Characters and Themes

Lecture 1

Charles Swann

A. Swann’s unfortunate marriage

Several mentions are made of his unfortunate marriage and the rumors surrounding it, without giving any details. We will, of course, learn the details and be able to sort out, for the most part, rumor from fact as we read the novel.

Our “people” were usually limited to M. Swann, who, apart from a few passing strangers, was almost the only person who ever came to the house at Combray, sometimes to a neighborly dinner (but less frequently since his unfortunate marriage, as my family did not care to receive his wife) and sometimes after dinner, uninvited. —Swann’s Way 1: 16. F: 11; RH: 14; P: 17; NP 1: 13.

Marcel’s relatives at Combray refuse to believe that Swann has brilliant social connections, even when Mme de Villeparisis mentions to her good friend the grandmother that Swann is a “great friend of my nephew and niece, the [prince and princess] des Laumes.” [. . .] This view of Swann’s social position which prevailed in my family seemed to be confirmed later on by his marriage with a woman of the worst type, almost a prostitute, whom, to do him justice, he never attempted to introduce to us—for he continued to come to our house alone, though more and more seldom—but from whom they thought they could establish, on the assumption that he had found her there, the circle, unknown to them, in which he ordinarily moved. —Swann’s Way 1: 25, 26. F: 18; RH: 21, 22; P: 23, 24; NP 1: 20.

The mother, whose understanding, altruistic nature is demonstrated on more than one occasion by her discreet interest in the lives of those considered socially inferior, such as the servant Françoise, encourages other family members to ask Swann about his daughter. This passage reveals Swann’s motivation for marrying such a woman:
As for my mother, her only thought was of trying to induce my father to speak to Swann, not about his wife, but about his daughter, whom he worshipped, and for whose sake it was understood that he had ultimately made his unfortunate marriage. — *Swann’s Way* 1: 29. F: 20; RH: 24; P: 26; NP 1: 22.

Mamma asks Swann about his daughter and even manages to allude to Mme Swann. Notice the analogy that Proust uses to describe the mother’s “delicate thought” in alluding to Mme Swann: a good poet.

My mother fancied that a word from her would wipe out all the distress which my family had contrived to cause Swann since his marriage. She found an opportunity to draw him aside for a moment. But I followed her: I could not bring myself to let her out of my sight while I felt that in a few minutes I should have to leave her in the dining-room and go up to my bed without the consoling thought, as on ordinary evenings, that she would come up later to kiss me.

“Now, M. Swann,” she said, “do tell me about your daughter. I am sure she already has a taste for beautiful things, like her papa.”

“Come along and sit down here with us all on the verandah,” said my grandfather, coming up to him. My mother had to abandon her quest, but managed to extract from the restriction itself a further delicate thought, like good poets whom the tyranny of rhyme forces into the discovery of their finest lines.

“We can talk about her again when we are by ourselves,” she said, or rather whispered to Swann. “Only a mother can understand these things. I’m sure that hers would agree with me.” — *Swann’s Way* 1: 30-31. F: 21-22; RH: 25; P: 27; NP 1: 23-24.

Marcel’s great aunt repeats to the family the rumor that Mme Swann has become the mistress of “a certain Monsieur Charlus.”

“I fancy he has a lot of trouble with that wretched wife of his, who lives with a certain Monsieur de Charlus, as all Combray knows. It’s the talk of the town.” — *Swann’s Way* 1: 45. F: 32; RH: 37; P: 37; NP 1: 34.
Marcel’s mother believes that Swann is no longer in love with his wife and seems happier now. She sees as partial proof of this that Swann no longer makes the gesture indicating mental fatigue, the same gesture that his father always made in similar circumstances:

My mother observed that, in spite of this [the rumor about Mme Swann being Charlus’s mistress], Swann had looked much less unhappy of late. “And he doesn’t nearly so often do that trick of his, so like his father, of wiping his eyes and drawing his hand across his forehead. I think myself that in his heart of hearts he no longer loves that woman.” —Swann’s Way 1: 45. F: 32 ; RH 37: ; P: 37; NP 1: 34.

**Portrait of Swann:**

Swann’s arrival in the evening, when it’s usually dark, is heralded by his ringing the visitor’s bell:

We would all wait there in suspense for the report which my grandmother would bring back from the enemy lines, as though there might be a choice between a large number of possible assailants, and then, soon after, my grandfather would say: “I recognize Swann’s voice.” And indeed one could tell him only by his voice, for it was difficult to make out his face with its arched nose and green eyes, under a high forehead fringed with fair, almost red hair, done in the Bressant style, because in the garden we used as little light as possible, so as not to attract mosquitoes. . . —Swann’s Way 1: 16, 17. F: 12; RH: 17; P: 18; NP 1: 14.

[This hair style was named after the actor Jean-Baptiste Prosper Bressant (1815-1886), who introduced this style by wearing his hair short in front and fairly long behind.]

In Combray 1, the reader encounters two Swanns: the country neighbor of Marcel’s family. This rather undistinguished Charles Swann is blemished, as we have seen, by his “unfortunate” marriage. The reader sees the “distinguished” Charles Swann of Paris.
For many years, during the course of which—especially before his marriage—M. Swann the younger came often to see them at Combray, my great-aunt and my grandparents never suspected that he had entirely ceased to live in the society which his family had frequented, and that, under the sort of incognito which the name of Swann gave him among us, they were harboring—with the complete innocence of a family of respectable innkeepers who have in their midst some celebrated highwayman without knowing it—one of the most distinguished members of the Jockey Club, a particular friend of the Comte de Paris and of the Prince of Wales, and one of the men most sought after in the aristocratic world of the Faubourg Saint-Germain. —*Swann’s Way* 1: 18-19. F: 13; RH: 16-17; P: 19; NP 1: 15.

The grandmother knows that Swann has excellent taste and is an expert on art and antiques. Although he is the heir to his late father’s fortune, a fortune made as a stockbroker, he leads a fairly simple life in Paris. The great aunts, however, believe that he is something of a naïve poseur. (For their opinion of his Paris neighborhood, see the file “Proustian Places.”) Another trait of Swann’s, one that is a weakness acquired from all the type he has spent in high society, is his refusal to talk seriously or express his opinion about important matters. This attitude only reinforces the great aunts’ poor opinion of him. (In *Swann in Love*, Odette will also express her impatience with his reluctance to speak about intellectual matters.) The great aunts provide some of the humorous passages in Combray 1:

Altogether, my great-aunt treated him with scant ceremony. Since she was of the opinion that he ought to feel flattered by our invitations, she thought it only right and proper that he should never come to see us in summer without a basket of peaches or raspberries from his garden, and that from each of his visits to Italy he should bring back some photographs of old masters for me. —*Swann’s Way* 1: 22. F: 16; RH: 19; P: 22; NP 1: 18.

The next paragraph, in which Proust continues to contrast the “two” Swanns, the one who is the intimate friend of the Prince of Wales and the Comte de Paris (the letter
from Twickenham) and the rather unassuming country neighbor at Combray, contains a good example of one of Proust’s strategies for engaging the reader. We see that after giving examples of the “two Swanns” and how he is treated by Marcel’s relatives, Proust very discreetly invited us to compare our own knowledge of the way the world works with how Swann and we are seen by others. He expresses this in an aphorism: “our social personality is created by the thoughts of other people.” Then he deftly resumes the narration about Swann. Each of us is many different persons to those who know us and who see us at different times, in different contexts, have casual or intimate relationships with us or know things about us that may not be true or only partially so or things that may have been true at one time but no longer are or even believe that we are someone else because we have been incorrectly identified or confused with another person. How we see others and how we ourselves are seen is, of course, tremendously complicated and constantly shifting. Proust will use these multiple perspectives to great effect throughout the course of his novel. This is one of the most modern aspects of his work. Here is the passage in question:

It seemed quite natural, therefore, to send for Swann whenever a recipe for some special sauce or for a pineapple salad was needed for one of our big dinner-parties, to which he himself would not be invited. . . . If the conversation turned upon the Princes of the House of France, “Gentlemen, you and I will never know, will we, and don’t want to, do we?” my great-aunt would say tartly to Swann, who had, perhaps, a letter from Twickenham in his pocket; she would make him play accompaniments and turn over music on evenings when my grandmother’s sister sang; manipulating this creature, so rare and refined at other times and in other places, with the rough simplicity of a child who will play with some curio from the cabinet no more carefully than if it were a penny toy. Certainly the Swann who was a familiar figure in all the clubs of those days differed hugely from the Swann created in my great-aunt’s mind when, of an evening, in our little garden at Combray, after the two shy peals had sounded from the gate, she would vitalize, by injecting into it everything she had ever heard about the Swann family, the vague and unrecognizable shape which began to appear, with my grandmother in its wake, against a background of shadows, and could at last be identified by the sound of its
voice. But then, even in the most insignificant details of our daily life, none of us can be said to constitute a material whole, which is identical for everyone, and need only be turned up like a page in an account-book or the record of a will; our social personality is created by the thoughts of other people. Even the simple act which we describe as “seeing some one we know” is, to some extent, an intellectual process. We pack the physical outline of the creature we see with all the ideas we have already formed about him, and in the complete picture of him which we compose in our minds those ideas have certainly the principal place. In the end they come to fill out so completely the curve of his cheeks, to follow so exactly the line of his nose, they blend so harmoniously in the sound of his voice that these seem to be no more than a transparent envelope, so that each time we see the face or hear the voice it is our own ideas of him which we recognize and to which we listen.

[Then back to Swann.]

And so, no doubt, from the Swann they had built up for their own purposes my family had left out, in their ignorance, a whole crowd of the details of his daily life in the world of fashion, details by means of which other people, when they met him, saw all the Graces enthroned in his face . . . even now I have the feeling of leaving someone I know for another quite different person when, going back in memory, I pass from the Swann whom I knew later and more intimately to this early Swann—this early Swann in whom I can distinguish the charming mistakes of my youth [...] this early Swann abounding in leisure, fragrant with the scent of the great chestnut-tree, of baskets of raspberries and of a sprig of tarragon. —Swann’s Way 1: 22-24. F: 16-17; RH: 19-21; P: 22-23; NP 1: 18-19.

B. Themes (see also “Quotable” Proust on our website):

Jealousy

In Combray 1, it is the very young Marcel who is jealous of Swann:

... a moment ago the ice itself—with burned nuts in it—and the finger-bowls seemed to me to be concealing pleasures that were baleful and of a mortal sadness because Mamma was tasting of them while I was far away. . . —Swann’s Way 1: 39. F: 28; RH: 32 ; P: 33;
This pattern of jealousy will be repeated, with variations, when Swann becomes jealous of Odette in *Swann in Love* and much later in the story when Marcel experiences jealousy at what he fears to be the infidelities of Albertine.

**Habit**

Proust often presents habit as the opposite of art in that its effects are “anesthetizing” (the anesthetic effect of habit—*Swann’s Way* 1: 11)—we see and feel nothing—whereas the effects of art, esthetics, are rejuvenating and make us see and feel that we are really alive. Art arouses our curiosity and often brings us joy and even consolation when faced with our mortality. “the anesthetic effect of habit” —*Swann’s Way* 1: 11. F: 8; RH: 11; P: 14; NP 1: 10.

The contrast between our habitual life and art will be an important feature that we will comment upon when we read Swann’s meditation on Vinteuil’s sonata. This takes place towards the end of *Swann in Love*. *Swann’s Way* 1: 489-501. F: 340-49; RH: 375-84; P: 347-55; NP 1: 339-47.