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## The Interplay of History and Narrative in Gore Vidal's *Lincoln*

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### Abstract

Historical inquiry has always been a fundamental human pursuit, driven by the need to understand the past and its impact on the present. Central to this pursuit is the use of language and narrative, which serves as a means of reconstructing historical events that would otherwise be lost to the mists of time. While primary historical sources are crucial for a precise understanding of historical events, examining the epistemological perspective of the historical author and comprehending the nature and structure of a historical narrative are also crucial for an accurate portrayal of history. This study aims to explore the relationship between Gore Vidal's epistemological view of history in the historical novel *Lincoln* and its impact on the accuracy of reflecting historical facts. Additionally, this research investigates the significance of narrative techniques, particularly the use of different historical figures as focalizers in the narrative, in constructing a historical work as a model of the past. The study demonstrates that narrative plays a significant role in producing historical meaning, and each historical narrative serves as an interpretation of a given past that may not necessarily convey all the historical truths related to that past.

**Keywords:** Epistemology, History, *Lincoln*, Narrative, Vidal.

## I | INTRODUCTION

The concepts of narrative and history have been closely intertwined throughout human civilization. Narrative refers to how events and experiences are presented and structured in storytelling, whether in oral traditions or written works. On the other hand, history is the study of past events, particularly with an emphasis on the actions and motives of human beings. The relationship between narrative and history is complex, with each influencing the other. Narrative can shape the way we understand and interpret historical events, while history provides the factual basis for narratives. Moreover, the use of narrative techniques in historical writing can impact the accuracy and interpretation of events. Therefore, understanding the interplay of narrative and history is crucial in comprehending the construction of our collective memory and the way we interpret the past.

It is widely acknowledged that historical works are not solely informational documentary sources about the past; but rather, they are “verbal artifacts” that can be studied as such, thanks in large part to the critical work of Roland Barthes and Hayden White. Scholars in the field of literature and history



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have not only utilized advancements in semiotics and textual analysis to reinvigorate their methodologies but also shown an escalating interest in the historian's position as a writer and generator of texts. An unresolved issue is the distinction, or the lack thereof, between the function of discourse and narrative form in constructing and disseminating historical knowledge.

Gore Vidal's "American Chronicles" is a significant contribution to the genre of historical fiction in American literature. This collection of seven novels explores crucial periods and events in American history, from the Founding Fathers to the twentieth century. The series is known for its meticulous research, compelling narratives, and insightful commentaries on the political, social, and cultural issues of the time. The novels also feature Vidal's distinctive style, blending historical facts with fictional elements and characterizations that challenge conventional wisdom and highlight the complexities and contradictions of American identity. As such, the "American Chronicles" have earned Vidal a reputation as one of the most innovative and thought-provoking writers in contemporary American fiction as well as a keen observer and critic of American history and society.

Gore Vidal's acclaimed novel *Lincoln* is a prominent work in his renowned series, the "American Chronicles," which delves into the intricate historical events of the United States of America. The novel is set in the backdrop of the American Civil War, and it presents a fictional yet plausible interpretation of the life and times of Abraham Lincoln, the 16th President of the United States. The story centers around the life of President Abraham Lincoln, offering a realistic account of his presidency and the events leading up to his assassination. The novel also explores the political and social climate of the United States during the 19th century, and the complex issues of slavery, race, and national identity that divided the country.

The novel is written in a narrative style that employs multiple perspectives, with each chapter presenting a different character's point of view. Through this technique, Vidal provides insight into the thoughts and motivations of not only Lincoln but also his advisors, political rivals, and family members. This approach to storytelling adds depth and complexity to the characters, allowing readers to see them as multifaceted individuals rather than one-dimensional historical figures.

This paper focuses on the historical novel *Lincoln* written by Gore Vidal, which portrays certain events and characters in American history. The aim is to demonstrate the impact of Vidal's epistemological view of history on the accuracy of historical representation in the novel. It also examines Vidal's use of the focalization narrative technique to reveal how it contributes to the reflection of historical facts. By exploring the relationship between narration and the production of historical meaning, this article seeks to shed light on the importance of narrative construction in historical representation.

## II. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Alun Munslow's work *Narrative and History* has been an important influence on the current paper. Munslow's book provides a detailed examination of the basic principles and techniques used in historical composition and writing. It investigates how an understanding of the methods employed by historians in crafting history affects many traditional assumptions about its character. Key concepts such as truth, objectivity, reference, and representation are reexamined and reconceptualized. By combining theory and practice, Munslow extends the boundaries of the field and creates space for unconventional forms of historical expression (Munslow, 2007).

Genette's renowned work, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, is employed as a reference point for analyzing the structure of the narrative. Genette presents a systematic theory of narrative by examining the works of Marcel Proust, specifically *Remembrance of Things Past*. Employing a primarily structuralist



approach, the author defines and outlines the basic components and processes of narration and provides examples of these by referencing various literary works in multiple languages (Genette, 1993).

The historical figure of Abraham Lincoln has long been a popular subject for historians, particularly regarding his life and character. One of the most highly regarded biographies of Lincoln is David Herbert Donald's work, entitled *Lincoln*. Donald's significant contribution to the study of Lincoln is his depiction of the former president's rise from rural Kentucky to national prominence, which sheds new light on Lincoln's personality (Donald, 1995). Another significant work on Lincoln is Doris Kearns Goodwin's *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln*. Goodwin's unique perspective sets her work apart from other biographies, as she examines not only Lincoln's personality but also his rivals on the path to the presidency, as well as members of his cabinet, in order to demonstrate Lincoln's exceptional qualities within the context of his competition with others (Goodwin, 2013). Vidal's novel is also comparable to Goodwin's work in this regard, as he too examines Lincoln's rivals using the narrative method of focalization. This paper will delve into the comparison of the narrative techniques used in these two works, which will provide a greater understanding of Vidal's methods and their relationship to historical reality. Barry Schwartz's *Abraham Lincoln and the Forge of National Memory* and Merrill D. Peterson's *Lincoln in American Memory* both examine the significance of Abraham Lincoln's memory in shaping American national identity. Schwartz's work explores the selective nature of America's historical narrative in relation to the former president's image as a national hero, and how his accomplishments have contributed to the country's progress. He also argues that Lincoln's memory functions as both a reflection of the nation's concerns and an illuminator of its aspirations. Meanwhile, Peterson's work delves into the evolution of Abraham Lincoln's image as a mythical figure in the minds of the American people (Schwartz, 2000). Peterson identifies five such mythical images that the American people hold of Lincoln: "the savior of the Union, the great emancipator, man of the people, first American, and self-made man." Ultimately, the examination of these archetypes not only provides a more comprehensive view of Abraham Lincoln's life and character but also highlights their correspondence with the national identity of the American people (Peterson, 1995).

In his book *Gore Vidal's America*, Dennis Altman delves into the writings of Gore Vidal, exploring how his works on various topics such as history, politics, sex, and religion contribute to our comprehension of the United States. Altman, who has a personal relationship with Vidal, is able to cover a broad range of subjects related to the author. Along with providing an extensive analysis of Vidal's literary career, the author also sheds new light on Vidal's works by discussing his sociopolitical views on the United States (Altman, 2005).

Marcie Frank's *How to Be an Intellectual in the Age of TV: The Lessons of Gore Vidal* serves as an exploration of the life and works of American writer Gore Vidal. Frank posits that the shift from print to visual media during the 20th century is evident not only in Vidal's works but also in his professional career. By examining Vidal's views on American television and politics, the author offers readers a unique perspective through which to understand the writer's literary achievements. Ultimately, Frank concludes that Vidal's success as a versatile writer across various media serves as an inspiration for modern-day intellectuals, countering the belief that new media is of little worth (Frank, 2005).

*Gore Vidal: Writer Against the Grain* is a compilation of essays about the prominent American writer, edited by Jay Parini. The authors of the essays offer diverse perspectives on Vidal's works and ideas. The book also features a brief interview with Vidal conducted by Parini. One of the essays, titled "The Central Man: On Gore Vidal's Lincoln," written by Harold Bloom, analyzes Vidal's historical novels and focuses on the significance of Abraham Lincoln in the author's portrayal of the iconic historical figure. According to Bloom, Vidal's talent in deconstructing the myth of Lincoln has allowed readers to gain a deeper understanding of this national figure (Parini, 1992).

Two academic theses have been written on Gore Vidal's historical novels and writing style. Michael Murphy's dissertation, titled "Gore Vidal's Historical Novels," examines the connection between Vidal's "American Chronicles" and significant events in American history. By comparing Vidal's works to those



of his contemporaries, such as Don DeLillo and E. L. Doctorow, Murphy concludes that Vidal's historical novels are conventional in terms of the literary context of his era. Murphy believes that this is because Vidal did not intend to use the historical novel as a means to philosophize history, but rather to provide the public with an accurate account of history (Murphy, 2007).

Saniye Çancı Çalışaneller's dissertation, titled "Fact, Fiction, Fact in Fiction: Gore Vidal's Historiographic Metafiction in the Narratives of Empire," provides an examination of Gore Vidal's "American Chronicles" using the concept of historiographic metafiction. The dissertation discusses the differences between historical novels and historiographical metafiction, focusing on the divergent narrative and ideological elements of the two forms. Subsequently, Çalışaneller examines six of Vidal's "American Chronicle" novels, excluding Lincoln from the categorization as he believes it is a conventional historical novel. This dissertation contributes to the current paper in various ways (Çancı Çalışaneller, 2013).

### III. METHODOLOGY

The current study aims to scrutinize the epistemological perspective of Gore Vidal in writing the abovementioned novel. The research methodology employed in this study also includes narratology and textual analysis as its fundamental tools. As a result, it becomes crucial to explicate the concepts of epistemology and narratology for better comprehension of the study's framework.

#### 1. Epistemology

Epistemology, the branch of philosophy concerned with the study of knowledge and belief, has been of great importance to the field of history. In the context of history, epistemology explores how knowledge about the past is obtained and validated, and what constitutes evidence and truth in historical narratives. This is particularly significant because the very nature of history involves the interpretation and reconstruction of past events, which requires an understanding of the sources and methods used to produce knowledge about the past.

Epistemology has played a crucial role in shaping the way historians approach their work, as well as in developing critical theories of history. Scholars such as Hayden White, Michel Foucault, and Dominick LaCapra have made important contributions to the field of history by examining the epistemological assumptions that underlie historical knowledge and narrative.

##### 1.1. Historian Author's Epistemological Choices

Epistemology concerns the understanding of the theory and fundamental principles of knowledge acquisition. According to Walsh, contemporary philosophers of history pose three epistemological queries, namely: "What is the proper structure of historical explanation? Can the study of the past be objective and truthful? What is the function of narrative in communicating historical knowledge?" (Walsh, 1992, p. 33). The absence of consensus on these questions reveals the inherent uncertainty of history as a means of knowledge. Nevertheless, historians make epistemological choices that shape their approach to exploring the past. Their epistemological stance reflects their perception of the relationship between "reference, explanation, and meaning," as well as the narrative's autonomous function in their work (Cannadine, 2002, p. 30). Historians' epistemological choices give rise to three genres of history, namely, *reconstructionism*, *constructionism*, and *deconstructionism*, which represent different approaches to the past and will be briefly discussed.

The reconstructionist perspective of history emerged from the framework of analytical philosophy, which was influenced by the European Enlightenment in the seventeenth century. This perspective



views history as fundamentally scientific, possessing a rational process, and being amenable to empirical investigation. Proponents of this perspective hold a realistic conviction that each historical statement corresponds directly to a document that can be reconstructed from the past. In line with the correspondence theory of knowledge, historians utilize data to draw conclusions and construct arguments that are best aligned with the relevant information.

Reconstructionist historians prioritize the significance of “referentiality” and “agency” in their methodology. They argue that the existence of evidence and documents renders the past accessible and thus avoids the need for ontological analysis. They further contend that a “fair description” of the past can be achieved through objectivity in historical data. Narrative, according to reconstructionists, merely serves as a conduit for transmitting meaning from the past to historical texts (Munslow, 2007, p. 152). Nevertheless, this simplistic form of “naive realism” has faced criticism from contemporary historians who believe that the study of history is a more intricate process that cannot be solely confined to the examination of sources and data. Therefore, a new approach called “constructionism” has been introduced that extends beyond the limitations of reconstructionism.

According to Munslow, the constructionist category of historical knowledge is a highly intricate conceptual approach that acknowledges the need for theory in addition to empirical evidence (Munslow, 2007, p. 13). This approach asserts that history is not only based on empirical data but also analytical and requires critical thinking. Therefore, the constructionist approach is focused on not only thoroughly examining relevant data but also investigating the causes of patterns beyond the agency of historical actors.

The level of sophistication characterizing the constructionist approach is such that a large majority of contemporary historians fall within this broad category. Belchem notes that the constructionist view of history posits that cultural factors such as language, consciousness, norms, and values coexist and interact with political, economic, social, and other structures. Indeed, an understanding of the past demands a careful examination of the interplay between concepts and evidence, as well as close attention to context and chronology, particularly about issues of race, gender, and class (Belchem, 1997, p. 3).

Constructionism, as an epistemological framework, presents an alternative perspective to postmodernism, which is believed to disassociate “representation” from “reality” in a radical manner (Palmer, 2008, p. 44). While constructionist historians do not contend that the study of historical evidence alone suffices, they do maintain the notion of correspondence theory and view the past as accessible through additional research conducted in the context of history. Hence, the narrative does not hold the same level of importance as a critical component of historical knowledge construction within this framework.

Deconstructionist historians adopt an epistemological stance that stands in contrast to the other two approaches to knowing history. They do not subscribe to the correspondence theory, which holds that there is a direct and reliable connection between the historical narrative and the past. Instead, deconstructionists posit that the relationship between the narrative and the past is relative and that each historical narrative can reveal distinct truths. As such, the historical narrative is the sole place where the past is constructed, as the past cannot be accessed directly due to temporal constraints. Consequently, the absence of unity between the truths reflected in each historical account implies that there is no strong and direct link between language and the actual past. For deconstructionists, the primary concern is to scrutinize the logic of a narrative’s meaning-making process. The authored nature of historical knowledge is the fundamental distinction between deconstructionists and the other two groups (Munslow, 2007, p. 14).

## 2. Narratology

Scholars such as Gerard Genette and Mieke Bal have been instrumental in developing the field of narratology, which focuses on the structure, elements, and functions of narratives. The study of narratology is concerned with identifying the patterns and techniques used by authors to construct stories and the



effects that these narratives have on readers or audiences. By analyzing the form and content of narratives, narratologists seek to gain insight into the cultural and historical contexts in which they were produced, as well as their ideological and aesthetic implications. Through the use of narratological tools and concepts, scholars can examine how narratives are constructed, how they communicate meaning, and how they shape our understanding of the world around us. Narratology has become a vital methodological approach in fields such as literary studies, film studies, and media studies, as it provides a rigorous framework for the analysis of narratives across a wide range of cultural forms and contexts.

## 2.1. Voice and Focalization

Genette's exploration of the concepts of *voice* and *focalization* provides insight into how authors use these elements to convey meaning and explanation in their works (Genette, 1993). To fully understand the nature of history, it is essential to recognize the author's role as the primary agent in constructing historical narratives. This highlights the importance of two central concepts of storytelling, namely, voice and focalization. By examining these concepts, one can gain a better understanding of how authors shape our understanding of historical events.

The concept of "voice" pertains to the author's audibility in narrating the story and is frequently referred to as "point of view" (Tonkin, 1992, p. 36). The historian's unique voice or perspective is reflected in their narrative choices. On the other hand, "focalization" refers to the author's curation, regulation, and organization of information in the story space, primarily in terms of "seeing" events and existents from the perspective of a specific character, typically a historical agent, narrator, or through someone else, establishing a focal point for the historical account. While voice is associated with "who speaks", focalization is concerned with "who sees" as an agent within the story space (Munslow, 2007, p. 48). Additionally, narrative theorist Mieke Bal stresses the importance of recognizing that the focalizer also serves as the narrator (Bal, 2009, p. 59).

Historians must inevitably adopt a specific perspective to provide a comprehensive understanding of the past. This choice of perspective, or focalization, is crucial for the historian. There are three main types of focalizations: *internal*, *external*, and *zero*. As a narrator, the historian selects a point of view through a particular historical agent, thereby transforming the agent into a focalizer. The historian assumes the roles of both voice and focalizer in the discourse that emerges. By determining how the story is conveyed and from which perspective, the historian establishes a connection with the narrator. The concept of internal focalization pertains to the portrayal of events from the perspective of the central character or agent chosen by the historian. On the other hand, external focalization involves the depiction of events through the eyes of an observer who possesses less knowledge than the focalized character. Zero focalization, in turn, refers to the use of a heterodiegetic narrator who is not confined to the perspectives or knowledge of the historical agents at that time. Such a focalizer is considered omniscient. As per theorists such as Louis Mink, Hayden White, Seymour Chatman, and Paul Ricoeur, voice and focalization are essential tools that historians must use to create a narrative of the past (Chatman, 1978, p. 19).

## IV. DISCUSSION

### 1. Vidal's Reconstructionist View of History in *Lincoln*

Before delving into Vidal's perspective on history as it pertains to *Lincoln*, it is imperative to recognize that every historian's epistemological approach grants them the ability to select the most appropriate "mode of expression" to depict a particular aspect of the past. Modes of expression can encompass a wide array of mediums, including written works, photography, film, and digital media in contemporary



times. Given the scope of this thesis, it is not feasible to explore every mode of expression associated with history, and as such, the focus remains solely on the matter at hand.

Gore Vidal utilized written text as a means of representing a segment of American history in his novel *Lincoln*. The “American Chronicles” series, a compilation of seven historical novels concerning the United States, are regarded as literary works due to their narrative structures. It should be noted that the narrative strategies used in each work are distinguishable in this series. According to Çancı Çalıřaneller’s study, the majority of novels in the “American Chronicles” are classified as historiographical metafiction, while *Lincoln* stands out as an exception (Çancı Çalıřaneller, 2013, p. 5). Given that Çancı Çalıřaneller’s research concentrates on the metafictional features of the other works in the series, the present research aims to examine Vidal’s realistic perspective on history in *Lincoln*.

The events depicted in Gore Vidal’s *Lincoln* are well-known, with the conclusion already established from the beginning of the narrative. The reader is aware that the Civil War will commence, the Union will emerge victorious, and President Abraham Lincoln will fall victim to John Wilkes Booth’s assassination. Vidal presents these events in chronological order, with a particular focus on Lincoln’s time in the White House, although he also delves into the president’s early life through either his own or secondary individuals’ recollections.

Vidal chooses not to delve into the psychological transformation of his protagonist but rather presents Lincoln as an efficient man of action during his presidency. Throughout the story, Lincoln is depicted as constantly besieged, as he battles his political foes, strives to keep Virginia and Maryland in the Union, grapples with the issue of slavery and emancipation, and struggles with obstinate generals and indecisive wars. Eventually, he appointed Ulysses S. Grant, who, despite his well-known excessive drinking, consistently led Union victories in the West. This decision proves pivotal, as it enables the Union to ultimately win the war. Nevertheless, even after Grant’s appointment, Lincoln faced a real threat of losing the presidency to the unsuccessful general-turned-politician, McClellan. It was not until September 2, 1864, when Sherman and the Union army captured Atlanta, that Lincoln’s re-election became almost certain. Sadly, only a few months after his second inauguration, Lincoln was assassinated.

The theme of assassination runs through Vidal’s *Lincoln* from the very beginning. The novel commences with the newly elected President’s covert arrival in the nation’s capital, having grown a beard and with two bodyguards, as he endeavors to bypass Baltimore. The reason for these precautions is a purported assassination attempt on Lincoln, which Baltimore’s “Plug-uglies,” the local street gang, is believed to be planning while his train passes through the city (Vidal, 1994, p. 19). Vidal highlights that this is just one of many assassination plots. The narrative swiftly introduces the character of David Herold, a young man who works as a delivery boy at a drugstore near the White House, believing that Washington’s “wild boys” are preparing to assassinate Lincoln before his inauguration (Vidal, 1994, p. 20). Herold later becomes linked to John Wilkes Booth and is implicated in the attempt on Lincoln’s life. Although little is known about Herold in reality, Vidal’s imaginative portrayal is supported by circumstantial evidence, and his experiences offer a useful subplot in the novel. Herold functions as a connection between Confederate conspirators and the White House and also serves as the reader’s representative amongst the ordinary citizens of the Union’s southern capital.

The novel highlights the hostile environment in which Abraham Lincoln had to operate as President. Washington, D.C., the city where he was to lead the Union during the Civil War, was more Southern than Northern, separated from Virginia by the Potomac River and from solidly held Union territory by Maryland. It was also a city with a significant number of disloyal Americans, second only to Baltimore. As a result, Lincoln had to wage war from a Union enclave situated in Confederate territory. Vidal stresses that Lincoln, who was elected with less than 40 percent of the vote, was also a minority president, a Westerner and an outsider, in the city of Washington. His two formidable competitors, William H. Seward and Salmon P. Chase, were serving in his cabinet. Consequently, while prosecuting the Civil War, Lincoln had to handle internal administrative issues, including opposition from the Washington establishment



represented by Chase and his daughter, Kate. The subplots of Chase and Kate's political ambitions and progress towards marriage, as well as that of David Herold, emphasize the hostility surrounding the protagonist of the story.

Challenges also arise within the Lincoln household, particularly with regard to Mary Todd Lincoln, the President's wife. Vidal portrays her as stubborn, prone to migraines, and occasionally suffering from mental illness. While the novel does not completely dismiss Mary's plight, it primarily highlights the difficulties she poses to her husband. Throughout the story, Lincoln expresses genuine concern for his wife's physical suffering and her unpredictable behavior. Mary's extravagant expenditures on the renovation of the White House and her wardrobe also caused significant financial strain, leading to political criticism and casting doubt on her propriety.

The aforementioned examination proposes that in his novel *Lincoln*, Gore Vidal endeavors to present a realistic portrayal of the past based on historical evidence. Before writing the novel, Vidal undertook extensive research of primary and secondary sources, particularly Abraham Lincoln's writings (Baker & Gibson, 1997, p. 84). This evidences Vidal's aim to create a historically accurate work of fiction by adhering to the available historical resources. It is virtually impossible to produce a fictional historical work from a constructionist perspective, as this perspective is primarily theoretical and analytical. Typically, constructionist historical works are grounded in a theoretical framework. Additionally, Vidal's reliance on historical sources to write his novel indicates that his perspective on *Lincoln* is not deconstructive, and he did not intend to produce an experimental work of history. Therefore, considering Vidal's endeavor to create a highly realistic work based on primary historical sources, it can be inferred that he had a reconstructionist view of history when composing *Lincoln*.

It could be argued that Vidal's perspective on history in *Lincoln* is deconstructive because he chose to write a novel rather than a purely historical account. This argument stems from the fundamental differences between literature and history. To gain a deeper understanding of this issue and to refute the claim mentioned above, it is helpful to refer to Vidal's afterword in *Lincoln*:

How much of *Lincoln* is generally thought to be true? How much made up? This is an urgent question of any reader, and deserves as straight an answer as the writer can give. I have introduced fewer invented figures in *Lincoln* than I did in *Burr* and *1876*. All of the principal characters really existed, and they said and did pretty much what I have them saying and doing. (Vidal, 1994, p. 659)

He further notes:

As for *Lincoln* and the other historical figures in this novel, I have reconstructed them from letters, journals, newspapers, diaries, etc. I have done some moving around, but I have not done this sort of thing often. I have not done it at all with presidents. (Vidal, 1994, p. 659)

The preceding excerpt from the author's afterword provides compelling evidence that Vidal held a reconstructionist perspective of history when composing *Lincoln*. This matter also underscores the notion that an author's selection of a literary genre to depict history does not necessarily entail a disregard for the fidelity of the primary historical sources.

Vidal, like other reconstructionist historians, adheres to a naive realism in his epistemological approach to history in *Lincoln*. Such a view is rooted in correspondence theory, which posits that any mode of expression can potentially enable a comprehensive reconstruction of the past. The next two sections aim to identify possible historical facts that are missing from Vidal's work and to examine the inconsistencies between his reconstruction of the past in *Lincoln* and the actual historical record.





## 2. Seward's Absence at the Depot

During an interview, Gore Vidal made a sarcastic claim that Doris Kearns Goodwin stole the idea of his novel *Lincoln* in her book *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln* (Parini, 1992, p. 87). Vidal was referring to the idea of depicting the personality and life of the former American president in the context of comparison with his competitors. This section aims to use this similarity to illustrate that even when two historical narratives with the same ideas seek to reflect a similar part of the past, each can produce different and contradictory facts from that identical past. It is important to note that the objective of comparing the representations of a similar historical event in the past in these two works is to better comprehend the narrative structure of Gore Vidal's work, and not to examine the narrative of both works to the same extent. In essence, *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln* is selected as a comparative model to *Lincoln* to present a more accurate picture of *Lincoln's* narrative limitations in this comparative context.

As noted earlier, the novel *Lincoln* by Gore Vidal covers the period from Abraham Lincoln's arrival in Washington, D.C. after winning the presidential election to his death. Vidal employs the technique of focalization in his portrayal of the president's character, often through the eyes of secondary characters who serve as focalizers. While this approach adds vividness to the portrayal of events and characters, it also creates limitations in terms of presenting historical truths. In contrast to *Lincoln*, which is categorized as a historical novel, Doris Kearns Goodwin's *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln* is a historical work that chronicles not only Lincoln's path to the presidency and his relationship with his rivals but also their backgrounds and histories from childhood onward.

Upon being elected president of the United States in 1860, Abraham Lincoln embarked on a twelve-day journey to the nation's capital, during which he delivered speeches to the American people in various states. His family accompanied him on this trip. At that time, seven states had already seceded from the Union due to then-President James Buchanan's flawed policies, and the country was on the brink of civil war. In the final days of his journey, security officials alerted the president-elect of a possible assassination plot, prompting a change of plans. The officials advised Lincoln to enter Washington in secret, against the original plan, due to the unforeseen threat. Initially, Lincoln was reluctant to comply, fearing that it would make him appear cowardly in the eyes of the public. Nonetheless, he eventually acquiesced to his advisors' suggestion and arrived in Washington, D.C. without his family on February 23, 1863.

As noted earlier, *Lincoln* commences with the depiction of the president-elect's covert entrance into Washington, D.C. The account of this occurrence is narrated through the lens of Elihu B. Washburne, a distinguished member of the United States House of Representatives at that time. Gore Vidal, the author, thus uses a historical agency from the past as a focalizer to depict the moment of Lincoln's arrival in the capital and the ensuing events. The narrative commences with a brief description of the streets and train station of Washington, after which it shifts its focus to the first encounter between Washburne and Abraham Lincoln. As Lincoln arrives at the station, he is accompanied by two men, one of whom is Detective Pinkerton and the other is Hill Lamon. Washburne then accompanies them to the Willard Hotel. Through their conversation, readers become familiar with some of Lincoln's character traits. The story states that Lincoln had plans to meet his future Secretary of State, William Henry Seward, at the Willard Hotel and to stay there for a few days before his inauguration. In Vidal's novel, the first meeting between Abraham Lincoln and William Henry Seward occurs at the Willard Hotel after the election.

As depicted in Vidal's novel, the meeting between Abraham Lincoln and William Henry Seward upon the former's clandestine arrival in Washington did not come to pass. Elihu B. Washburne, a prominent United States congressman, meets Lincoln at the train station instead. Washburne recounts a conversation with Seward, during which the latter emphasizes the importance of discretion and the presence of officials at the train station. The narrator recalls the dialogue and adds that "since the always-mysterious Seward had then chosen not to come to the depot, only the House of Representatives was represented in the stout



person of Elihu B. Washburne, who was, suddenly, attracted to a criminal threesome” (Vidal, 1994, p. 10). The narrative thus emphasizes Seward’s absence and highlights the secrecy surrounding Lincoln’s arrival.

Upon taking Lincoln out of the train station, Washburne notes, “Governor Seward was supposed to meet us here, but he appears to have overslept”. The novel suggests that, in the interest of security, General Scott had recommended that the president-elect stay temporarily at the Willard Hotel, which is where Lincoln is promptly taken by Washburne (Vidal, 1994, p. 10). The book also recounts that Lincoln and Seward eventually meet at the Willard Hotel, as previously mentioned.

Doris Kearns Goodwin’s account of the same incident in the past, which is reflected in her book *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln*, is as follows:

Seward and Illinois congressman Washburne were appointed to greet Lincoln and escort him to the Willard. Accounts vary, however, as to whether Seward was there to meet the train. He wrote his wife that “the President-elect arrived at six this morning. I met him at the depot.” Nevertheless, Washburne later claimed that Seward had overslept and arrived at the Willard two minutes after Lincoln, “much out of breath and somewhat chagrined to think he had not been up in season to be at the depot on the arrival of the train.” (Goodwin, 2013, p. 456)

The cited excerpt from Goodwin’s work serves to compare the representation of a shared historical event in the two works. It illustrates the uncertain nature of William Henry Seward’s presence or absence at the train station during President-elect Lincoln’s arrival. Despite Seward’s claim, as recorded in a letter to his wife, that he was present to meet Lincoln, Goodwin has chosen to represent all plausible accounts based on available sources. Conversely, Vidal’s portrayal of *Lincoln* omits Seward’s presence at the station, a decision that aligns with the perspective of Congressman Washburne, as noted in the aforementioned passage from Goodwin’s book.

It can be argued that the presence or absence of William Seward at the train station may not have any historical significance. However, this matter holds crucial importance not only in the context of historical truth but also in providing a more accurate understanding of the actual historical events. Seward had planned to hold the reins of power in Lincoln’s cabinet, with the president-elect being reduced to a mere instrument. This is further substantiated by the fact that in Vidal’s novel, during Lincoln and Seward’s meeting with General Scott, it was revealed that contrary to Lincoln’s belief, it was Seward and not General Scott who had arranged for Lincoln to stay at the Willard Hotel (Vidal, 1994, p. 28). Thus, Seward’s absence or presence at the train station during Lincoln’s arrival in Washington could have been a deliberate and purposeful act with a specific intent.

In his novel *Lincoln*, Vidal strives to construct a historically accurate account of the past, embracing a reconstructionist approach to history. In doing so, Vidal is confronted with the challenge of reconciling the limitations of his chosen epistemological framework with the demands of historical fidelity. This requires the selection of certain historical sources over others, which in turn, as Hayden White has noted, can be viewed as “elective affinities” within the narrative structure. Consequently, the narrative itself becomes an integral part of the historical reconstruction, and the relationship between language and the past is not a direct one (White, 1990, p. 76). Through an examination of a particular event in the novel, it becomes clear that Vidal’s decision to prioritize one historical source over others has led to the exclusion of potentially significant historical facts.

### 3. Elihu B. Washburne as Focalizer

As previously alluded to, Gore Vidal has utilized multiple characters’ perspectives in the narration of his novel *Lincoln*. In doing so, he has employed the narrative technique of focalization, positioning these characters as actual historical focalizers. One such character is Elihu B. Washburne, who is introduced



briefly in this section. The author's choice of Washburne as a focalizer in reflecting historical events is examined herein thoroughly.

To demonstrate Vidal's use of the narrative focalization technique, an analysis of the technique in this novel is first conducted. As previously explained, focalization occurs in a narrative when a character's point of view is used to reflect a portion of the events. This technique shows the story's events and characters from the perspective of a specific character, allowing the narrator to access the character's thoughts and emotions. In *Lincoln*, Vidal employs the focalization technique, as evidenced by the focalization markers used in the novel's narrative. For instance, in the opening sections of the novel, after providing a brief description of Washburne's character and his conversation with his driver, Vidal writes that Washburne harbored the "wish" of being accompanied by no fewer than six Federal guards as he observed the lethargic passengers disembark (Vidal, 1994, p. 9). Similarly, in the subsequent part of the novel, the readers are introduced to Washburne's personal opinion of Lincoln's physical appearance. Washburne thought that despite being somewhat thin, Lincoln appeared to be healthy. Moreover, he was reputedly as strong as an ox, capable of lifting a weighty axe from the floor with an outstretched arm at the end of the shaft (Vidal, 1994, p. 13). To examine the focalization markers in the novel's text more closely, a section of the first chapter is presented below:

Over the years, Washburne "had heard" Lincoln tell this particular story a dozen times; and the wording never varied. Lincoln's little stories tended to come at regular intervals, as a form of punctuation-or evasion. But Lincoln was also a master of the long, cumulative, funny story; and many times, Washburne had sat at the stove of some backwoods Illinois tavern when the lawyers on the circuit would compete in story-telling and it was always Lincoln who won. But then, except as a humorist, he had no naturally easy way with an audience. He needed a well-prepared brief. Washburne "hoped" that the grip-sack on the chair next to Lincoln contained such a brief. (Vidal, 1994, p. 15).

In the preceding instances, the terms "wish" and "thought" serve as indicators of Washburne's role as a focalizer in the narrative. Additionally, at the outset of the aforementioned excerpt, the narrator notes that Washburne "had heard" Lincoln's tales. Towards the end, the same character "hopes" for Lincoln to deliver a compelling inaugural address. These examples, in conjunction with numerous others that have been omitted for the sake of brevity, constitute focalization markers that attest to Vidal's frequent use of historical personages as focalizers in *Lincoln*. In effect, the narrator is privy to the sentiments and musings of numerous characters throughout the novel. Therefore, it is crucial to evaluate the significance of Vidal's utilization of this technique in his narration, and the implications that it has for his interpretation of history.

Elihu B. Washburne was a prominent American politician who served as a U.S. Representative from Illinois and later as U.S. Secretary of State under President Ulysses S. Grant. Known for his staunch abolitionist views, Washburne played a key role in the passage of the 13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which abolished slavery throughout the country. He was also a close friend and supporter of President Abraham Lincoln, and was present at his deathbed. Throughout his career, Washburne was a vocal advocate for civil rights and equal treatment under the law, and played an important role in shaping American politics during a critical period of its history.

The necessity of providing the audience with historical background information about events and key figures in the novel *Lincoln* is because the story commences with Lincoln's entry into Washington after winning the election. This abrupt start without sufficient background information would result in a lack of context and confusion for the audience. Hence, the author's decision to employ Washburne as the focalizer of the narrative at the beginning of the novel is a judicious one. This choice has two merits. Firstly, as a prominent politician of his time, Washburne possessed substantial knowledge about key historical figures and events. Therefore, his comments offered the audience an authentic sense of reality. Secondly, he is not among the principal political figures of the era, such as Lincoln and Seward. Thus, his perspective on these



characters not only facilitates a better understanding of them at the outset of the narrative, but also provides the audience with an accurate and unbiased portrayal of these figures.

The author's use of Washburne as a focalizer in the novel's opening sections serves to introduce the crucial figures of Abraham Lincoln and William Seward, both significant historical players. By utilizing the focalization technique and Washburne's observations, Vidal portrays Lincoln in a more realistic and demythologized light. When Washburne first encounters Lincoln at the train station, the narrative from Washburne's perspective depicts him as an individual of considerable height and slender build, donning a supple slouch hat positioned in such a manner as to obscure his gaze like a common thief, as well as a brief overcoat whose collar was upturned to the extent that the sole features apparent between cap and collar were a noteworthy nose and prominent cheekbones, whose "yellow skin" was tightly stretched as if stretched over a taut drum (Vidal, 1994, p. 10). The words chosen in this description of the president-elect are devoid of any exaggerated or legendary adjectives that might have otherwise depicted him as an iconic figure. Washburne's perspective on the elected president is further emphasized in the text, as he perceives Lincoln as "a prosperous, down-state Illinois farmer come to market" (Vidal, 1994, p. 10).

During the journey to the Willard Hotel, Washburne observes that Abraham Lincoln is carrying a "grip sack" and upon inquiry, Lincoln reveals that it contains the only copy of his inaugural address, which he clutches tightly due to its significance (Vidal, 1994, p. 11). Washburne finds Lincoln's behavior naive, and Lincoln's attempt at humor does not change his perception. Upon their arrival at the hotel, the manager mistakenly addresses Washburne as the president-elect and shakes his hand, reflecting the reality of Lincoln's time, when he was not yet widely recognized (Vidal, 1994, p. 12).

Washburne's description of Lincoln's physical appearance and habits humanizes and demythologizes him, as he compares him to an "ox" and his napping style to that of a "frog". While these descriptions are not intended as insults, they serve the novel's purpose of demystifying the main character. Vidal's depiction of Lincoln's health issues goes beyond his physical appearance and includes his chronic constipation, which Washburne has been urging him to treat through dietary changes and the use of a laxative called blue mass (Vidal, 1994, p. 12). This candid portrayal of Lincoln's health further contributes to his realistic portrayal in the novel.

Furthermore, the novel explicitly challenges the mythologies surrounding Lincoln's personality in a dialogue between Seward and Washburne. After Lincoln departs from the two at the Willard Hotel and retires to his room, Washburne inquires of Seward his opinion of Lincoln. Seward characterizes Lincoln as a "typical Western politician, man of the people, a splitter of rails, that kind of thing" (Vidal, 1994, p. 17). Washburne counters Seward's assessment by stating, "that was all made up for the campaign" (Vidal, 1994, p. 17), suggesting that the popular image of Lincoln was carefully crafted for political purposes.

In this segment of the novel, Washburne is not only the focalizer who sheds light on Lincoln's true image but also offers insights into the character of William Seward. According to Washburne, Seward was a former master of the state of New York and the Republican Party, with long white hair, a large nose, and pale eyes. He had a husky voice from a lifetime of smoking cigars and snuff addiction. Seward, who was seven years senior to Lincoln, had been outmaneuvered by Lincoln's managers at the Chicago Convention, where Lincoln was nominated for president (Vidal, 1994, p. 13).

Moreover, the novel introduces two essential points about Seward through Washburne's narration. Firstly, Seward had imperialist tendencies and always sought to add the surrounding countries to the American territory. This inclination is evident in his conversation with Lincoln and Washburne, where he talks about the preference of dealing with countries such as Mexico and Canada, considering America's internal problems unimportant, in contrast to Lincoln's perspective (Vidal, 1994, pp. 15-16). Secondly, since Lincoln's election victory, Seward has devised a plan called the Albany Plan, which the audience is unfamiliar with due to the lack of knowledge of the events before the time of the novel.



Vidal cleverly explains the Albany plan in a part of the first chapter of the novel and the dialogue between Washburne and Seward. The use of focalization markers highlights the fact that Washburn has been chosen as the focalizer in this part of the novel:

‘What’s wrong with that?’ Washburne played the innocent. Actually, he knew Seward’s game—the so-called Albany Plan had been secretly formulated during the fall by Seward and his chief henchman, Thurlow Weed, the proprietor of *The Albany Evening Journal*. They wanted to exclude from the Cabinet such presidential contenders as Chase. They wanted, most ambitiously to turn Lincoln into a figurehead; the actual administration of the country would be taken over by Seward, the party’s national leader and most famous man. Seward would be premier to Lincoln’s powerless monarch. (Vidal, 1994, p. 17)

In addition to portraying the central historical figures in the novel, Washburne, in his role as a focalizer in *Lincoln*, serves to shed light on key events and conditions of the period. For instance, Vidal employs dialogues between Washburne and Lincoln to deride the building constructed by President Buchanan near the White House, which serves to underscore the ineffectiveness of the former president (Vidal, 1994, p. 12). The novel consistently emphasizes that Buchanan’s misguided policies not only led to the secession of several southern states from the Union but also pushed the country toward civil war. Furthermore, through Washburne’s focalization, the book illustrates two instances of discrimination against African Americans in the United States during that era, aligning with one of the novel’s primary themes, namely, slavery. Firstly, Washburne’s driver is an African American, and Washburne is seen reprimanding him (Vidal, 1994, p. 9). Moreover, upon entering the Willard Hotel, the novel highlights that the assistant manager of the hotel is white, while all the employees under him are black, serving as a stark portrayal of racial discrimination even in northern states (Vidal, 1994, p. 12).

#### 4. David Herold as Focalizer

In contrast to Elihu B. Washburne and the other characters in Vidal’s novel who serve as focalizers, little historical information is available about David Herold. The author himself acknowledges this fact in the afterword of the novel (Vidal, 1994, p. 659). Consequently, Vidal has utilized Herold differently compared to the other characters in his work, making him a subject of analysis in this section. Given Herold’s insignificance in the political context of his time and his absence from the communication networks of key historical figures, his thoughts and emotions have a limited role in the characterization of the main historical actors. Instead, Vidal employs focalization through other important historical figures to portray the primary characters. Even when Herold’s thoughts are briefly referenced about the main characters, they only serve to reinforce his distance from them, ultimately highlighting the unreliability of his opinions. Thus, Herold’s internal focalization is reserved primarily for peripheral characters, such as the Surratt family and Sal Austin, allowing Vidal to maintain the fictional nature of his work.

In the novel, Mrs. Surratt is portrayed as a peripheral, fictional character whose characterization is developed through the eyes of David Herold. The narrative employs David’s focalization to illustrate his perception of Mrs. Surratt’s physical appearance and demeanor. For instance, when David first encounters the Surratt family, he describes Mrs. Surratt as “a handsome auburn-haired woman with a body that David...knew was Junoesque” and later remarks on her “sad” and “beautiful” appearance (Vidal, 1994, p. 18). Such passages demonstrate Vidal’s use of David’s focalization to explore peripheral characters that are of limited historical significance. However, it is worth examining whether Vidal’s use of David’s focalization serves only to develop minor characters. Upon reviewing the novel, it becomes apparent that Vidal also employs David’s character to convey historical facts. Although David is not utilized for characterizing the central historical figures, his perspective is essential for depicting historical facts.

Vidal employs David Herold as a representation of the masses in the capital during that period. By doing so, the author provides the audience with a more comprehensive picture of the lower echelons of the society, beyond the perspectives and actions of the societal elites. This results in a more nuanced



understanding of the historical reality of that era. For instance, Vidal utilizes Harold's point of view to introduce the audience to armed groups like the "Plug Uglies" and "Wild Boys" in Washington and Baltimore, who were plotting to assassinate Lincoln (Vidal, 1994, p. 19). This aspect is linked to Vidal's use of Herold to reflect the societal events of that period, which aims to create a more authentic and realistic portrayal of Lincoln's time, as discussed in this section.

The narrative of the novel portrays the political beliefs of the Surratt family and David Harold during their encounter, specifically their stance on President Lincoln. It is evident that both Harold and the Surratts, as part of a wider society, strongly oppose Lincoln's presidency (Vidal, 1994, p. 21). As the story progresses, we learn that they take active measures to fight against Lincoln. Vidal aims to illustrate that, contrary to the popular belief, Lincoln was not widely supported even in the American capital, which is not situated in the southern states. Moreover, the fact that Abraham Lincoln won the election by a narrow margin receives less attention than it merits, challenging a portion of American collective memory regarding him.

Abraham Lincoln's reputation as the "Man of the People" is a widely held belief, though it is, in fact, a myth. According to Peterson, this myth is based on two main aspects. The first is the notion that Lincoln was a common man, born into poverty and hardship, and rough-hewn figure like the country he represented. The second aspect is Lincoln's faith in democracy, his keen political acumen, his ability to intuitively understand public opinion, and his capacity to inspire trust among people (Vidal, 1994, p. 31). In the novel *Lincoln*, Vidal adopts David Herold as the narrator to offer the audience a glimpse into the everyday life of the common people, revealing a reality that diverges from the idealized image of Lincoln as the "Man of the People." By depicting the opposition of Herold and the Surratt family to Lincoln's presidency, Vidal challenges the popular misconception that Lincoln enjoyed widespread popularity even in the capital. Through this technique, Vidal sets out to dismantle the distorted images of Lincoln that have taken root in the collective memory of the American people. The power of narrative in shaping historical accounts and even influencing the formation of collective memory is thus underscored.

## V. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this paper has examined the representation of history in Gore Vidal's novel *Lincoln*, with a focus on the author's epistemological view, the narrative techniques employed, and the historical accuracy of the portrayal of characters and events. The analysis has revealed that the process of representing the past is complex, and historical writers face difficult choices when selecting an epistemological view and a narrative technique to create meaning. The analysis of Vidal's epistemological view of history revealed that the author's reconstructionist approach relies heavily on the primary sources, leading to a limitation in accurately reflecting the social conditions of a historical period. The examination of narrative techniques, such as voice and focalization, also demonstrated how Vidal used them to create multiple perspectives and represent the thoughts of different characters, thereby rendering the characterization of important historical figures more palpable.

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