Characters and Themes

Characters:

Marcel

This wonderful description of a fish makes us smile because Marcel finds in its small frame those elements he dreamed that he would find at Balbec, when his imagination was inspired by the name of the place:

... in order to preserve ... the idea that I was on the uttermost promontory of the earth, I compelled myself to look further afield, to notice only the sea, to seek in it the effects described by Baudelaire and to let my gaze fall upon our table only on days when there was set on it some gigantic fish, some marine monster, which unlike the knives and forks was contemporary with the primitive epochs in which the Ocean first began to teem with life, at the time of the Cimmerians, a fish whose body with its numberless vertebrae, its blue and pink veins, had been constructed by nature, but according to an architectural plan, like a polychrome cathedral of the deep. —*Within a Budding Grove* 2: 372-73

**on himself as an adolescent**

But the characteristic feature of the ridiculous age I was going through—awkward indeed but by no means infertile—is that we do not consult our intelligence and that the most trivial attributes of other people seem to us to form an inseparable part of their personality. In a world thronged with monsters and with gods, we know little peace of mind. There is hardly a single action we perform in that phase which we would not give anything, in later life, to be able to annul. Whereas what we ought to regret is that we no longer possess the spontaneity which made us perform them. In later life we look at things in a more practical way, in full conformity with the rest of society, but adolescence is the only period in which we learn anything. —*Within a Budding Grove* 2: 423
Mme de Villeparisis

We have an important hint regarding why Mme de Villeparisis decided to vacation at the Grand-Hôtel and why she knows everything that Marcel’s father is doing.
—Within a Budding Grove 2: 379, 381

Themes:

“Nothing is impossible to the eye of a friend.”

In Swann in Love, we have heard Odette say that she can always tell what Swann is doing even though she is thousands of miles away, because “Nothing is impossible to the eye of a friend.” A similar sense of communication across long distances exists between Marcel and his mother. In 1912, Proust wrote a letter to his former lover and life-long best friend, Reynaldo Hahn, in which he expressed this same belief: “Tu sais que tu es toujours avec moi, que je te fais toute la nuit la conversation.” (You know that you are always with me, that I converse with you all through the night.)
—Correspondance 11: 70

How we see others and are seen by others

We meet Proust’s characters the same way we meet people in real life. Often our opinion or perspective is wrong because we are mistaken in our own assumptions or have believed rumors that turn out to be false. For example, in this part of the novel, Proust describes the relative social standings of the hotel guests, their vanity, and their many erroneous assumptions about the social standings of other guests. For example, the Princess de Luxembourg is taken by some of the guests to be a harlot. —Within a Budding Grove 2: 384