



Empire

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Following Roosevelt's short speech seconding McKinley for the presidential nomination, the author observes: "History does not enjoy too close an examination of its processes." Vidal provides an elaborate examination of political developments at the turn of the century, and, if history itself does not enjoy it, it is expected that the reader will. The novel focuses on a period that is perhaps less intrinsically colorful than those of LINCOLN and BURR, but it manages to convey a detailed sense of life at the social and political top in Washington, New York, and Newport.

The novel's theme is power, and, while warriors and diplomats are busy offstage extending United States dominion to the edge of Asia, Caroline Sanford is busy taking control of her own life by subduing those in her way. As the novel begins, in 1896, she is twenty years old and has been deprived of a considerable inheritance, until she reaches the age of twenty-seven, through the machinations of her half-brother Blaise. Caroline refuses to accept the gilded cage to which the Gilded Age has consigned women of her class. Establishing herself in Washington, she becomes owner of the TRIBUNE and a fierce rival to Hearst, not only in reporting events but also in creating them.

Caroline is affectionate toward the elderly Adams and Hay, but their detached melancholy over historical entropy is in sharp contrast to the amoral energies exerted by Caroline and actual figures corrupt even in their fashionable crusades against corruption. Though it might lack some of their brilliant and cynical stylistic touches, EMPIRE, like the other novels in Vidal's American cycle, portrays American history as a pageant of scoundrels and fools.

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