Characters and Themes

Lecture 2

Characters:

The Grandmother

Edmund Wilson sees the grandmother as the golden mean of *la Recherche*:

“Perhaps the narrator’s grandmother may be taken as playing for Proust the same rôle that the speed of light does for Einstein: the single constant value which makes the rest of the system possible.” *Axel’s Castle*, New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1931, 163.

Themes:

Women as Works of Art

In *Swann in Love*, we will see Swann confusing Eros and art when he identifies Odette as a Botticelli woman. When Marcel falls in love with Albertine, he will remember this aspect of Swann’s infatuation with Odette and ask himself if Albertine is a work of art. We will see how Marcel’s conclusion differs.

In Combray 2—we remember that the episode of Marcel’s meeting the Lady in Pink takes place after the story of *Swann in Love*—Marcel is tempted to regard such women as works of art. We will also see at the conclusion of *Swann’s Way* and later in *Time Regained* that Mme Swann is said to personify an entire epoch. In the passage from Combray 2, the Lady in Pink is compared to an artist:

> It has since struck me as one of the most touching aspects of the part played in life by these idle, painstaking women that they devote their generosity, their talent, a disposable dream of sentimental beauty (for, like artists, they never seek to realize the value of their dreams, or to enclose them in the four-square frame of everyday life), and a wealth that counts for little, to the fashioning of a fine and precious setting for the rough, ill-polished lives of men. And just as this one filled the smoking-room, where my uncle was entertaining her in his jacket, with the aura of her charming person, her dress of pink...
silk, her pearls, the elegance that derives from the friendship of a grand duke, so in the same way she had taken some casual remark of my father’s, had delicately fashioned it, given it a “turn,” a precious title, and embellishing it with a gem-like glance from her sparkling eyes, tinged with humility and gratitude, had given it back transformed into a jewel, a work of art, into something “exquisitely charming.” —Swann’s Way 1: 106-07

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The Search for the Truth

Marcel’s search for the truth is a constant of his quest and he reminds us of this periodically. He seeks to understand the meaning of his own experience and the truth about what it is to be human. In Combray 2, there are expressions of this. He is disturbed when Bloch tells him that “fine lines of poetry (from which I expected nothing less than the revelation of truth itself) were all the finer if they meant absolutely nothing” (Swann’s Way 1: 129). And later Marcel states his conviction that Bergotte’s books are “mirrors of absolute truth.” —Swann’s Way 1: 106-07

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Lessons Learned

During Marcel’s quest, we will see him learn many lessons. These may often be psychological, philosophical, and aesthetic. His aesthetic credo, some aspects of which will evolve during the novel, will be stated fully in Time Regained. In this part of the novel, we find Marcel learning lessons that form our youthful apprenticeship. Such lessons may be painful or humiliating, but Proust often renders them with a bit of humor. Here is an incident that occurs just after the “Zut!” scene when the exuberant Marcel is walking through the woods and cheerfully greets a peasant, “apparently in a bad humor, who replied somewhat coolly to my ‘Fine day . . . Good to be out walking!’ . . . I learned that identical emotions do not spring up simultaneously in the hearts of all men in accordance with a pre-established order.” He gives another example: “And if I had just been thinking of my parents with affection, and forming resolutions of the kind most calculated to please them, they would have been using the same interval of time to
discover some misdeed that I had already forgotten, and would begin to scold me severely as I was about to fling myself into their arms.” —Swann’s Way 1: 219

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Women as Landscapes

On some of Marcel’s walks, his energy derives from the frustration or rage of adolescent sexual longing for a girl that he always identifies with this particular landscape (Swann’s Way 1: 220-33). This is another of the traits that he and Swann share.

In this scene, it is Marcel’s pent-up sexual frustration—rather than the energy absorbed from the sedentary activity of reading books—that leads him to strike the trees of Roussainville wood:

Sometimes to the exhilaration which I derived from being alone would be added an alternative feeling which I was unable to distinguish clearly from it, a feeling stimulated by the desire to see appear before my eyes a peasant-girl whom I might clasp in my arms. [...] It seemed to me that the beauty of the trees was hers also, and that her kisses would reveal to me the spirit of those horizons, of the village of Roussainville, of the books which I was reading that year; and, my imagination drawing strength from contact with my sensuality, my sensuality expanding through all the realms of my imagination, my desire no longer had any bounds. [...] at that time everything that was not myself, the earth and the creatures upon it, seemed to me more precious, more important, endowed with a more real existence than they appear to full-grown men. And between the earth and its creatures I made no distinction. I had a desire for a peasant-girl from Méséglise or Roussainville, for a fisher-girl from Balbec, just as I had a desire for Balbec and Méséglise. —Swann’s Way 1: 221-22

His passionate desire leads him to masturbate, which he describes rather poetically; his fears that it might be a highly dangerous activity reflect the ominous warnings that parents, teachers, and priests gave young men to discourage the practice.

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“I can’t write.” “I don’t know how to observe.” “I have no talent.”
Throughout his long search to discover his vocation as a writer and the topic of the books he wants to write, Marcel will experience many moments of discouragement. In this passage, Marcel naïvely wonders whether his father, a prominent government official, who sometimes accomplishes seemingly impossible things for the sons of friends, might not pull some strings for him. For example, his father arranges things so that one young man is allowed to “take his baccalaureate exam two months in advance, among the candidates whose last names began with ‘A,’ instead of having to wait his turn as an ‘S’.” Perhaps “this lack of genius, this black cavity which gaped in my mind when I ransacked it for the theme of my future writings, was itself no more than an insubstantial illusion, and would vanish with the intervention of my father, who must have agreed with the Government and with Providence that I should be the foremost writer of the day.” But at other times, Marcel is aware that he “existed in the same manner as all other men, that I must grow old, that I must die like them, and that among them I was to be distinguished merely as one of those who have no aptitude for writing. And so, utterly despondent, I renounced literature forever.” —Swann’s Way 1: 244-45

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How We Fall in Love

Proust supplies many variations on the theme of love throughout the novel. The following passage compares Marcel’s reaction to Gilberte’s utter disdain to his belief that Mme de Guermantes has glanced at him with approval. This glance occurs at the wedding she attends at Combray. Before she looks at him, he is disappointed that the real woman does not match the expectations he had built up in his imagination fueled by her rank, social prestige, and family history. But during the ceremony, he believes that she bestows on him a favorable glance and he falls in love with her:

And remembering the glance which she had let fall upon me during mass, blue as a ray of sunlight that had penetrated the window of Gilbert the Bad, I said to myself: “She must have taken notice of me.” I fancied that I had found favor in her eyes, that she would continue to think of me after she had left the church, and would perhaps feel sad that evening at Guermantes, because of me. And at once I fell in love with her, for it is
sometimes enough to make us love a woman that she should look on us with contempt, as
I supposed Mlle Swann to have done, and that we should think that she can never be ours,
sometimes too, it is enough that she should look on us kindly, as Mme de Guermantes
was doing, and that we should think of her as almost ours already. Her eyes waxed blue
as a periwinkle flower, impossible to pluck, yet dedicated by her to me; and the sun,
bursting out again from behind a threatening cloud and darting the full force of its rays on
to the Square and into the sacristy, shed a geranium glow over the red carpet laid down
for the wedding, across which Mme de Guermantes was smingly advancing, and
covered its woolen texture with a nap of rosy velvet, a bloom of luminosity, that sort of
tenderness, of solemn sweetness in the pomp of a joyful celebration, which characterize
certain pages of Lohengrin, certain paintings by Carpaccio, and make us understand how
Baudelaire was able to apply to the sound of the trumpet the epithet “delicious.”
—Swann’s Way 1: 250-51

This is another example of synesthesi a, the phenomenon wherein the senses mix,
this one from Baudelaire, a favorite poet of Proust’s. Charles Baudelaire (1821-67) is
considered to be the first modern French poet and the founder of the symbolist movement
with his poem, “Correspondances,” from Les Fleurs du Mal (1857). In
“Correspondances” and other poems, Baudelaire uses synesthesia to illustrate the often
obscure or hidden links or correspondences between ourselves and nature and the
universe. It is the role of the poet or artist to reveal these correspondences to us, to make
us see or perceive them. The “delicious” sound of the trumpet is from the last quatrino of
“L’Imprévu” (“The Unforeseen”).

Le son de la trompe est si délicieux
Dans ces soirs solennels de célestes vendanges
Qu’il s’infiltre comme une extase dans tous ceux
    Dont elle chante les louanges.

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Swann’s Mental Torpor
We have seen the gesture that Swann inherited from his father—the act of removing his glasses and rubbing his forehead—indicating his congenital inability to concentrate for long on any difficult matter or emotional conflict. This problem is a common one and Swann’s gesture is especially well chosen, as though by cleaning his glasses, he can “see” more clearly or by rubbing his forehead he might coax forth the thought, the answer to the dilemma, the answer that is surely latent in his mind. Swann’s problem is not dissimilar to Marcel’s writer’s block and lack of will. We will see more examples of Swann’s defect in Swann in Love. We will also learn the exact nature of the question that he never could remember to ask Vinteuil whenever he saw him at Combray:

M. Vinteuil did not send his daughter to visit Swann, an omission that Swann was the first to regret. For whenever he met M. Vinteuil, he would remember afterwards that he had been meaning for a long time to ask him about someone of the same name, a relation of his, Swann supposed. And on this occasion he had made up his mind not to forget what he had to say to him when M. Vinteuil should appear with his daughter at Tansonville. —Swann’s Way 1: 210-11

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Le moi profond

While we are on the subject of Vinteuil, the passage in which his musical composition is analogized as his photograph represents one of Proust’s most deeply held beliefs: that each of us is many different selves. This is true even in our perception of ourselves and more so when we are seen by others. We remember that Shakespeare said of Cleopatra that she was a creature of infinite variety and that Walt Whitman stated:

Do I contradict myself?

Very well then I contradict myself,

(I am large, I contain multitudes.)

Proust always distinguishes between what he calls “le moi profond,” the deep, true profound self, capable of activities and accomplishments that are transcendent and
altruistic and the “moi social,” which is our outward, vain, social self. If you are reading *In Search of Lost Time* for the first time, watch for these distinctions. In this novel, we often meet an artist or a composer as he is seen by others, by those of his social milieu only to discover later that this is neither his real name nor his true “profound” nature.

Proust stated this belief succinctly in his essay against the critic Sainte-Beuve, who violated this principle. The essay “Against Sainte-Beuve” is, in many ways, a lengthy draft of writings that led to *In Search of Lost Time*.

... un livre est le produit d’un autre moi que celui que nous manifestons dans nos habitudes, dans la société, dans nos vices. *Contre Sainte-Beuve* 5: 221-22