosexuality. (56-57)

A Lonely Soul

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In *The City and the Pillar* Jim is portrayed as a lonely person. Jim is a sportsman. He sits alone in a bar, trying very hard to get drunk: "He looked about him but there was nothing interesting to see: only a bar in a city. He wasn't sure what city; only the bar had a certain relationship to him because there was no one else in the world except himself" (12).

Fear of Memory

Jim is afraid of something. He is twenty-five years old. He wants no memory. He rejects the offers of a friendly homosexual and continues drinking, "although, no matter how much he tried, he could not destroy the fear: he could only forget, for a while, how it began" (20).

Vidal and Homosexual Fiction

Vidal talks about his entry into the world of homosexual fiction career as a novelist:

"I was twenty-one when I wrote *The City and the Pillar*," recalls Vidal in an interview by Gerald Clarke. "I was bored with playing it safe. I wanted to take risks, to try something no American had done before. I decided to examine the homosexual underworld... And in the process show the naturalness of homosexual relations, as well as making the point that there is of course no such thing as a homosexual" (154).

Vidal portrays his hero as an innocent, an ordinary young man who moves deeply from a surface naivety into the world of the homosexual. Gore Vidal says several truths about the nature of sex and love in the character of Jim.

The Hero

Jim Willard is a handsome youth in Virginia. He is also a sportsman. Jim Willard and Bob are friends. They like indulging in homosexual activities. Bob also likes to have sex with girls. Bob leaves Jim for the purpose of his job in the United States Army. Jim hopes that he will

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be reunited with Bob. Then he becomes a cabin boy on a journey ship. He meets a friend called Collins. He also likes to have sex with two girls. After that he becomes a tennis instructor at a hotel in Las Angeles. There he meets the actor Ronald Shaw who immediately indulges in sex with him. Both Shaw and Jim indulge in homosexuality. He meets the writer Paul Sullivan at a party and falls in love with him. Their homosexual is really different from others they had relations with earlier.

Jim is very happy to have sex with Paul. He moves with Paul to New Orleans. Paul and Jim are called to go to New York to enlist in Army. The World War II has started. There also homosexuality plays a vital role. Jim wants to have sex with young corporal. Jim is discharged from service. He goes back to New York, where he meets Marie and Shaw again. Shaw introduces Jim to his local boys. He likes to have sex with these boys. Jim hears two sad messages from his father and the friend Bob. His father is dead and Bob has married. Jim finally goes home.

Their relationship between Jim and Bob is renewed again in New York, but it in the same place their relationship comes to an end in Bob's hotel room. Bob dislikes having sex with him. So, finally Jim vigorously rapes Bob and escapes from the hotel.

To Conclude

The City and the Pillar is a serious novel, portraying the emotional challenges a young man faced. His sexual orientation and preference are really not the focus of the novel. It is his earnest desire seeking peace in him and with people around him takes the centre-stage in the narrative.

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