*The Golden Gate* by Vikram Seth – Presentation for Chapters 1-6

The Two Sides of San Francisco

**Theme to keep in mind**

We typically think of San Francisco as the lefty, counter-culture birthplace of free love, but it also gave us Reagan and new conservatism and housed plenty of the new class of young, urban professionals in the 1980s when *The Golden Gate* is set. Seth captures many of these contradictions within San Francisco in his novel. There’s free love but still entrenched and enforced gay shame. There’s Silicon Valley, but there are also peaceniks dedicated to “World Amity.” **How do these contradictions characterize San Francisco and establish conflict in the novel?**

1. Background
   1. *The Golden Gate* was published by Random House in 1986. (Post *Tales of the City*)
   2. Seth was inspired while in grad school for economics at Stanford. While reading translations of Alexander Pushkin’s verse novel *Eugene Onegin*, Seth was attracted to the verse style: “I realized that this was the form I was looking for to tell my tales of California. The little short stories I had in my mind subsided and this more organically oriented novel came into being. I loved the form, the ability that Pushkin had to run through a wide range of emotions, from absolute flippancy to real sorrow and passages that would make you think, during and after reading it.”
2. Structure
   1. The novel is written in **Onegin stanzas** or **Pushkin sonnets**—sonnets written in iambic tetrameter, rhyme scheme AbAbCCddEffEgg (uppercase=feminine rhymes, lowercase=masculine rhymes[[1]](#footnote-1)).
   2. This is one of the most distinguishing features of the novel. Seth claims that it allows for both “absolute flippancy” and “real sorrow.” **How does this style help Seth achieve the emotional depth he wishes to capture? Does the form distract from the story or enhance it?**
   3. **In the novel, Seth interrupts every now and then. On page 100, 5.1, Seth writes… “” What purpose does this serve? Speaking of the narrator…**
3. Narrator
   1. Pushkin used a slightly fictionalized version of himself as narrator of *Eugene Onegin*. Seth does the same thing.
   2. **How is this similar to Seth’s use of a narrator? How does Seth’s interruptions affect the story? Does it add to the realism of the novel or detract from it?**
4. San Francisco History
   1. The novel takes place in 1980 right after the 70s (obviously). Hippies, the San Francisco Sound (6-7), pornography, serial killers, flower power, LGBT rights (Harvey Milk), Silicon Valley (7), feminism (16).
   2. Even in 1980s SF, there is still venomous homophobia. 17, 88, 98, 105
   3. Seth refers to Japanese internment briefly when he describes Janet’s apartment (11).
   4. Though *McTeague* was “a story of San Francisco,” *The Golden Gate* captures the more recognizable San Francisco of the later 20th century. Seth, unlike Hammet or Norris, set out to write his “tales of California.” (Note the call to regional distinction on p.60; Seth asserts that the West, unlike the East, is WASP-free.)
5. **Yuppies vs. Peaceniks** (Main focus of discussion)
   1. The underlying tension within the novel hinges on the divide between yuppies (young, urban professionals like John) and peaceniks (communist-sympathizing pacifists like Phil). P.142, 6.39, talk about going limp and resisting arrest.
   2. The novel I set in 1980 in the middle of the Cold War near the end of Carter’s presidency. Californian Ronald Reagan was about to take his place in 1981.
   3. San Francisco was “Manhattanizing” (building tall skyscrapers in the Financial District).
   4. Conflict between John and Phil. 8, 80, 142-146
   5. **How does Seth use this conflict to comment on his characters? What does John’s position reveal about him? What does Phil’s reveal about him?** He quit his job even though he was a single parent because he believed in the movement.

\*Thanks to Wikipedia for background info

1. Feminine rhymes are double rhymes (passion and fashion), and masculine rhymes are single rhymes (gloat and float). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)