Characters and Themes

Characters:

Charlus

Charlus’s emotional needs not being met, specifically his desire to have an heir, which explains in part his plans for Morel:

Was there indeed a trace of incest in this paternal affection? It is more probable that the way in which M. de Charlus habitually appeased his vice—as to which we shall learn something in due course—did not meet his emotional needs, which had remained unsatisfied since the death of his wife; certain it is that after having thought more than once of remarrying, he was now devoured by a maniacal desire to adopt an heir, and certain persons closed to him feared that it might be fulfilled in favor of Morel. And there is nothing extraordinary in this. The invert who has been able to feed his passion only on a literature written for women-loving men, who used to think of men when he read Musset’s Nuits, feels the need to enter in the same way into all the social activities of the man who is not an invert, to keep a lover, as the old frequenter of the Opéra keeps ballet-girls, to settle down, to marry or form a permanent tie, to become a father. —The Captive 5: 322-23

Dr. Cottard

We learn that Dr. Cottard is dead, but he, like a few other characters who are deceased, will reappear. (The Captive 5: 321) I mentioned in an earlier lecture the place in this volume where Proust stopped making revisions. The effect on us of such resurrections may be similar to those moments in real life when we hear of someone absent from our minds for a long time and, in surprise, we think, “I didn’t know he was still alive.”

Mme Verdurin
Although Mme Verdurin’s salon has suffered a setback because of the Dreyfus affair, she has patiently, by taking advantage of opportunities, whenever they presented themselves, placed herself in an advantageous position. The following quote shows that in creating the Verdurin salon, Proust was inspired in some measure by the salon of Mme Arman de Caillavet, which he knew well, and of which distinguished writer Anatole France was the star.

It was thus that, from each political crisis, from each artistic revival, Mme Verdurin had picked up one by one, like a bird building its nest, the several scraps, temporarily unusable, of what would one day be her salon. The Dreyfus case had passed, Anatole France remained. —The Captive 5: 313-14

We remember that she is always in the avant-garde and is one of the earliest admirers of the Ballets russes. This, too, becomes a major attraction to her salon:

Even those society people who professed to be endowed with taste and drew otiose distinctions between the various Russian ballets, regarding the production of Les Sylphides as somehow more “delicate” than that of Sheherazade, which they were almost prepared to attribute to the inspiration of Negro art, were enchanted to meet face to face these great theatrical innovators who, in art that is perhaps a little more artificial than painting, had created a revolution as profound as Impressionism itself. —The Captive 5: 315.

Mlle Vinteuil

We recall from the lesbian love ritual in Swann’s Way that Proust maintained that Mlle Vinteuil was not really evil, but only pretending to be. He repeats this justification in The Captive:

In any case Mlle Vinteuil had acted only out of sadism, which did not excuse her, though it gave me a certain consolation to think so later on. No doubt she must have realized, I told myself, at the moment when she and her friend had profaned her father’s photograph, that what they were doing was merely morbidity, silliness, and not the true and joyous
wickedness which she would have liked to feel. This idea that it was merely a pretense of wickedness spoiled her pleasure. But if this idea recurred to her later on, since it had spoiled her pleasure so it must have diminished her grief. —*The Captive*: 5: 349

**Themes:**

**Artists as separate universes:**

Proust uses Hugo to illustrate his concept of each artist as a separate universe:

Had Victor Hugo died after having written only his earlier works: what is to us his real achievement would have remained purely potential, as unknown as those universes to which our perception does not reach, of which we shall never have any idea. —*The Captive* 5: 351

**High society as a wasteland:**

The social world being the realm of nullity, there exist between the merits of different society women only the most insignificant degrees, which can however be crazily exaggerated by the rancours or the imagination of a M. de Charlus. —*The Captive* 5: 368