

Frederick Manfred. The Golden Bowl. 1944, reprint Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1976.

### SUMMARY OF THE BOOK

Originally published in 1944 under the pen name of Feike Feikema, The Golden Bowl, Frederick Manfred's first novel, received glowing notices from reviewers and launched Manfred's literary career on a high note. He followed it the next year with Boy Almighty and two years after that with This Is the Year, eventually writing twenty-two novels as well as a number of other works of fiction and nonfiction. The New York Times called the book "a timeless account of man's battle against nature and the gains measured only in the integrity of his own soul." Sewanee Review likened it to a kind of folk ballad, "another lyric performance, a dexterous biography of the elemental forces which threaten the pioneer." The reviewer for The Listener of London weighed in, "This is a comfortable and beautiful novel, achieving unpretentious perfection in its little field, and I'd prefer it to half a dozen howling Wolfes or straining Steinbecks."

The 6'9" Manfred, in fact, was often compared to the wide-girthed Thomas Wolfe, whose massive autobiographical novels, comparable in volume to his own out-sized physique, won him widespread notice and fame before his premature death at thirty-seven in 1938. Much more relevant, John Steinbeck won acclaim for The Grapes of Wrath, another dust bowl adventure, published a half-decade before Manfred's contribution to the field. The Minnesota novelist indeed had read Grapes before publishing his own book, but only after having gone through three or four drafts, with three or four more being completed before The Golden Bowl finally came out in print in 1944. Both books dealt with the environmental and economic disaster of the Dust Bowl and Great Depression, empathized with the victims of the debacle, and sympathized with New Deal-type reforms aimed at ameliorating the conditions resulting from the breakdown. But Manfred's was a much shorter, sparer, stripped-down, and simple narrative. Where Steinbeck was a "putter-inner," Manfred was a "taker-outer" (more like Hemingway in this regard).

While Steinbeck sold many more copies and won much greater renown for his books (eventually capturing a Nobel Prize for Literature), Manfred won a substantial and enthusiastic following of his own, especially in the area around where he was born and lived all his life: northwest Iowa, southwest Minnesota, southeast South Dakota, and northeast Nebraska. Indeed, he would set almost all of his stories in this region, and he concocted his own special name for it, "Siouxland," which he started using in 1947 in This Is the Year. Manfred observed that in writing his novels his greatest discovery was that all great writers are regionalists. He was simply following the rule most writers put at or near the top of their list of "do's and don't's": "Write about what you know." Despite his close association with the Upper Midwest, however, he told one interviewer, "I am no more conscious of being a western writer than Homer was of being a Greek or Hardy a Wessex Englishman or Tolstoi a Russian or Faulkner a Mississippi Southern. I just happened to be born here; I like it here; and by great good luck it also happens to be one helluva a wonderful place to live in." Like many, if not most, other writers, Manfred considered the themes he addressed in his writing to be universal ones.

Though a first novel, The Golden Bowl evidenced a sure control of its material, kept its readers turning the page, demonstrated a mature sense of craft, and remains one of the author's most highly regarded works. While lacking a complex plot, it had a compelling story to tell. Its protagonist, Maury Grant, was a sort of Odysseus figure—the prototypical traveler looking for a better life for himself and in search of his true identity. It is his character that changes most during the course of the novel, and it is his troubles, dreams, adventures, ups, and downs that we are interested in learning about. We are not surprised to discover that the inspiration for the book's writing was a trip the new college graduate, Fred Manfred, took hitchhiking across South Dakota, Montana, and Wyoming in 1934, the same year that the novel begins, and perhaps the worst year of the drought and dust storms in South Dakota. Crop reporting figures revealed that the food grain production index that year was 4 (normal output being 100). Cattle and other farm animals were dying right and left, farm foreclosures were rife, the percentage of South Dakotans on government relief rolls (39%) topped the nation, and thousands of families were leaving in their jalopies for California (just like their more famous counterparts, the “Okies,” chronicled by John Steinbeck in The Grapes of Wrath). Readers should understand that none of the hardships and ecological disasters described in The Golden Bowl were in any way exaggerated. Manfred had seen it all through his own eyes in his wanderings across the state, and the narrative he wrote about it later was accurate in every detail, if delivered in fictionalized form.

The first few pages of the book establish the contours of place, specifically the Thor farm, located twenty miles east of the Badlands. Following the route of the Atlantic-Yellowstone-Pacific Highway (Manfred had hitchhiked along Highway 16, which is the route of present-day I-90), Maury Grant witnesses how the topography, rainfall, and soil differed the further west he went. Manfred expands his purview by placing geography within historical context, briefly sketching changes in the flora, fauna, and human presence over millennia—even millions of years of time. But while the context for his story is immense—even cosmic—the focus is always tight and circumscribed. There really isn't a lot of social context; most of the action occurs in the travels of Maury and in his interactions with the Thor family. A quick perusal of the local newspapers of the period, or, say, a book like Paula Nelson's The Prairie Winnows Out Its Own: The West River Country of South Dakota in the Years of Depression and Dust (1996), would reveal that a vital and complex set of social institutions and activities provided a more complicated picture of the area than the spare one presented in Manfred's novel. However, he was not aiming at verisimilitude as much as a deeper truth about the aspirations and dreams of people on the land, the adversities they faced, and the degree to which they were able to transcend the limits facing them.

Central themes worth paying attention to include (1) the Dust Bowl and the environmental disaster posed by the drought and dust storms of the 1930s; (2) governmental efforts, primarily those initiated by the New Deal, to ameliorate environmental and economic conditions; (3) the peripatetic wanderings of hoboes, transients, migrant laborers—call them what you will—during the period; (4) social and economic conflict between owners, businessmen, and law enforcement officials, on the one side, and tramps, workers, destitute farmers, and union organizers, on the other; (5) the ultimate triumph of settlers on the land over adverse climatic conditions; (6) the impact of history on people's lives; (7) the lure of the “American Dream” and the

question of whether it would endure; (8) discovering one's personal identity; (9) a love story featuring Maury and Kirsten; (10) the resoluteness and survival of Pa and Ma Thor; and (11) the perpetual tension between a desire to roam and be free as against a search for roots and rootedness in the land.

That last theme is personified by the Thors, on the one hand, with their decision to stay put on their acreage despite all odds and predictions, and Maury, on the other, whose main desire is to get away from farming and the land and to roam free and find fulfillment in an elusive job that he never is able to find before the story ends. Pa Thor tells him that the job he's looking for is always "100 miles ahead of him," and Maury finally discovers that this is true. By the end of the book, he has come to realize that the happiness he desires, the "American Dream" he has pursued, and the freedom he has elevated to his highest goal will best be found back with Kirsten and her parents on their hard-scrabble farm in the heart of the Dust Bowl. The end of the book brings no promise of riches, contentment, or even modest success, but it does deliver hope, and until this time, that is something that has been lacking in Maury. There is enough substance to the expectation to suffice in a land where the dwellers view the place they live as "next year country."

### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Have you traveled through the region of South Dakota described in this book? Were any of Manfred's descriptions familiar to you? How have things changed in the area since 1934, in your opinion?

2. What descriptions of the weather and the environment in the book do you find most interesting or surprising?

3. How do you assess Manfred's style of writing? What do you like best or least about it?

4. Are the main characters in the book believable—Maury, Kirsten, Pa, Ma, Ol' Gust?

5. Who are you most inclined to identify with—roamers and seekers after freedom like Maury, stayers and seekers after roots like the Thors, or people whose main purpose in life is to have babies like Kirsten?

6. How do you respond to Kirsten as a person? What kind of person is she? Are her motives and actions understandable and laudable?

7. How about Maury? Is he an admirable character? Or is that the right question to ask about him?

8. How about Pa and Ma Thor? Are their characters fully developed? Do you know people like them?

9. How have people changed since the 1930s?

10. Describe economic and environmental conditions in 1934-35, as discussed in The Golden Bowl.

11. How is the land depicted in the book? What role does it play in people's lives?

12. The author indicates that the Thors are church people, but we don't hear much about their religion because the church is gone now. Is there much to indicate in

the book that they indeed are church people, or what their politics are, or what their social views are, or who their friends are, or what their role in the community is? Or are all of these dimensions necessary or relevant to the story?

13. Four episodes provide opportunities for Maury to learn more about himself and obtain a deeper understanding of life: (a) his descent into the well to retrieve the dropped wrench; (b) his encounter with the rattlesnake; (c) his viewing of the amazing sights in the Badlands; (d) his interactions with the hoboes around the fire in the hobo jungle. What did he learn or how did he change because of these events?

14. Was Maury's dream of freedom realistic? Was his decision to go back to the Thors and Kirsten correct? Do you think he found happiness?

15. Does a story about the "Dirty Thirties" and the depressed economic conditions of the decade that largely leaves out societal and governmental efforts to respond to and ameliorate those conditions provide a full or accurate picture of reality? In other words, is there enough historical context provided in this story?

16. Maury keeps thinking the Thors are crazy to live in the area during the dust storms until he goes back to join them. Were they crazy? Was he?

17. Lots of song lyrics are recorded in the text. What do they add to the story?

18. The author took the book's title from Ecclesiastes 12:6. The notion of a "golden bowl" is obviously a play on words of "dust bowl." Manfred has Pa Thor say, "Son, when I look out a that winder there, I kin see this land as it's been. They say it's a dust bowl now, an' maybe it is. But I can close my eyes and see the golden bowl it's been. . . . This land ain't empty for me. It's the only land I know. It's been full a gold before an' it'll be full a gold again. I know." Is this typical South Dakota talk? How do you respond to this attitude of optimism and hope?

### **BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF THE AUTHOR**

Born Frederick Feikema in 1912 and of Frisian descent, Manfred grew up on a farm near the little town of Doon in northwestern Iowa. After graduating from Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan, in 1934, Feikema hitchhiked around the country from coast to coast for the next three years. His travels through South Dakota, Wyoming and Montana provided the materials serving as the basis for The Golden Bowl. Along the way, he rode in a cattle truck along the graveled Highway 16 and met a cynical young man who became the inspiration for Maury Grant. Manfred got going in 1937 writing his first novel after entertaining friends at a Saturday night party with stories of his travel adventures and deciding that he should put them down on paper. Seven drafts and seven years later he had a published book in hand and a fiction-writing career ahead of him. In the meantime, he worked as a reporter for the Minneapolis Journal, served as editor of Modern Medicine, and spent time in a TB sanatorium. Having adopted the pen name of Feike Feikema for his novels, he officially changed it to Frederick Manfred in 1952, thinking it would be easier for people to pronounce and would boost sales. His first book published under his new name was Lord Grizzly (1954). Eventually, Manfred published thirty-two works of fiction, poetry, and nonfiction, including Riders of Judgment (1957), Scarlet Plume (1964), and Green Earth (1977). He died in 1994 at the age of 82.

[SUPPORTED WITH FUNDING FROM THE SOUTH DAKOTA HUMANITIES COUNCIL]