Lecture 3

Characters and Themes

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Characters:

1. The comic portrait of the pianist’s aunt: why does she speak as she does?

2. Note the link between Swann and Marcel and the source of information found in this part of the story: “I began to take an interest in his character because of the similarities which, in wholly different respects, it offered to my own. . .” We also remember that in Combray 1, the mature Marcel says that he remembers “an early Swann in whom I distinguished the charming mistakes of my youth.”

3. Compare the early description of Cottard’s facial expression, which he can quickly alter to suit the circumstance, to Swann’s comic encounter with him, where this trait is illustrated by precise examples.

4. The painter sometimes called Tiche or Biche is a major figure whom we will meet under his true name in Within A Budding Grove. In spite of his ridiculous behavior in the Verdurin salon, Swann considers him to have “one of the finest brains that I’ve ever come across.” This observation is a hint of what we will discover about the painter’s reputation in Within A Budding Grove. The painter’s influence on the young Marcel regarding “how to see” will be an important stage in the evolution of the hero’s quest.

5. To do an orchid: Note how this scene is linked to the theme of Adam and Eve and the notion that Adam’s task was to give names to everything in the freshly created earth. Here the orchids become the flowers of paradise and Swann’s term for making love to Odette, “to do an orchid,” is meant to indicate a pleasure “as individual and new” as when Adam and Eve first made love:

   Swann tremulously hoped [as he arranged the cattleyas that evening] . . . that it was the possession of this woman that would emerge for him from their large mauve petals; and the pleasure which he had already felt . . . seemed to him .
. . as it might have seemed to the first man when he enjoyed it amid the flowers of
the earthly paradise—a pleasure which had never before existed, which he was
striving now to create, a pleasure—as the special name he gave to it was to
certify—entirely individual and new. —Swann’s Way 1: 332

Themes and Images:

1. Themes to watch for: love & disease; love & music, art; desired women as
   landscapes.

2. Planetary imagery. In French, the same word “monde” is used for “world”
   and “society.” High society is “le beau monde.”

3. Note this remark about original art: “Inasmuch as the public cannot recognize
   the charm, the beauty, even the outlines of nature save in the stereotyped
   impressions of an art which they have gradually assimilated, while an
   original artist starts by rejecting those stereotypes. . . .” —Swann’s Way 1:
   301 We will read many interesting passages about how to look at art or how
   not to. These later passages (how not to) are used to reveal the superficiality
   and vanity of members of high society like the bourgeois Verdurins as well
   as the aristocratic members we will meet in The Guermantes Way.

4. Swann and Marcel share the trait of identifying people they know with
   figures in paintings by the old masters. When Swann notices the resemblance
   of Odette to a Botticelli woman, this alters the notion he had of her (inferior)
   beauty.

5. Swann’s desperate attempts to find Odette the evening she went to Prévost’s
   are similar to the emotions Marcel felt as a child when his mother could not
   come and give him the goodnight kiss because Swann had come to call.

6. Odette’s occasional use of an English expression, such as “fishing for
   compliments” and the importance she sets on the ceremony of having tea, are
   portrayals of the anglophilia that was widespread in France during the Belle
   Époque. The new French enthusiasm for sports and the revival of the
   Olympic Games (1896), whose primary promoters were England and France,
   were part of this fad.
7. Compare the replies of those in the Verdurin salon to Swann’s questions about who this Vinteuil might be to Marcel’s advice at the end of the “Zut” scene:

But none of these people who professed to admire this musician (when Swann had said that the sonata was really beautiful Mme. Verdurin had exclaimed, “Of course it’s beautiful! I quite believe it! Charming, indeed! But you don't dare to confess that you don't know Vinteuil's sonata; you have no right not to know it!”—and the painter had added, “Ah, yes, it's a very fine bit of work, isn’t it? Not, of course, if you want something ‘obvious,’ something ‘popular,’ but, I mean to say, it makes a very great impression on us artists.”), none of them seemed ever to have asked himself these questions, for none of them was able to answer them. —Swann’s Way 1: 300