

Tales of the city essay



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Tales of the City Christoph Jeff Micklon's Book Report FOR ENG 744. 3 Gay Literature Dr. John Bowers Spring 1996 Armistead Maupin When you sense the affection where people enfold their loving kindness you are probably amidst the tenants of 28 Barbary Lane, San Francisco 94109.

Perhaps tenants' is the wrong word, it should be something more like a friendly community of people. In Tales of the City, by Armistead Maupin, the characters are intertwined with togetherness. The mother of all mothers, the landlady', guardian of all who live under her roof, orchestrates an unfolding story that is captivating and compelling. It is her love that permeates the other characters within this story.

This sequence of story snippets was originally introduced to San Francisco Chronicle readers back in 1976. It is because of this that each sub-story, or chapter in the book, is a self-sustaining story in itself, more so than most chapter arranged narratives. This book is the first volume in a series, that chronicles the life of a small number of San Francisco residents. With each new chapter there is a personal development for the characters within. It is this sense of development that is most important for the continuity of Tales of the City. The development neatly meshes the character's lives with one another, till ultimately the product is a mass evolution.

It is interesting to note that the writing style Mr. Maupin uses to guide the story forward is consistent throughout the book. Chapters inevitably commence with a character's response to the given situation. There are several departures from this style, which are explained further on in this book report.

The chapters are suited for the readers of a newspaper. Each is short, usually between two and four pages in length. This makes the reading simple to digest. Each chapter equates to an individual episode of a television soap opera. Chapters link their engaging scenarios together to form a habit forming series. The first thirty-one chapters amply show the author's intended direction & purpose for the entire novel.

“ Taking the Plunge” ch. 1 p. 1-3: This is the introduction of the unfolding Mary Ann Singleton & the expeditious Connie Bradshaw.

Vacationing in San Francisco for eight days Mary Ann discovers that she wishes to escape her home and stay in San Francisco. She attempts to convince her mother she is doing the right thing. Haplessly she is not even sure herself about this. Confronting her housing situation head-on Mary Ann asks her friend, Connie, if she can shack up with her till she finds her own pad.

“ Connie's Place” ch. 2 p. 4-7: Mary Ann moves into Connie's apartment. She believes her new life will begin soon. The two new roommates reminisce about their childhood together, not looking forward but looking back. Mary Ann discovers a myriad cologne collection in Connie's bathroom cabinet. Connie is still popular with the men, a quality she is striving for in her new life.

“ A Frisco Disco” ch. 3 p. 8-11: Mary Ann & Connie go out clubbing together for different reasons. Mary Ann pretends to disrobe her innocence, but her attempts do not work. Due to her inability to put aside her starched

values she turns down a sexual advance from a man. With the night's failure, and without Connie, she goes home early.

“ Her New Home” ch. 4 p. 12-15: This is the introduction of the caring & passionate Anna Madrigal. Mary Ann had enough exposure of Connie's Trix. Out of the three places the rental agency sent her, Mary Ann discovers that 28 Barbary Lane is where her new funky home will be. Once back at Connie's apartment, Connie suggests they meet at the Safeway for another man hunt.

“ Love with the Proper Shopper” ch. 5 p. 16-19: This is one of the only chapters where scenery is in place before the introduction of characters. The grocery is more paramount to the characters than the other way around. This is because by its very nature Safeway is a place where people are compelled to congregate. Mary Ann begrudgingly gets a lesson on how to pick up men from Connie. Once alone Mary Ann is besieged by a man inquiring specifics on Chinese cooking. She is repulsed by the overt scenario and quickly dumps him into the frozen food section. To her frustration the second round of interaction is with a beautiful man who is not there to pick up girls, he was just being friendly.

He had no intentions of picking her up, namely because he was gay. Mary Ann's emotions dip to her foundation, when she realizes that again she is unsuccessful at forging her new life.

“ Connie's Bummer Night” ch. 6 p. 20-23: Connie arrives back from Safeway, as she puts it, “ with no weirdoes.” Mary Ann turns down Connie's invitation to go out yet again to find tonight's Trix. The night passes and Connie still

does not have a man, one that substitutes for a meaningful relationship, to prevail by her side. The next day Mary Ann takes her lonely suitcase and what possibly is forever, leaves behind Connie for 28 Barbary Lane. She has experienced one side of San Francisco that does not appeal to her. Moving on to the next situation, she continues on her path for a new life, leaving Connie on her own.

“The Employment Line” ch. 7 p. 24-27: During her first day in her very own apartment Mary Ann seeks to fulfill her horoscope by availing herself to the Metropolitan Employment Agency. Her posting was deceptively innocent. A red-faced Mr. Creech decided that he wanted a girl Friday for more than just office work. Mary Ann fell back on her hometown morals and declared she was indeed uptight about that type of work. Not being able to withstand the rejection, she cried herself to sleep. After she woke up she wrote a deceptively optimistic letter to her parents. Anna intuitively knew of Mary Ann's troubles that day.

She consoled Mary Ann with a neatly rolled joint and a letter of support welcoming her. Mary Ann truly needed a friend in her new life.

“Enter Mona” ch. 8 p. 28-31: This is the introduction of the oddly free Mona Ramsey; the steadfast Edgar Halcyon. While taking out the garbage, Mary Ann meets head on with Mona, another tenant. Mona uncovers her quaint Franciscan nature by revealing the secrets held in Mary Ann's garbage. Mona, trying to be friendly, invites her up for tea and a chat. With Mona's connection at work, Mary Ann successfully interviews with Edgar Halcyon of Halcyon Communications.

“ The Ad Game” ch. 9 p. 32-34: This is the introduction of the flippant ; troubled Beauchamp Day. Some time has passed and Mary Ann has settled into her new job as the personal secretary for Edgar Halcyon. Beauchamp is described in great unnerving detail. He is irreverent, married and flirting with Mary Ann.

He asks her to lunch that afternoon. Exposed to another moral dilemma, Mary Ann, begins to think that her ideas of morality need to be modified to let her experience her new life.

“ Edgar Blows Up” ch. 10 p. 35-38: Concerned for his daughter’s marriage, Edgar confronts Beauchamp on his whereabouts the night before. The chapter turns to Mary Ann & Mona having a friendly lunch together. Later on Mona asks Anna if Mary Ann knows about Anna’s secret. A mystery that is frugally explained in chapter 105, is left unanswered in this chapter. This helps develop Anna’s secretive identity.

“ Anguish in Bohemia” ch. 11 p. 39-42: This is the introduction of the blue-blooded Frannie Halcyon. Edgar calls Frannie on the phone to make up an excuse for not coming home that evening. Suspecting deception, Frannie becomes combative. After getting off the phone with Frannie, Edgar admits to himself that Ruby Miller might as well have been his mistress. The chapter diverts to a conversation at Beauchamp’s social club. Drugs were used by a club member.

Both of these situations shatter high societies ambiance. The lives of the rich are not perfect.

“ The Wrath of DeDe” ch. 12 p. 43-45: Beauchamp realizes that DeDe was waiting for him to take her to a social ladder climbing party. He begrudgingly rushes home to chauffeur her to this social incarceration. Once home the two quarrel about DeDe calling up her father the previous night. The quarrel ends when DeDe pronounces that Beauchamp is obligated to her father. The undertone here is that Beauchamp does not relish the idea that he is not of the same social class as his wife. He resents when he feels inferior, and frustrated when he has to live up to the social class. With this small triumph, DeDe can declare that she knew about the lunch date with Mary Ann Singleton. Behind those words she suspects infidelity. This turbulent conflict forces Beauchamp to immaturely retaliate in chapter twenty-two.

“ The Landlady’s Dinner” ch. 13 p. 46-50: Mary Ann’s innocence surfaces again when she does not realize that Mona’s offer of coke’ was not a cola. Mona further exposes her debauched nature when she produces food stamps when it is obvious that she is making enough money not to need them. But Mary Ann does not realize that Mona did need them at one time and simply kept them. During Anna’s dinner party Mary Ann is offered more joints and boorish company. Bored with Anna’s plastic guests, Mary Ann wanders into the bathroom and notices a part of Anna’s past. Anna comes in to reveal that her name is assumed and that she was never married. The conversation leads to men. Anna assures Mary Ann that she will find a man in San Francisco that is not gay.

“ Rendezvous with Ruby” ch. 14 p. 51-53: This is the introduction of the devoted Ruby Miller. This is another chapter that begins with setting the scene before interacting with the characters. In this case it is necessary to do

this because the scene is showing the environment that Ruby lives in, than the person herself. She is made out to be a born, bred, lower-middle class Christian soldier. The chapter name and the actions seem very much like a mid-evening rendezvous for a quickie. The chapter's intention is to dumfound the reader.

Ruby starts pressing her fingertips against Edgar's temples. The action appears to prelude a sexual act. Then the next sentence blunts the senses by making it known that Ruby is spiritually healing Edgar. Blam! The chapter ends without warning.

“ The Boy Next Door” ch. 15 p. 54-56: This is the introduction of the meandering ; oversexed Brian Hawkins. Mary Ann reads her mail. There is an impression that she is very lonely in her new world. Anna intervenes by sending up Brian Hawkins. He had no idea of the reason why Anna would ask him to go up and see Mary Ann, but the light dawned for her. She explained that she had just told Anna that there were not enough straight men in San Francisco. He invited her up to his apartment, which was short and agreeable.

“ The Matriarch” ch. 16 p. 57-59: Edgar returns home after his meeting', and makes up an intricate lie about it. It is evident that Frannie is drunk and discouraged. Not realizing it Edgar is guilty of the same transgression that he reprimanded his son-in-law for in chapter ten. Edgar changes the subject from being late, which leads to a discussion about a party that Frannie wishes to put on. It is evident that he is tired of living the strict social life of the upper class. Both Edgar & Beauchamp wish for the same thing, release, but they attain their wishes in different ways.

“ Stranger in the Park” ch. 17 p. 60-64: Edgar is in turmoil over his lifethreatening medical problem. There was a hint of the problem in chapterfourteen, but the problem was never so imposing. Edgar’s doctor pleads with him to face his life, fling it off and take advantage of his last few months. As he leaves for lunch he is in great turmoil. He absurdly fantasizes about Frannie’s party and that he could add to his wife’s social ladder by foretelling his death at the party. He put this notion out of his mind as he entered Washington square and encountered Anna.

“ Relating at Lunch” ch. 18 p. 63-66: Beauchamp and Mary Ann have lunch at an urban-organic-aloof restaurant. This only amplifies Mary Ann’s uneasiness of being with Beauchamp. He is able to still her butterflies by tearing away the pretenses she has built around his presumed blue-blood. He purposely strikes back DeDe, fulfilling her fears by asking Mary Ann to vacation with him that weekend. She resists but not with much effort on account of her struggle to fit into her new life.

“ A Piece of Anna’s Past” ch. 19 p. 67-69: This is the first chapter that directly follows the personal timeline of a character. This is because it’s importance to Edgar’s life discovery could not be completed in one single chapter. Meeting Anna made the park warmer and the bird’s songs more joyous.

The two start out with small talk but it inadvertently, at least according to Edgar, turns into a serious discussion about both of their pasts. Anna remarks that Edgar is not too happy with himself and she tries to bring back memories when he enjoyed his life. She plays with his mind by implying that she runs a house of pleasure. But her words are misleading, she actually runs

a boardinghouse. Finally Anna finishes playing with her prey by saying, “ Tomorrow is histurn to buy lunch.”“ Mona’s New Roomie” ch. 20 p. 70-73: This is the introduction of the self-styled Michael Tolliver (Mouse). From nowhere Michael calls Mona declaring thatanother relationship is down the tubes. In Michael’s mind this is a typicalstereotype for himself as a gay man. Relationships are supposed to be shortterm, never everlasting, ; far ; few between. His only comfort is that thisparticular relationship was able to get to the furniture buying stage. Therelationship is in control, neither of the two men. Concerned for Michael’swell being, Mona practically demands that Michael come live with her. Aselection of possessions are inventoried coming into Mona’s apartment: a T-shirtthat reads “ Dance 10, Looks 3”, Army surplus clothing, a photo of La Belle, ; aroach clip. These possessions elucidate Michael in a stereotypical light. Theauthor uses possessions to make character inner workings evident.

“ Their First Date” ch. 21 p. 74-76: It is obvious that Edgar is falling forAnna in this chapter. He does not care if anyone sees them alone together.

They joke with one another and Edgar reveals his inadequacy of contend with hissocial class. Anna remarks about how wonderful it is to fly a kite while beingstoned. Obviously shocked Edgar asks “ Marijuana?” He felt older than everhaving to refuse the offered joint. Anna turned the cheerless situation into agleeful one by trading the joint for the usage of a kite.

“ Off to Mendocino” ch. 22 p. 77-79: This is the first instance where Mary Annovertly disregards her hometown morals. She sleeps with Beauchamp, a marriedman, her boss’ son-in-law, and a very big step. It is unfortunate

that Beauchamp is only using her to get back at his wife for all her meddling & over-inquisitive nature.

“ Brian Climbs the Walls” ch. 23 p. 80-83: It is ironic while Mary Ann seeks sex with Beauchamp, Brian is bored out of his skull and wants Mary Ann’s company.

Brian really desires her, Beauchamp does not share this. Brian relieves himself by going out for the night. He ends up in a bar with Chip Hardesty, who is a rival of sorts. The rivalry comes from the fact that Chip is a babe magnet; note Chip’s last name. All used up, Chip leaves the bar to Brian. Alas Brian has no choice but to accept the women leftovers.

“ Post-Mortem” ch. 24 p. 84-86: Beauchamp’s little soldier, was unable to salute Mary Ann. He was worried, perhaps even concerned, for what he had done to DeDe. Mary Ann wants to share feeling while Beauchamp is cold. All of a sudden Beauchamp reveals that he is in love with Mary Ann. More than likely he wishes to escape his social rank with Mary Ann, the representation of his freedom. But Beauchamp divulges his true nature in his sleep. Mary Ann is no longer infatuated with this escape to her future. Both, Beauchamp’s & Mary Ann’s escapes have failed miserably.

“ Coming Clean in the Marina” ch. 25 p. 87-89: Brian gave up on picking up a mistress for the evening, at the bars at least. He takes his male chauvinism to the Laundromat. He sights his quarry, a saucy girl waiting for the same thing he is there for. The two exchange smart-aleck remarks with each other. In sort, checking each other’s resistance to hurt. With persistence he melts

her resistance, Connie's resistance. Ironic that yet another intertwining of characters has developed.

" and Many Happy Returns" ch. 26 p. 90-93: Brian wakes to find himself trying to cope with Connie's emotions. She is pissed and Brian has no clue.

She wants tenderness and only gets, wham bam thank you ma'am. She emotionally breaks and communicates the reason for her acting like a bitch, it is her birthday. She is depressed that she has no one to share her loneliness with except complete a stranger, picked up in Laundromat. Placing aside his sarcastic comments, Brian's tender nature surfaces. He quickly runs into her kitchen and reappears with a makeshift birthday cake and says, " no wisecracks." The charade of the wise-cracking in the last chapter is dropped for gentleness in this chapter. Both characters grow to understand that their life simulation only disservice them.

" Mrs. Day at Home" ch. 27 p. 93-95: DeDe's life is crumbling around her. She bathes away the frustration, but this escape fails to secure her doubts about herself. She grasps for the first support, an old fling. Walt unfortunately casts her back to reality. He now has a happy and well adjusted marriage, noneed for another woman's yearnings.

" The Chinese Connection" ch. 28 p. 96-98: On the phone with Walt, DeDe realizes that her husband is not away for the weekend where he said he would be.

She admits to herself she never believed the lie anyway, and tries to brush off the compounded pain. She hangs up with Walt and almost immediately calls for backup, breakfast cereal. It reminded her again of the past that she was struggling to find. The present knocks on her front door delivering the groceries she just ordered. Lionel Wong was a strong & a man to be fixated over.

Bluntly, DeDe throws herself on him and they do the dirty. Beauchamp arrives home an hour later, just in time to see Lionel withdraw. Indirectly he knew what had just happened. He reveled in his ability to coerce his wife into acting out the deeds she accused him. This is a shallow victory for Beauchamp & serves no purpose but to obliterate their marriage.

“ Confession in the Nude” ch. 29 p. 99-102: Mona and Michael go for a mini beach vacation up the coast. It is brought to light that Michael and Mary Ann have met before. His lover was the shopper at the Safeway that Mary Ann was trying to inadvertently pick up. This is another cross link of the characters within the story.

“ Miss Singleton Dines Alone” ch. 30 p. 103-105: In deep thought Mary Ann realizes that she is not living her life for her self. She should confront DeDe with the situation Beauchamp and her are entangled in. The scene shifts to the Day's home. Beauchamp plants Mary Ann's glove in his Porsche in retaliation to DeDe's nagging suggestions that he was not where he said he would be that weekend. He is determined to squelch his wife's denigrating actions.

"Mona vs. the Pig" ch. 31 p. 106-108: The pig' is a client of Halcyon Communications, king of pantyhose himself, Fartface Siegel. Mona does not relish the fact that she has to jump through hoops to get the man to admit that the current ad campaign needs to be overhauled. During the meeting, Mona speaks her mind a little too freely. She hurls her job better than any discus thrower ever could. Walking out the door she affronts Beauchamp, "Your karma is really fucked." Once she gets home, she apathetically informs Michael of the news that she lost her job.

There are many parallels within the story. These stress the significance that people are much more alike than they are different. It also gives the story a sense of continuation.

The settings within Tales of the City mostly occurs within San Francisco, aside from two departures. These two places represent an escape from the city ; the lives that are moored there. Beauchamp's escape to Mendocino bore no fruit, neither did Michael's escape to the beach. It turns out in later chapters that the two characters must face their lives directly to change them. Actually all the characters that are escaping from themselves, discover this incisive wisdom.

There are several social gatherings that take place. The party Beauchamp ; DeDe Day attend provides the characters with a moment where they get to learn the truth about each other. Both of Mrs. Anna Madrigal's parties help MaryAnn's development as a new person.

The only substantial character not reviled in the first thirty-one chapters is the pathetic Norman Neal Williams. It is a pity that he is unable to develop.

He is introduced little by little, each part showing more of his grotesqueness. He is found to be a little man that only obtains what he wants by using other people. He tries to reach out to Mary Ann, but his shortcomings are too great. Norman is cut from the book in a fury, not able to learn from his mistakes as the other characters do throughout the book. He is a reminder that not all people are saved from themselves.

Interactions Between Characters By keeping a close knit group of characters Armistead Maupin is able to keep the attention drawn towards the development of the character, not strewn ; trying to assimilate new characters constantly. It is easier to keep track of less characters. The interaction between the characters within Tales of the City are simple but many. It is almost predictable that a character already introduced will somehow be the new introduced.

To understand Tales of the City it is useful to relate it to other reading from the class.

The characters are not as complex as ones in Plato's Symposium . While this is true what the reader learns about their nature is more revealing in Tales of the City. Maupin's work is much more light hearted, while Plato interjects a deep philosophy. There is an obvious time difference between the two stories, but this does not keep love from becoming the binding strap for each. Tales of the City is a search for love that the Symposium defines.

Both Petronius' Satyricon & Tales of the City are intended to tell a story. The bathhouse emerges from the past to be incorporated in chapter ninety-seven. It nearly serves the same function, but in present times the sexual content

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has increased. It is odd to know this & still understand that the perversion in the Satyricon is much more open. Usually sexual outlays refer to perversion, but in Tales of the City the action is not meant to be perverse. This would not be acceptable to the readers of a daily newspaper.

In Tales of the City the characters are able to reach from deep within to find answers. Augustine's Confessions has Aurelius attaining his answers from an outside source, GOD. Grasping for answers outside their experience the characters in Armistead's book fail to attain happiness. Because Aurelius has an exceptional faith in things outside his experience he is able to attain happiness this way.

It is not very clear if Foucault's ideas in The History of Sexuality an introduction Vol. 1. Conform to Tales of the City. Foucault says that it is inherent to confess such as in Augustine's work. Because Tales of the City is not about the author himself, but a selection of fictional characters, it is difficult to tell if Maupin is interjecting his confession. The only sure idea that fits the work is that the power of identity is not taken for granted.

Strong examples of this are Mary Ann & Anna. Mary Ann firmly builds her identity and Anna has one to begin with.

After the dedication page Maupin quotes Oscar Wilde. "It's an odd thing, but someone who disappears is said to be seen in San Francisco" Maupin must relate to this quote. The finding of one self happens very often in San Francisco. In Oscar Wilde's prose composition De Profundis the lower class is able to run their lives free of the obstruction of society. Maupin relates this understanding with the characters Edgar & Beauchamp. Wilde was

thrust into a social class that he was never really included. Beauchamp feels the same way. He does not fit in, but must take the responsibility of the social position. Wilde writes his composition to justify his deeds to either to himself or his beloved. Maupin writes to convey a sense that life is workable.

Sir Richard Conway in Forester's *Arthur Snatchfold* does not confront his omission from society. The character does not believe he needs to develop, unlike characters in *Tales of the City* which are striving to develop into a new.

Sir Richard fantasizes about another character & is able to confront him. The descriptions of settings are much more colorful in *Arthur Snatchfold*, but the characters are not as absorbing.

Anna Madrigal serves as the motherly type in *Tales of the City* much like the storyteller in Coward's "Me and the Girls." The reader never knows the storyteller's name, but does realize that he cares for his dance troop. While Coward's story is a fanciful recounting of prior experiences, a confession of sorts, Maupin's rendering releases the past for a better future. Death manifests because of necessity in both works. To confess the storyteller needs death to encourage his reminiscing. In chapter one hundred-twelve fairness is brought when Norman dies a befitting death. He fails to hang on from the precipice because of his own shortcomings. His tie is just a clip on, an article that represents his fraudulent life. Mary Ann holds his tie while Norman falls to his death.

Beattie's stories characters in "The Cinderella Waltz" are as shallow as a muddy puddle. The characters in Tales of the City are fully developed and substantial. Marriage is considered a facade in both works. The characters superficially believe that marriage is important, but when it comes down to feelings, it is unimportant. Development is found by separation in Beattie's story, while in Maupin's story it is found through consolidation.

Tales of the City requires a detailed explanation of all events.

Each circumstance leads to another which helps in the development of the characters.

Maupin is also able to tie in events so they adhere to future events.

The hypocrisy of the social classes is brought forward. Humans are frail.

The reading is seemingly simplistic on the surface, but beneath this there are serious lessons to be learned. Self improvement & happiness can only be attained when a critical analysis of oneself has been executed.

Subsequent Chapters: Tales of the City Ch. 32. Where Is Love p. 109-111 Ch. 33. If the Shoe Fits p. 112 Ch. 34. Sherry and Sympathy p. 115 Ch. 35. The Rap about Rape p. 118 Ch. 36. Romance in the Rink p. 123 Ch. 37. Coed Steam p. 127 Ch. 38. Hillary's Room p. 130 Ch. 39. Breakfast in Bed p. 133 Ch. 40. The Maestro Vanishes p. 136 Ch. 41. Frannie Freaks p. 139 Ch. 42. The Case of the Six Batons p. 142 Ch. 43. Back to Cleveland p. 145 Ch. 44. Michael's Pep Talk p. 148 Ch. 45. War and Peace p. 151 Ch. 46. Once More into the Beach p. 154 Ch. 47. Fantasia for two p. 157 Ch. 48. The Mysterious Caller p. 160 Ch. 49. So Where Was Beauchamp p. 163 Ch. 50. What the Simple Folk Do p. 167 Ch. 51. Intermezzo p. 170 Ch. 52. Vincent's Old Lady p.

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