

Building Heaven on Earth: Romance and Realism in Gore Vidal's *Visit to a Small Planet*

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Abstract



Romance and realism are almost contrary to each other. Realism focuses on real life, its issues and realities being objective and unromantic. Instead of idealizing life, it actualizes it. So, it keeps its feet on earth whereas romance has an alluring effect because of its flight from the hard practical life into heaven presenting an idealized form of life. This study explores this combined perspective of two opposite approaches in Gore Vidal's Science fiction *Visit to a Small Planet* (2019). Vidal deals with the elements of romance and realism simultaneously. This synthesis is more interesting because the story itself is a Science Fiction. Thus he builds heaven on earth giving a realist critique of present-day civilization at one hand and romantic elements at the other. The play is primarily a Science fiction, which deals with futuristic ideas, space exploration, advanced science and technology and time travel. So this study finds that Vidal's play provides entertainment, presents realistic picture of society and civilization and forwards an idealized idea of better future. In this way, the combination of romance and realism is quite significant. This attempt may relate to the existing issues in our contemporary world of rupture and turmoil where contemporary civilization faces multiple problems and serious concerns on moral, ethical, cultural, social, economic and other grounds. Moreover, this study may inspire further research that combines contrary and different approaches to analyze and explore literary texts which are generally enriched with multiple themes.

Keywords: Realism, Romance, Science Fiction, Genre, Civilization, Idealized

Introduction

Writers and artists use the device of realism in their literary and cultural productions as a tool to deal with and present reality. It is a generic term that covers a number of views all referring to existing or real entities. It is unromantic in its approach whereas romance is an idealization of life and is remote from real and existing aspects of our practical world. These two approaches are obviously contrary to each other but are, sometimes, artistically combined and synthesized by the artists and writers in order to create great impact. As far as literary research and existing scholarship are concerned, this combination of romance and realism has largely been ignored and no considerable attempt has been made to explore and analyze this synthesis of two contrary concepts. In the existing literature, realism and romance have been used and utilized separately in various works but this gap exists in terms of exploration and analysis of the combination of romance and realism. Moreover, no research has been conducted that examines the elements of romance and realism or any of these two in the selected text. This is the gap this research intends to fill by exploring simultaneous projection and portrayal of romance and realism in Gore Vidal's play *Visit to a Small Planet* (2019), a Science fiction. Another research objective is to find how these two apparently contradicted approaches are placed together and what significance this combination carries.

Realism emerged and flourished in early 19th century as a response or reaction to romanticism. Instead of creating romantic and exotic works, the realist writers primarily focused on their observations of the world and society. Mark Twain's famous work *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) is based on realism. In the story, Jim and Huck are shown floating down the Mississippi and the novel projects the real life of the time. It throws light on the hard and difficult circumstances through which the people had to pass. Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* (1917) is a realist work that highlights stark realities of hard and uncertain life. The novel mainly focuses on the economic difficulties and odd conditions of two working class men. Rebecca Harding Davis is the first American writer who saw feminism through a realist's lens in her famous text *Life in*

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the Iron Mills (2015). George Eliot's *Middlemarch: A Study of Provincial Life* (1871) is another famous example of literary realism. It focuses on and portrays the new middle class in United Kingdom.

Similarly, romance and its elements have been frequently used in literature by various authors. The earliest example of romance in Literature is *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (2007) by an unknown author written in 14th century. It is an idealized version of a knight's bravery, courage and heroism. Jane Austen's famous novel *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) artistically handles the elements of romance in the story of the Bennet family. Alexander Dumas' *The Count of Monte Cristo* (1844) is also an example of romance. It is story of a brave man who heroically fights against odd conditions and miraculously manages to escape. E.L. James' *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2011) is an example of modern romance. The story revolves around the relationship between two college fellows who depict chivalry and erotic love. Charlotte Bronte has used the elements of romance in *Jane Eyre* (1847). Similarly, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) and Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights* (1847) are some of the examples of romance in literature.

In the light of previous and existing literature, it may be noted that no considerable research has been done in order to highlight and analyze the combined perspectives of romance and realism in literary texts. This study attempts to explore romance and realism in Gore Vidal's play *Visit to a Small Planet* (2019). The play details the story of an alien, Kreton, who comes to visit this small planet and comments on human civilization and culture representing future man who is supposed to be scientifically advanced and free from hatred, violence, enmity, pride, jealousy and other human evils. It is interesting to find how Gore Vidal combines realism with romance because realism has its feet on earth and romance floats in the heaven. This combination is further painted on the canvass of Science fiction, a generic sub-category of Speculative fiction.

Concepts of Romance and Realism

Realism, as a movement in literature and art, starts in 19th century as a revolt against the exotic conventions of Romanticism because the romantics had been on the run to kill the monster of realism as it appeared to them. So, Realism in literature intends to represent reality by depicting everyday experiences of relatable characters as they are in real life. Realism tends to be objective and indifferent as an unemotional criticism of the society. As a reaction to Romanticism, the writers of this movement focus on precise documentation and sociological approach taking their subject matter from everyday life. Instead of idealizing and romanticizing, realism focuses on accurate literary representation of real, everyday life. It is not only a literary skill but also it is a way to reveal truth and uncover harsh and bitter realities. Instead of making life like a fiction, realistic writers love to make fiction like-life. So, their characters are frustrated by bitter realities of social life and their own feelings and attitudes. They represent real, common people who have an urge to live happily but are entangled in their everyday difficulties.

Realism consists of different types which project various shades of this approach. Social realism focuses on the problems of the poor and the working class. John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* (1937) is an example of social realism. The novel is a social commentary that comments on the odd and hard conditions of the poor. In magical realism, elements of magic are mixed with realism. Gabriel Gracia's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1970) is based on magical realism. Psychological realism mainly focuses on and dives deep into the psychology of the characters looking at their motivations, desires, thoughts and dreams. Henry James' *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881) is an example of psychological realism. Instead of focusing on the plot, the novel concentrates on the thoughts and inner-working of the characters. Naturalism is another example of realism. It utilizes scientific method in order to explore human life and its occurrences. William Faulkner's short story *A Rose for Emily* (1930) is mainly based on naturalism. The story portrays the mental illness of a character who is victimized by the cruel fate. Socialist realism is a type of realism that was developed by Joseph Stalin and used by other communists. It is basically a glorification of the proletariat. Fyodor Gladkov's novel *Cement* (1994) is an example of socialist realism. It is a story that revolves around the reconstruction of Soviet Union. Kitchen-sink realism is an off-shoot of social realism that portrays the lives of the young English working-class men who were found in pubs spending their spare time in drinking. John Braine's *Room at the Top* (1957) falls into this category of realism. It is a story of a young English man who strives to achieve his big ambitions in the post war era.

So, in a nutshell, it can be said that realism mainly focuses on close and comprehensive representation of reality. Instead of falsely idealizing life, it emphasizes on the appearance of what is true and real. Along with logical events, it focuses on an impartial and objective narration of the story. Some main writers of this movement in Europe and America include Mark Twain, George Eliot, John Steinbeck, Stephen Crane, Upton Sinclair, Henry James, Daniel Dafoe and Edith Wharton. In his book *The Boundaries of Realism in World Literature*, Kornelije (2020) has defined Realism as a “realistic figuration and re-figuration of reality from logical constructs that are similar to our usual notion of reality” (p. 28). Elizabeth Ermarth views literary realism in an article “Realism, perspective, and the novel” (1981) as a representation of real life in the form of diction (p. 500). Grant (2018) says, “Realism is a critical term only by adoption from philosophy” (p. 3). So, it can be concluded that realism in literature deals with realistic settings, realistic characters, real dialects of the time, plausible plot, accounts of everyday occurrences and the portrayal of the poor working classes. It intends to tell a story truthfully instead of romanticizing it. A critic Pam Morris has detailed and theorized the concept of realism in his theoretical book *Realism* (2003). For the analysis and exploration of realism in literary text, Morris’ classic work is utilized as a key book.

Etymologically, the word romance is derived from Old French and Anglo-Norman *romanz* meaning a story of love and chivalry. It also refers to the concept of romantic love. In literature, the term has a broader perspective referring to the romantic stories of chivalrous heroes and knights featuring courtly love, chivalry, boldness, courage and sense of duty. It also refers to the story, which is remote from everyday life and ordinary people. There is some difference between romance and Romanticism. Romance is based on idealized love, obsessive association with some idea or somebody, chivalry, mysterious, adventurous and remoteness from ordinary life whereas Romanticism is a period and a certain movement in literature and arts during which literature related to romantic ideas was created. Similarly, romance fiction is main type of popular or genre fiction, which, according to Ann M. Eike (1986), “is certainly not new. From the late 18th and early 19th centuries up to the Victorian era, tales of love and romance were very popular”(p. 26). Thus romance fiction is primarily based on romantic love and remoteness from daily practical life. “The characters and events discovered in the pages of the typical romance do not resemble the people and occurrences the readers deal with in their daily, ordinary lives”(Radway, 1983, p. 59). Jane Austen’s famous novel *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) can be seen as one of the first examples of romance fiction in English Literature. Elements of romance fiction are also traced in the works of Samuel Richardson and Charlotte Bronte. But the market of romance novel mainly thrived in 20th century and it became an industry. An example of early American romance novel is Kathleen E. Woodiwiss’ novel *The Flame and the Flower* (1972). In United Kingdom, this genre was established by Catherine Cookson, Georgette Heyer and others. In our contemporary times, the market of romance novels is thriving and booming. Most of the readers of the romance novels are women who are fed up and want an idealized form of life beyond the walls of their homes. Main types of romance fiction include contemporary romance, erotic romance, gothic romance, historical romance, paranormal romance, romance with spiritual elements and young adult romance.

John C. Stubbs details the theory of romance and its various elements which are and can be used and utilized by the writers and researchers. In his article, “‘*The Scarlet Letter*’: The Theory of Romance and the New England Situation” (1968), Stubbs analyzes Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) and brings out the major elements of romance projected and treated in the text after theorizing the concept. “Theoretically, the romance was a pure form and could serve for many kinds of subject matter” (Stubbs, 1968, p.1439). He further says, “The primary goal of the romance is artistic distance. It differs from the novel in the extent of this distance. The romancer’s aim is to order the raw stuff of human experience into the clearer mode of artifice”(Stubbs, 1968, p.1439). In this way the readers can develop an emotional and intellectual understanding of the experience. According to Nathaniel Hawthorne (1851), the romance is bound to project and reflect the “truth of human heart” (p. 1). So, it can be said that romance, as a literary device and a genre, projects and deals with the ideal by utilizing the power of imagination and focusing on human feelings and emotions.

As romance and realism are broader concepts, this study is narrowed down to the theories and concepts of John C. Stubbs and Pam Morris respectively. For the analysis of realism in the selected text, Morris’ theory of realism is utilized and romance and its elements are analyzed in the

light of John C. Stubbs' theory. So, the major concepts of these two theorists constitute the theoretical framework of this qualitative research which adopts textual analysis as a research method.

An Overview of *Visit to a Small Planet*

Visit to a Small Planet (2019) by Gore Vidal is a science fiction with subtitle "A Comedy Akin to Vaudeville." It was originally presented as a television play in 1957 having New York City stage premiere in the same year. The story revolves around an alien named Kreton who comes from an unknown planet to visit our planet Earth with express purpose of reading human beings, their civilization and advancement of 20th century. By mistake, his spaceship lands in the backyard of a journalist Roger Spelding's house in Maryland, America. He comes down and meets Spelding, Mrs. Spelding, their daughter Ellen and her lover John. While he talks to them and apologizes for his mistake, General Powers, in charge of American security, comes with soldiers to investigate the arrival of the flying saucer. General Powers considers him a spy from an alien race whereas Kreton assures him that his race is not hostile and they cannot even think of invading human beings but General Powers does not believe and tries to grab him. But Kreton builds an invisible wall around him and his spaceship. So General Powers and his army cannot even touch Kreton and his spaceship. First, he shows that he has come as a tourist and people of Earth are his hobby but, at the end of the play, he declares that he will take charge of the whole world and sends his hosts to sleep making a promise to see in the morning.

Story draws a line between the civilization of Earth people and the civilization of Kreton's race. Kreton represents his own race and Spelding's family and General Powers are representatives of human life on this planet. Kreton is miraculously advanced in science and technology. He can read minds, builds invisible wall and travels in a spaceship without instruments. They have also conquered death and they do not die. His morals are also impressive. He is wonderfully civilized and friendly but human beings are violent and they are not that advanced in science and technology. They are more emotional. So their civilization is in its initial stages. Ellen and John love each other and they have their romantic ideas and purple thoughts. There are so many differences between two civilizations. In this way, Gore Vidal intends to present Kreton and his civilization as future of human life.

Realism in *Visit to a Small Planet*

Primarily a science fiction, Gore Vidal's *Visit to a Small Planet* (2019) presents realism uncovering the real condition of American social and cultural life in particular and human civilization in general. As Realism can "leave no place for the exercise of the imagination" (Fried, 1990, p. 4), Gore Vidal uses this realist's lens to view the so-called civilization of Earth people. With this "unromantic approach to life" (Morris, 2003, p. 1), he severely criticizes the flaws of our civilization with specific focus on the culture and society of the otherwise most cultured American nation. In *Visit to a Small Planet* (2019), the alien Kreton comes across a suburban family of a journalist, Mr. Spelding and General Powers who is "a vigorous product of the National Ground" (Vidal 19). These people are representatives of Earth people and their civilization but, Kreton's impression is shattered and he is forced to say that their "civilization is only just beginning" (Vidal, 2019, p. 18). Spelding insists on that they have had civilization but Kreton maintains, "You are only in the initial stages" (Vidal, 2019, p. 19). Kreton forms this opinion because of the flaws he observes in the characters of these Earth people.

First of all they are violent. They plan and intend to imprison Kreton and wreck his spaceship. They take this alien visitor as "a spy or a hostile alien" (Vidal, 2019, p. 20) who has been "sent here by an alien race" in order to study "preparatory to invasion" (Vidal, 2019, p. 22). So, this idea of invasion, war, enmity and violence is fundamental to human life on Earth and keeps on haunting them like a devil whereas, Kreton's people are wonderfully friendly and peaceful. He assures General Powers that his "people are not remotely hostile" (Vidal, 2019, p. 26). In spite of having unbounded power, Kreton is so civilized that he gets down and apologizes Spelding and his family for the wrong landing of his spaceship in their rose garden. In spite of their violent intentions to imprison him, he does not lose temper or uses his power. His morals are very impressive. Kreton's contrast to the earth people actually mirrors the true picture of human civilization and society where war, violence, torture and enmity rule and destroy the social order and peace. This realist's picture of our contemporary world accurately relates to and resembles with Pam Morris' concept of realism. According to Morris (2003), a realist's writing "is to be judged according to how faithfully it corresponds to things and events in the real-world" (p.15).

The other flaw, which Kreton highlights, is lack of rational thinking. He observes that people of this planet do not think logically. They are emotional and their minds are still raw even in the age of so-called advancement and development. He says, "Your minds are not at all like ours. You see we control our thoughts while you... well, it's extraordinary the things you think about" (Vidal, 2019, p. 25). According to him, they still live their "exciting primitive lives" (Vidal, 2019, p. 24) and "simply seethe with unlikely emotions" (Vidal, 2019, p. 25). Gore Vidal also exposes that human beings are selfish and they always think to fill their own pockets. In the story, Roger Spelding thinks of interviewing Kreton in order to raise his status as a journalist. Mrs. Spelding thinks of her rose garden and the damage done to her plants. Kreton's spaceship lands in her rose garden, she gets worried and asks her husband, "I am sure if we ask him, he will move that thing for us. Roger. "You ask him"(Vidal, 2019, p. 17). Roger Spelding thinks of his duty and promotion. Ellen thinks of her lover and John only thinks of his beloved, Ellen. So, all the characters in the story are self-centered: the approach which is specific to the civilization of Earth people especially in the materialistic era of 20th century. So, Gore Vidal presents real picture of our civilization which is hollow from within. He dismantles the glorified and idealized version of civilization presented by the developed nations. The people who are violent, irrational, selfish and self-centered cannot be called cultured and civilized when compared with Kreton who is civilized in true sense. Of course, this description of the characters is an example of realism because it mainly relates to the "nature of reality and an evaluative attitude towards it" (Morris, 2003, p.12). As realism is based on the "perceptions of what is 'true' or 'real' (Morris, 2003, p.12), Vidal's portrayal fits the theory and concept of realism.

Elements of Romance in *Visit to a Small Planet*

Although *Visit to a Small Planet* (2019) is basically a science fiction, yet it represents some basic elements of romance which is a wide generic term. Some key elements found in this play are remoteness from ordinary life, flow of emotions instead of reason and idea of romantic love. Gore Vidal goes far away from actual practical life when he suggests an idea or picture of man's future represented by Kreton. He is shown as a cultured and civilized man who has full control over his thoughts and emotions. He is free from violence, hatred, pride, jealousy and all other evils basic to human nature. It seems probable that man may get control over his emotions and thoughts but evil free, idealized character of Kreton is nothing but a romance. Scientific advancement of Kreton's race is quite possible in future. Like kreton, human beings will be able to build invisible walls, read minds and travel in space in automated spaceships without any instruments. They may conquer pain, sufferings and disease but they may never conquer death as Kreton's race has done. Kreton says, "Poor fragile butterflies, such brief little moments in the sun... you see we don't die" (Vidal, 2019, p. 20). So, man's conquest over death in future and evil free, angel-like nature are romantic notions. Man can become neither an immortal nor an angel. He is supposed to die as well as carry some manufacturing flaws with him be it 5000 or 50000: Vidal suggests that till year 5000, man will be developed and will stand equal to Kreton's race. This idealized and imaginative form of life is an example of romance because the romancer can and does "imaginatively picture his conception of human experience" (Stubbs, 1968, p.1443). So, according to Stubbs theory, Vidal's portrayal of future man falls into the category of romance.

The other element of romance in the play is romantic love between Ellen and John. Ellen is Mr. Spelding's young, beautiful daughter who has fallen in love with John, a farm boy. Both of them are driven by "wonderfully purple thoughts" (Vidal, 2019, p. 25). Neither John nor Ellen thinks or plans career. They do not think about jobs or financial prospects. John grows walnuts at his farm and both of them are content with living at that ordinary place. Mr. Spelding is not in favor of Ellen's marriage with John because "he has no get-up-and-go" (Vidal, 2019, p. 15). He tries to convince Ellen to leave her romantic ideas and says, "However, my only wish is that you marry someone hard-working ambitious, a man who'll make his mark in the world. Not a boy who plans to sit on a farm all his life, growing peanuts" (Vidal, 2019, p. 15). But Ellen is so overwhelmed by her emotions that she abruptly corrects her father by affirming that John grows "English walnuts" and says, "He doesn't want to get up and he doesn't want to go because he's already where he wants to be on his farm which is exactly where I'm going to be when we're married" (Vidal, 2019, p. 15). These lovers' purple thoughts and romantic love are key elements of romance fiction where hero is shown powerful and masculine. Similarly, John is not a sophisticated professional worker; he is a masculine rough farm boy who cares nothing but Ellen.

Building Heaven on Earth

Visit to a Small Planet (2019) is a science fiction which primarily deals with futuristic and imaginative ideas such as space exploration, advanced science and technology, time travel and extra-terrestrial life. But it is quite interesting to find that Gore Vidal mixes aspects of realism and romance to create a great impact on the viewers and readers. Apart from inspiring a sense of wonder and providing entertainment, *Visit to a Small Planet* (2019) criticizes present day society by exposing hollowness of human civilization and culture with a realist's lens. Thus Gore Vidal holds the brush of realism and paints the picture of Earth. Then, paradoxically but artistically and effectively builds heaven on that Earth by weaving elements of romance into a realist story of human civilization. Present day society is shown vibrant with people who are violent, unfriendly, hypocrite, selfish and self centered but here and there are found John and Ellen who do nothing and know nothing but love. They are quite contrary to General Powers, Mr. Spelding and others. Moreover, Gore Vidal presents a heavenly picture of moral and human character of future man who will be free of violence, hatred, enmity, pride, jealousy and all other human evils.

Gore Vidal's "metaphysical inquiry into the relationship of the ideal and the real" (Stubbs, 1968, p.1440) and aesthetic blending of the two opposite attitudes and approaches can be seen as an artistic merit of the play that carries a great thematic and literary significance. In Nathaniel Hawthorne's story "Drowne's Wooden Image" (1883), an artist praises Drowne's work thus: "It is as ideal as an antique statue, and yet as real as any lovely woman whom one meets at a fireside or in the street" (p. 354). This appreciation of Drowne's work can accurately be used as applause for Vidal's aesthetic and artistic blending of the ideal and the real. It's his credit that he beautifully, artistically and effectively builds heaven on earth.

Conclusion

Combining romance and realism in his Science fiction *Visit to a Small Planet* (2019), Gore Vidal builds heaven on earth. Generic category of the play focuses on entertainment, futuristic ideas, advanced science and technology and exploration of time and space. But its realist perspective makes it a harsh commentary on human civilization at one hand and its romantic elements turn it into an alluring tale at the other. Kreton, an alien and futuristic side of man, comes to visit this small planet and draws a line between present and future. The present is represented by violent, hypocrite, selfish and self centered General Powers and Spelding but this bitter bite is sweetened by the romantic love of Ellen and John. In the similar way, dark, realist picture of present day civilization is lightened by the idealized and romantic version of man's character in future. Thus, a science fiction is successful in moving viewers and readers between heaven and earth. So far as scholastic significance is concerned, this study may inspire further research that explores different genres with opposite lenses simultaneously. Moreover, this exploration of realist versions of faulty civilization and idealized picture of future may effectively relate to the contemporary world of rupture and turmoil.

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