



Marcel
Proust's Search
for Lost Time

A Reader's
Guide to *The
Remembrance
of Things Past*

Patrick
Alexander

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MARCEL PROUST'S SEARCH
FOR LOST TIME

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OF THINGS PAST*

PATRICK ALEXANDER



Patrick Alexander

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After graduating with a degree in literature from Sussex University in England, Patrick Alexander moved to France in the early 1970s, where he raised a family and embarked on a lifelong love affair with French literature. Throughout a professional career as an international corporate executive traveling all over the world, Alexander's fascination with the works of Marcel Proust continued to grow. While a director at the University of Miami from 2001 to 2007, he organized a Proustian reading group, and he continues to be a regular contributor to an international Proustian forum. Alexander retired from the university in 2007 in order to work full-time on *Marcel Proust's Search for Lost Time*.

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Vintage Books

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*To Peggy, Bridie, and Emma
For always making me proud and happy*

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Introduction

In Search of Lost Time, Marcel Proust's great novel, is like a beautiful garden filled with delights but hidden behind a forbidding wall. The wall is too high to scale and the gate is jealously guarded. Prospective readers who know of the book's fame and status are frightened away by the sheer length of the novel—and by its daunting academic reputation.

Except for those fortunate enough to spend several years confined to a hospital bed or a federal prison, or to be stranded on a desert island with their preselected library, few modern readers have the time to tackle a novel with more than three thousand pages, a million and a half words, and more than four hundred individual characters. The demands of contemporary living, and our culture of immediate gratification, mean that Proust's novel is increasingly read only by professional academics.

This is a great pity. Like the hidden garden, the novel, once entered, is an enchanting world filled with beauty and haunting images to delight all the senses. Proust's profound observations on life, literature, and art are brought to life by a rich panoply of characters who are as contemporary now as when they were first created. Above all, the book is extremely funny. Proust's humor, veering between the subtle and the outrageously bawdy, affects every page of the novel. *In Search of Lost Time* is a comic masterpiece.

The purpose of this book is threefold. It is an introduction for readers who have not yet read *In Search of Lost Time* and feel daunted by the length of the novel and the "serious" reputation of the author. It is a way to tempt them through the gate and into the garden. For those who are currently reading Proust, this book will provide a useful guide to the complexities of the plot and to help them keep track of the many different characters. It will serve as a map to the garden. For those who have already read Proust, I hope it will refresh their memories and provide a companion to help them recall and locate their favorite passages.

Part 1 describes the plot of Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* in three ways: a brief overview of the novel that describes the main story and

the major themes; a summary of the whole novel in less than six hundred words (inspired by Monty Python's famous "All-England Summarize Proust Competition" comedy sketch; and a detailed synopsis of the plot in each of the seven volumes.

Part 2 contains individual descriptions of the novel's major characters. Names are listed alphabetically for quick reference, and this list is followed by thumbnail sketches of more than fifty of the most important individuals in the story.

Part 3 includes a brief biography of Marcel Proust as well as the historical background of the events referred to in the novel, such as the Dreyfus Affair and the Belle Époque. There is also a map of Paris that shows not only where many of the characters in the novel lived but also the various places where Proust himself lived.

Proust and *In Search of Lost Time*

Marcel Proust was a French author, born in 1871, who spent most of his life in Paris and died in 1922. His most famous work, *À la recherche du temps perdu* (*In Search of Lost Time*), was published in seven volumes between 1913 and 1927. The final three volumes were published posthumously.

Like James Joyce's *Ulysses* and T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, both of which were published in the year of Proust's death, *In Search of Lost Time* was immediately recognized as a major and revolutionary work of literature. Graham Greene described Proust as the greatest novelist of the twentieth century and Somerset Maugham called *In Search of Lost Time* the greatest fiction to date.

Proust was perhaps the first artist to incorporate the radical and world-shattering ideas of Charles Darwin, Sigmund Freud, and Albert Einstein so effortlessly into his own work. He was extremely well read and educated on a wide variety of subjects—scientific, medical, historical, literary, and artistic—all of which he integrated seamlessly into his fiction. This present book is focused only on the story and the characters in Proust's novel and, regretfully, must ignore the many rich themes of art, philosophy, and literature that he weaves throughout its pages. His literary references range from Xenophon to (then) contemporary novelists such as Zola; his musical references cover Western music from Palestrina to Puccini; and he refers to more than one hundred individual painters from Botticelli to the avant-garde Léon Bakst. All of these references are used to express and illustrate startlingly original insights into every aspect of the human condition, from love and sex to religion and death—and all with a freshness and a comic sense of the absurd.

One consistent theme that readers have observed over the past hundred years is how Proust's novel seeps into the reader's life and the narrator's memories become part of the reader's own consciousness. André Gide wrote, "Through the strange and powerful subtlety of your style I seem to be reading ... my own memories and my own most personal sensations." A more contemporary writer, Susan Minot, recalled reading Proust as a

college student many years earlier: “Looking back to the fall when I read *In Search of Lost Time*, I find my memory seems to be peppered with as many images from the book as from life. In fact, the images from life are more of a blur, and those from the book remain crystal clear” (*The Proust Project*, 2004). Proust very consciously wrote his book not for the literary elite but for the general public. He described his novel as the sort of book a man might pick up at a railway station when setting off on a journey. Unfortunately, in recent years the book has developed a reputation for being “difficult” and is seldom seen in airport bookstalls—not to mention railway stations. This is partly because of its extreme length, which is indeed a challenge for the time-pressed modern reader. But it is also perceived as being irrelevant to the twenty-first century. The purpose of this present work is to show that, on the contrary, Proust’s novel remains not only fresh and relevant to contemporary life but is extremely funny and shockingly entertaining.

The Illustrations

Paul Nadar was the Parisian Annie Leibovitz of the Belle Époque and he photographed many of Proust’s friends, family, and most of the society figures on whom Proust based his fictional characters. In addition to including some of Nadar’s photographs, for example of Proust’s parents, I have also used his portraits as inspiration for some of my own illustrations.

As Joseph Conrad wrote admiringly, Proust’s genius lies in his skills of analysis. “All that crowd of personages who fill the pages of his novel in their infinite variety through all the gradations of the social scale are rendered visible to us through analysis alone.” Conrad argues that despite the physical vividness of characters, such as Françoise and Charlus, there is very little actual description, and though we feel we know them so well, we have little idea of what they look like. Hence my illustrations.

The portrait of Proust’s mother, [*Madame Adrien Proust*](#) by Anais Beauvais, was painted when the author was still a young boy, not yet ten. Subsequent portraits by Nadar show a stout and matronly figure but the Beauvais portrait captures all the mystery, beauty, and power of a young mother whose kiss, whether granted or withheld, could inspire or destroy a child’s destiny. The famously iconic portrait of [*Marcel Proust by Jacques Emile Blanche*](#) was painted when Proust was only twenty-one years old

and, like the painter himself, was still an unknown. Proust kept both of these portraits on the walls of his apartments for the rest of his life and they can be seen, in pride of place, in a photograph of his rooms at rue Hamelin, taken just before he died.

The Translations

The first English translation of *In Search of Lost Time* was published between 1922 and 1931 with the title *Remembrance of Things Past*. The English title is a quotation from one of Shakespeare's sonnets but really misses the significance of the word "Time" in the French title. The original translation was by C. K. Scott Moncrieff and remained the only translation for many years. In 1981, Terence Kilmartin produced a revised translation of Moncrieff's original, which was further revised in 1992 by D. J. Enright, and this remains the standard version in the United States. In 2003, Penguin Books commissioned a new translation and assigned a different translator for each of the seven volumes. These new translations have received mixed reviews.

Originally planned as a three-volume work (*Swann's Way*, *The Guermantes Way*, *Time Regained*), the final work eventually expanded to seven volumes. Proust was still editing the final three volumes in bed when he died. Details of the publication dates and all references used in this book are listed in the appendix.

Author's Note: This book was originally self-published in 2007. Vintage Books purchased the rights in 2008, and this current edition is a new and revised version of the original with additional material, including illustrations. All quotations in this book are from the Vintage Books three-volume edition translated by C. K. Scott Moncrieff and revised by Terence Kilmartin.

PART ONE

What Happens in Proust

Overview

In Search of Lost Time is a fictional autobiography by a man whose life almost mirrors that of Marcel Proust. The first forty pages of the novel describe the narrator as a young boy in bed awaiting, and as a middle-aged man remembering, his mother's good-night kiss. Though it is not obvious to the reader at the time, these first forty pages also establish most of the themes of the next seven volumes and introduce most of the major characters. The rest of the novel traces the chronology of Marcel's life over the next fifty years and the lives of his family, friends, and social acquaintances. The novel concludes at a grand party in Paris attended by Marcel and most of the remaining characters.

Because the story is told with two "voices," that of the narrator as a young boy and also as an older man recalling his youth, it is sometimes difficult to tell Marcel's age at any particular moment in the novel. The reader must rely on the context of the action.

Two of the novel's major themes concern Marcel's frustrated desire to become a writer and his despair at the corroding effect of Time, which makes all human feelings and experiences fade to nothing. It is at the Parisian party that concludes the novel that Marcel finally realizes past feelings and experiences, far from being lost, remain eternally present in the unconscious. Marcel further realizes that these "memories" can be released through a work of art, and thus he discovers his vocation: to write *In Search of Lost Time*. And so, on the last pages of the novel, as the reader prepares to close the book, the author hurries home to begin writing it.

The novel opens with the pastoral pleasures of Marcel's childhood family vacation in the small country town of Combray, and with the heartbreak of first love for his playmate in the park near his home in Paris. As a young man, the narrator spends time at Balbec on the Normandy coast. Here he meets various people who are to play an important part in his life, including the second and greatest love of his life, Albertine.

Except for brief interludes in Venice with his mother and in the garrison town of Doncières with his friend Robert de Saint-Loup, the rest of the book takes place in Paris. The novel chronicles Marcel's eventually successful attempts to become an accepted member of high society as represented by the aristocratic family of the Guermantes. Although successful in his social climbing, Marcel is

less successful in his love life and in his determination to become a writer. His long and jealously obsessive relationship with Albertine ends only with her death.

Unhappy love affairs are a leitmotif of the novel. The best known is that of Charles Swann, which could act as a template for all the rest and is described in “Swann in Love.” The tension and swing of power between lovers and the inevitable disappointment when we achieve the object of our desires is a constant theme throughout the book. All the love affairs, homosexual as well as heterosexual, describe the futility of trying to possess or even understand another person. Love is a metaphor for all human experience and, for Proust, all man’s suffering is caused by his desires. Achieving those desires only increases the suffering. His love for and pursuit of Odette take Swann from the pinnacle of smart society to the depths of social rejection and eventual oblivion.

Paralleling Swann’s descent from high society is the slow ascent of the awful Mme Verdurin into high society, so that in the final pages of the novel, we realize that she has become the Princesse de Guermantes, the most fashionable woman in Paris. Proust’s world is in constant motion, and like the structure of the novel, everything is circular. The wheel of fortune affects his characters, all of whom are either moving up or moving down in society. While Proust’s descriptions of the powerful attractions of society are compelling, he is equally persuasive in exposing its snobbery and transience. Transience and Time are the real subjects of the novel, what Samuel Beckett called “the Proustian equation ... that double-headed monster of damnation and salvation—Time.”

This is not to suggest that Proust had “theories” about time that he wished to express. On the contrary, he once wrote: “A work of art which contains theories is like an article on which the price tag has been left.” However, his novel does have distinct themes and “Time” is certainly one of the major themes.

We are all subject to time and the changes it works upon us from when we were young to when we are old. The “self” is transient and ever-changing; this is true of our own selves and also the “selves” of the people we know. And not just people but things and places are also subject to time. “Houses, avenues, roads are, alas, as fugitive as the years.” We have all experienced the disappointment of returning to a place from our youth and finding the magic gone. Those places we remember are located not in space, but in time, and unless we can once more become the child that first experienced the joy and the love with which they are associated, then they are forever lost.

The word “time” is in the title of the book *In Search of Lost Time* and it occurs in the famous opening sentence of Volume I, Book 1: “For a long time I used to go to bed early.” It is also repeated four times, like a momentous Beethoven chord in the final sentence of Volume III, Book 7, where it is also the final word of the novel:

“If at least, time enough were allotted to me to accomplish my work, I would not fail to mark it with the seal of Time, the idea of which imposed itself upon me with so much force today, and I would therein describe men, if need be, as monsters occupying a place in Time infinitely more important than the restricted one reserved for them in space, a place, on the contrary, prolonged immeasurably since, simultaneously touching widely separated years and the distant periods they have lived through—between which so many days have ranged themselves—they stand like giants immersed in Time.” [Vintage, Volume III, page 1107]

All human endeavors are mocked and destroyed by Time. Great historical events become confused or forgotten with the passage of Time. Social values change within decades, from generation to generation. Even as individuals we forget the details of our own past and the faces of those once dear to us. Time numbs the pain we felt with the death of somebody close and exhausts the ecstasy of a love that is now gone. How soon we forget: Time conquers all.

But the good news is that Time can be defeated. It can be defeated through the chance operation of involuntary memory, such as dipping a piece of madeleine cake into a cup of tea. It can also be defeated through art.

Through art alone are we able to emerge from ourselves, to know what another person sees of a universe which is not the same as our own and of which, without art, the landscapes would remain as unknown to us as those that may exist in the moon. Thanks to art, instead of seeing one world only, our own, we see that world multiply itself and we have at our disposal as many worlds as there are original artists, worlds more different one from the other than those which revolve in infinite space, worlds which, centuries after the extinction of the fire from which their light first emanated, whether it is called Rembrandt or Vermeer, send us still each one its special radiance. (3:932)



Marcel Proust

Summary

In 1972 the English television show *Monty Python's Flying Circus* broadcast the "All-England Summarize Proust Competition," in which contestants were required to summarize all seven volumes of *In Search of Lost Time* in fifteen seconds. Dressed in traditional evening gowns and swimming costumes, one group of contestants sang their entry in madrigals but still failed to win. Eventually the prize was awarded to the girl with the largest breasts. Ever mindful of the foolishness of the concept, the following is a six-hundred-word summary of *À la recherche du temps perdu*.

1. *Swann's Way*: The taste of a madeleine dipped in tea recalls Marcel's childhood visits to Combray; his family's country walks along the two "ways"; their relationship with various neighbors, including Charles Swann; and Marcel's fascination with the aristocratic Guermantes. The second part tells the story of Swann's unhappy love affair with the courtesan Odette de Crécy at the salon of Mme Verdurin. The volume's final section describes the friendship between Marcel and Gilberte, the daughter of Swann and Odette, who is now Madame Swann.
2. *Within a Budding Grove*: The first half describes Marcel's adolescence in Paris in two upper-middle-class households: that of his parents and that of the Swanns. The second half takes place in Balbec on the Normandy coast where he stays in the Grand Hotel with his grandmother. The Paris section mocks haute bourgeois pretensions while the Balbec section contains equally amusing descriptions of provincial bourgeois affectations. Recovered from his infatuation with Gilberte, Marcel now falls in love with every girl he sees, of which there are many. He makes friends with Robert de Saint-Loup and his uncle, Baron de Charlus.
3. *The Guermantes Way*: Marcel's family moves next door to the Paris residence of the Duc and Duchesse de Guermantes, and Marcel becomes obsessed with making their acquaintance. He spends weeks at a military academy with their nephew, Robert de Saint-Loup, whom he had met at Balbec. Eventually Marcel is accepted into the magic circle of the Guermantes and the Faubourg Saint-Germain.
4. *Cities of the Plain*: Continuing his social success in the Faubourg

Saint-Germain, Marcel also discovers the hidden homosexual world of the Guermantes' Baron Charlus. On his second visit to Balbec he becomes part of the Verdurins' "little clan," rekindles his love affair with Albertine, and discovers the world of lesbianism.

5. *The Captive*: Marcel brings Albertine to live with him in Paris where he treats her more like a captive. Obsessively jealous, he discards his social circle and alternately tries to please her or to leave her. Above all, he tortures himself thinking about, asking about, and neurotically thwarting any possible indulgence in her lesbian tastes. Meantime, Charlus's public behavior becomes increasingly outrageous until he is publicly disgraced by the now influential Verdurins. Albertine leaves without warning.
6. *The Fugitive*: Marcel gradually recovers from the disappearance and subsequent death of Albertine. He rediscovers Gilberte, who, with her mother Odette, is now accepted by smart society, while the memory of her father, Swann, is hidden and destroyed. Marcel visits Venice with his mother and learns by letter of Saint-Loup's marriage to Gilberte. After his marriage, Saint-Loup becomes an active and promiscuous homosexual.
7. *Time Regained*: Visiting Gilberte at her home in Combray, Marcel learns that Swann's way and the Guermantes way are not irreconcilable. The war affects everyone differently: Robert dies a hero at the front; Charlus haunts the male brothels of wartime Paris. Marcel, still an unsuccessful writer, returns to Paris after the war and is invited to an afternoon party at the Princesse de Guermantes' home. All of the novel's characters, or those still living, are at the party, but everyone has changed. Time has destroyed everything. Even the new Princesse de Guermantes turns out to be the widowed Mme Verdurin. Marcel realizes that memory can only be recaptured and Time defeated through art. With a sense of joy, in the middle of the party, he realizes that his vocation is to write a great novel and thus bring the past back to life.

Synopsis of *In Search of Lost Time*

Each of the three volumes of the Random House/Vintage Books edition contains a detailed synopsis written by Terence Kilmartin with precise page references for each incident described. Rather than duplicate Kilmartin's excellent work, the following synopsis offers just an overview of the main themes and events described in each of the seven novels.

As mentioned in the introduction, page references are to the Vintage Books edition (see the appendix for details), which collects the seven books that make up the complete novel into three separate volumes.

Although the narrator does not officially have a name, referring to him always as "the narrator" is clumsy, while calling him "M." can be confusing. The novel's narrator is therefore referred to as Marcel.

Swann's Way

Swann's Way is the first of the seven volumes that constitute *In Search of Lost Time*. This first volume is made up of three individual sections (plus the "Overture") and the central character in all three sections is Charles Swann. Because Swann so impressively dominates this first volume, he remains a powerful presence throughout the following six volumes, even though he never again plays a major role. The story of Swann's obsessive jealousy, his unhappy love life, and his unfulfilled artistic yearnings are a prelude to the narrator's own story.

In the first section, "Combray," we see Swann through the eyes of a child, indirectly reflected through the often misleading gossip of adults. "Swann in Love" describes Swann's affair with Odette de Cr cy, a relationship that covers several years and that directly addresses the thoughts and feelings of Swann the lover. The final section, "Place-Names: The Name," describes Swann as he was perceived by the outside world, as the "husband" and, more important, as the "father."

Overture

The first forty pages of the novel describe the narrator lying in bed, in that space between sleep and wakefulness, hovering like the fleeting memory of a dream, uncertain not only of where he is but even of who he is. All the various beds he has slept in, places he has visited, and different “selves” he has been throughout his life pass rapidly through his consciousness, focusing finally on the memory of a small boy lying in bed waiting for his mother to come upstairs and kiss him good night. Apparently formless and abstract, these first forty pages are difficult to read on the first attempt, and are probably the reason that many people never progress further into the book.

The narrator’s family was on its annual vacation to Combray and staying in the house of Aunt Léonie. Under normal circumstances his mother would come upstairs after he was in bed, kiss him good night, and sometimes read him a book. However, when the family had guests, his mother would stay downstairs at the dinner table and not come up to kiss him. This often happened when their neighbor Charles Swann came to dinner. Swann had made an “unfortunate” marriage and so would only make social visits by himself. We do not meet her, but we hear disapproving references to Mme Swann in this first volume, and there is also a reference to naughty Uncle Adolphe’s “lady in pink.” It is much later when we learn that both women are the same, Odette de Crécy.

Swann always entered the house by the back gate with its distinctive bell, and so whenever Marcel heard this double tinkle of the visitor’s bell, his heart sank and he knew his mother would not come upstairs to kiss him. On this particular evening he stays awake until Swann has left and then persuades his mother to stay with him all night and to read him a book. This memory remained with him for many years and so, even as a grown man lying awake in bed, he would recall that particular night in Combray long after all other memories of childhood had faded. The image of his mother’s kiss is a recurring theme in each volume of the novel whenever he has moments of happiness. Similarly, memories of the kiss that never came recur in times of anxiety and frustration. This particular night was especially significant because it was the first time that he successfully manipulated his parents and was able to impose his will upon the world. In later volumes, when he is able to exercise control over his mistress, he recalls the sense of power first awakened on this particular night.

It can be no coincidence that the book his mother chose to read to him that

night was *François le Champi* by George Sand. It is a story of the incestuous love of a mother called Madeleine for the orphan François. It is also the book that Marcel finds in the library of the Prince de Guermantes in the final volume of the novel and that provokes his second “madeleine moment.” His first “madeleine moment” occurs early in the first volume.

As a dejected middle-aged man who feels that his life has been wasted, the narrator thinks all memories of his youth and past pleasures have been irretrievably lost. And then one day, while dipping a piece of madeleine cake into a cup of tea his mother had made him, the memory of his happy childhood days in Combray came unexpectedly flooding back to him. He realized that they had been released by the taste and smell of the tea and madeleine crumbs that evoked the cakes his aunt Léonie used to make for him as a child.

And as in the game wherein the Japanese amuse themselves by filling a porcelain bowl with water and steeping in it little pieces of paper which until then are without character or form, but, the moment they become wet, stretch and twist and take on color and distinctive shape, become flowers or houses or people, solid and recognizable, so in that moment all the flowers in our garden and in M. Swann’s park, and the water lilies on the Vivonne and the good folk of the village and their little dwellings and the parish church and the whole of Combray and its surroundings, taking shape and solidity, sprang into being, town and gardens alike, from my cup of tea. (1:51)

These 119 words are a good example of a typical Proustian sentence.

Combray

This is the most lyrical section in the whole of *In Search of Lost Time* and introduces many of the major characters. Combray is a small market town where everybody knows everybody (and their dogs) and very little happens. Anything that does happen is immediately reported and discussed at the family dinner table.

The novel as a whole chronicles the narrator's ascendancy through society with a series of increasingly glittering social gatherings, but they begin at the home of Aunt Léonie in Combray when the family entertains M. Swann at dinner. In addition to Marcel's parents and maternal grandparents, the family includes his great-aunt, her daughter Léonie, and his grandmother's spinster sisters, whose ears have atrophied from lack of use and who grow increasingly crazy. Unable, because of their exaggerated sense of refinement, to thank M. Swann directly for the case of wine that he had given them, they make obscure and enigmatic remarks that only they can understand. The conversation around the dinner table reflects a society that is ordered and unchanging and in which everybody knows their place.

Aunt Léonie is a religious hypochondriac who took to her bed when her husband died many years previously and is now tended by her servants and her cook Françoise. From her "sickbed" Aunt Léonie holds court over the town and from her window she observes the activities of her neighbors in the street below. With Léonie mumbling her rosary and mouthing pieties, nothing happens in Combray without her knowing about it.

Everyone was so well known in Combray, animals as well as people, that if my aunt had happened to see a dog go by which she "didn't know from Adam" she never stopped thinking about it, devoting all her inductive talents and her leisure hours to this incomprehensible phenomenon.

"That will be Mme Sazerat's dog" Françoise would suggest, without any real conviction, but in the hope of appeasement, and so that my aunt should not "split her head."

"As if I didn't know Mme Sazerat's dog!" My aunt's critical mind would not be fobbed off so easily.

"Well then, it must be the new dog M. Galopin brought back from

Lisieux.”

“Oh, if that’s what it is!”

“They say he’s a very friendly animal,” Françoise would go on, having got the story from Théodore, “as clever as a Christian, always in a good temper, always friendly, always well-behaved. You don’t often see an animal so gentlemanly at that age.” (1:62–3)

Because he is a sickly child (and remains so throughout the novel), his family encourages Marcel to read books. He becomes a great admirer of Bergotte, a well-known writer, and is very excited when he learns that Bergotte visits Swann’s house and is a close friend of Swann’s daughter.

The Hawthorn Bushes

Swann’s house, Tansonville, was set in a large estate on the outside of town, and although the family never visits Swann because of his wife, they walk past his park on their family outings. Passing Swann’s park with his father and grandfather one day, Marcel sees a little redheaded girl playing on the lawn and guesses that she must be Swann’s daughter, Gilberte, the friend of Bergotte. He falls immediately and desperately in love.

This first sight of Gilberte and the first taste of love are inextricably entwined with images of the hawthorn bushes in full bloom along the side of Swann’s estate.

I found the whole path throbbing with the fragrance of hawthorn blossom. The hedge resembled a series of chapels, whose walls were no longer visible under the mountains of flowers that were heaped upon their altars; while beneath them the sun cast a checkered light upon the ground, as though it had just passed through a stained-glass window; and their scent swept over me, as unctuous, as circumscribed in its range, as though I had been standing before the Lady-altar ...

But it was in vain that I lingered beside the hawthorns—inhaling, trying to fix in my mind (which did not know what to do with it), losing and recapturing their invisible and unchanging odor, absorbing myself in the rhythm which disposed their flowers here and there with the light-heartedness of youth and at intervals as unexpected as certain intervals in

music—they went on offering me the same charm in inexhaustible profusion, but without letting me delve any more deeply, like those melodies which one can play a hundred times in succession without coming any nearer to their secret. (1:150–51)

Throughout the rest of the novel, the almost orgasmic memories of this hawthorn blossom never fades and is an image of pleasure to which the narrator returns again and again. It is at these moments of intense pleasure that Marcel feels that the meaning of the universe is about to be revealed if he can just concentrate his mind and break through the surface. Just as the taste of the madeleine was to bring back the memories of his youth, and the little phrase of Vinteuil's sonata recalls the joy of lost love, so later in the novel, when he sees the spires at Martinville, the three trees near Balbec, or the uneven cobblestones at the Prince de Guermantes', Marcel experiences an epiphany of joy—just as on the day when he first inhaled the scent of hawthorn blossom in the road outside Swann's estate.

Swann's Way

There are two possible walks around Combray, and the one that leads past Swann's estate is called the Méséglise way, but the family usually refers to it as Swann's way. This is the path most often taken and the one with which the narrator is most familiar. The alternative walk, the Guermantes way, in the opposite direction, was much longer and taken only when the weather was good, with no chance of being caught in the rain. Because the walk was longer, the family would usually arrive home later, which in turn meant a late dinner. A late dinner meant that there would not be a good-night kiss in bed. Marcel therefore has ambivalent feelings about the Guermantes way.

The importance of these two family walks to the novel as a whole is obvious from the very title of the books themselves. The first is called *Swann's Way*, the third is called *The Guermantes Way*, and references are made to the two different and apparently irreconcilable "ways" all throughout *In Search of Lost Time*. Volumes could be written about how the two ways differ on political, psychological, and symbolist grounds, but more important is what they had in common. Those two walks around Combray as a child form the core of the narrator's memory and the essence of his concept of reality. Everything and everyone that he encounters in later life is, in some way, judged and compared

with the real world he first discovered walking around the countryside of Combray.

But it is pre-eminently as the deepest layer of my mental soil, as the firm ground on which I still stand, that I regard the Méséglise and Guermantes ways. It is because I believed in things and in people while I walked along those paths that the things and the people they made known to me are the only ones that I still take seriously and that still bring me joy. Whether it is because the faith which creates has ceased to exist in me, or because reality takes shape in the memory alone, the flowers that people show me nowadays for the first time never seem to me to be true flowers. The Méséglise way with its lilacs, its hawthorns, its cornflowers, its poppies, its apple-trees, the Guermantes way with its river full of tadpoles, its water-lilies and its buttercups, constituted for me for all time the image of the landscape in which I should like to live, in which my principal requirements are that I may go fishing, drift idly in a boat, see the ruins of gothic fortifications, and find among the cornfields ... an old church, monumental, rustic, and golden as a haystack; and the cornflowers, the hawthorns, the apple-trees which I may still happen, when I travel, to encounter in the fields, because they are situated at the same depth, on the level of my past life, at once establish contact with my heart. (1:201)

This sense of being spiritually grounded in these very physical memories of his childhood walks provides a powerful and consistent theme throughout the novel.

These two different walks, each leaving from the house by two separate gates and moving in opposite directions, become a recurring metaphor in all seven volumes. The Méséglise way (Swann's way) is the more familiar bourgeois path, while the Guermantes way is nobler and more romantic but also more difficult to follow. Through most of the seven books these two paths are presented as forever incompatible, but in the final pages of *Time Regained*, Marcel meets Mlle Swann, the daughter of Robert de Saint-Loup (a Guermantes) and Gilberte (Swann's daughter), and in her the two paths are finally reconciled.

The Guermantes Way

This second walk, along the bank of the river Vivonne, leads toward the château of the dukes of Guermantes, hereditary rulers of the region. The

Guermantes traced their lineage back to the Merovingian dynasty and they were “Great and glorious before the days of Charlemagne,” and “had the right of life and death over their vassals.”

This introduces another major theme of the book: Marcel’s romantic obsession with the charms of the aristocracy and his desire to become part of that society. His yearnings are epitomized by the Duchesse de Guermantes whom he regards as an impossibly remote and exotic figure. The duchess attends Mass one Sunday at the church in Combray and Marcel cannot keep his eyes off her. Faces of her ancestors can be seen in the stained-glass windows and the carvings of the medieval church, yet Marcel is surprised and disappointed when he finally sees the living woman. A continuing theme of *In Search of Lost Time* is that reality always disappoints our expectations: “There is a sort of compulsion upon us to value what we lack at the expense of what we have.” Though she appears only briefly in this first volume, the duchess becomes a powerful symbol of Marcel’s aristocratic and romantic yearnings.

Legrandin

Sunday Mass at the church is the major social occasion of the town, and it is here that we meet many of the other characters who become more important later in the novel. At the same time that Marcel first sees the Duchesse de Guermantes, he also sees their neighbor M. Legrandin in a new light. When Marcel sees Legrandin outside the church on Sunday morning being introduced to some of the local landowners, he is surprised to observe his rump quivering in an orgasm of obsequiousness. He is surprised because Legrandin professes to be a republican and complains that the Jacobins and their guillotine did not finish off all the aristocracy.

Legrandin also boasts about his sister, who married the Marquis de Cambremer. Because they know his sister lives in Normandy, near Balbec, and that Marcel and his grandmother plan to stay there on vacation, Marcel’s father tries to get Legrandin to make an introduction to his sister. Legrandin, forgetting that he has boasted about his sister’s country house near Balbec on previous occasions, tries to avoid the question.

“Indeed! And do you know anyone at Balbec?” inquired my father. “As it happens, this young man is going to spend a couple of months there with his grandmother, and my wife too, perhaps.”

Legrandin, taken unawares by the question at a moment when he was looking directly at my father, was unable to avert his eyes, and so fastened them with steadily increasing intensity—smiling mournfully the while—upon the eyes of his questioner, with an air of friendliness and frankness and of not being afraid to look him in the face, until he seemed to have penetrated my father's skull as if it had become transparent, and to be seeing at that moment, far beyond and behind it, a brightly colored cloud which provided him with a mental alibi and would enable him to establish that at the moment when he was asked whether he knew anyone at Balbec, he had been thinking of something else and so had not heard the question. As a rule such tactics make the questioner proceed to ask, "Why, what are you thinking about?" But my father, inquisitive, irritated and cruel, repeated: "Have you friends, then, in the neighborhood, since you know Balbec so well?"

In a final and desperate effort, Legrandin's smiling gaze struggled to the extreme limits of tenderness, vagueness, candor and abstraction; but, feeling no doubt that there was nothing left for it now but to answer, he said to us: "I have friends wherever there are clusters of trees, stricken but not defeated, which have come together with touching perseverance to offer a common supplication to an inclement sky which has no mercy upon them."

"That is not quite what I meant," interrupted my father, as obstinate as the trees and as merciless as the sky. "I asked you, in case anything should happen to my mother-in-law and she wanted to feel that she was not all alone there in an out-of-the-way place, whether you knew anyone in the neighborhood."

"There as elsewhere, I know everyone and I know no one," replied Legrandin, who did not give in so easily. "The places I know well, the people very slightly. But the places themselves seem like people, rare and wonderful people, of a delicate quality easily disillusioned by life. Perhaps it is a castle which you encounter upon the cliff's edge standing there by the path where it has halted to contemplate its sorrows beneath an evening sky, still roseate, in which the golden moon is climbing while the homeward-bound fishing-boats, cleaving the dappled waters, hoist its pennant at their mastheads and carry its colors. Or perhaps it is a simple dwelling-house that stands alone, plain and shy-looking but full of romance, hiding from every eye some imperishable secret of happiness and disenchantment." (1:142–44)

And so he continued for another whole page before suddenly concluding with a “Good night to you neighbors” and moving away with an evasive abruptness. Marcel’s father never did get an introduction to Legrandin’s sister.

Vinteuil

The brief appearance of M. Legrandin in this volume is used to also introduce the theme of snobbery and hypocrisy as well as, obliquely, homosexuality. Homosexuality and sadism are further developed through the daughter of old Vinteuil, a retired music teacher who lives near Combray. This is another character whom the family meets at church and while walking through the town with Charles Swann. Each time that Swann meets M. Vinteuil, he knows that he has an important question to ask him but can never remember to do so, and the question, so typical of Proust, hangs unasked and unanswered until much later in the novel. Vinteuil, a rather prudish man, shares the general disapproval of Swann’s marriage, even though a far larger scandal festers under his own roof in the person of his daughter.

Mlle Vinteuil lives with her father in a country house called Montjouvain, just outside Combray on the Méséglise way. When an older girl with a bad reputation in the neighborhood moves into the house with the daughter, it creates a scandal in Combray. Hiding from the cruel jokes of Dr. Percepied and other local gossips, old Vinteuil spent his days sitting mournfully beside his wife’s grave and slowly died of a broken heart.

A few months later, Marcel “just happened” to be in the bushes, a few feet away from Mlle Vinteuil’s window.

The window was partly open; the lamp was lighted; I could watch her every movement without her being able to see me; but if I had moved away I would have made a rustling sound among the bushes, she would have heard me, and she might have thought that I had been hiding there in order to spy upon her. (1:174)

And spy, of course, he does. After Mlle Vinteuil’s friend joins her in the room and kisses her suddenly in the

V-shaped opening of her crepe bodice ... she gave a little scream and

broke away; and then they began to chase one another about the room, scrambling over the furniture, their wide sleeves fluttering like wings, clucking and squealing like a pair of amorous fowls. At last Mlle Vinteuil collapsed exhausted on the sofa, with her friend on top of her. (1:177)

Part of their ritualistic lovemaking involves arranging the photograph of the now-dead father on the side table so that he can watch them.

“Do you know what I should like to do to this old horror?” she said, taking up the photograph. And she murmured in Mlle Vinteuil’s ear something that I could not distinguish.

“Oh! You wouldn’t dare.”

“Not dare to spit on it? *On that?*” said the friend with studied brutality. (1:178)

This profane and sadistic treatment of the dead parent was apparently repeated in Proust’s own life, and there are various accounts of Proust displaying photographs of his mother at the male brothel that he frequented on the rue de l’Arcade.

Just as the lesbianism of Vinteuil’s daughter eventually becomes a major theme of the novel, so too does Vinteuil’s little sonata, a piece of music that becomes important both to Swann and to the narrator. However, in this first volume, there is no suggestion that the sad little piano teacher was any more than the village organist.

Baron de Charlus is very briefly introduced in this first volume and is presented as the robust lover of Mme Swann. In fact, he is one of Swann’s closest friends, was never his wife’s lover, and later becomes one of the novel’s most central characters.

Other characters in this first volume who continue to play an important role include Marcel’s rather strict and distant father, his loving and idealized mother, his saintly grandmother, and Françoise, Aunt Léonie’s cook, who acts more like a rude Greek chorus as the novel unfolds.

The descriptions of Combray are filled with large and happy family meals when for one season they feast on asparagus every day. The family assumes that Françoise has found a special source at the market or that asparagus is especially plentiful that year. It is much later that Marcel discovers that the scullery maid,

whom Françoise detests, is allergic to asparagus. Françoise had deliberately served asparagus with every meal so that the poor maid was forced to spend all day in the kitchen preparing it.

The Epiphanies

The volume ends with Marcel's first attempt at writing, undertaken when riding in Doctor Percepied's carriage with his family one evening at dusk.

At a bend in the road I experienced, suddenly, that special pleasure which was unlike any other, on catching sight of the twin steeples of Martinville, bathed in the setting sun and constantly changing their position with the movement of the carriage and the windings of the road, and then of a third steeple, that of Vieuxvicq, which, although separated from them by a hill and a valley, and rising from rather higher ground in the distance, appeared none the less to be standing by their side.

In noticing and registering the shape of their spires, their shifting lines, the sunny warmth of their surfaces, I felt I was not penetrating to the core of my impression, that something more lay behind that mobility, that luminosity, something which they seemed at once to contain and to conceal. (1:196)

And later, when leaving Martinville on the drive home, he watches the steeples recede.

And presently their outlines and sunlit surfaces, as though they had been a sort of rind, peeled away; something of what they had concealed from me became apparent; a thought came into my mind which had not existed for me a moment earlier, framing itself in words in my head; and the pleasure which the first sight of them had given me was so greatly enhanced that, overpowered by a sort of intoxication, I could no longer think of anything else. (1:197)

He is so overwhelmed by this mysterious pleasure that (with borrowed pencil and paper in a jolting cart on country roads) he immediately writes a two-page description of the experience. In the act of expressing himself through writing, he discovers such joy as though he were "a hen and had just laid an egg. I began to sing at the top of my voice."

This episode with the twin steeples of Martinville is significant not just because it marks Marcel's first step in his lifelong quest to become a writer but also because it is the first of a series of epiphanies that occur throughout the novel. Like the "little phrase" in the sonata by Vinteuil, or the taste of madeleine steeped in tea, the memory of the steeples of Martinville evokes memories of a powerful pleasure that Marcel recalls again and again. The pleasures of these moments are as intense as they are unexpected, but at the same time Marcel feels they are hiding from him a mysterious secret.

... suddenly a roof, a gleam of sunlight on stone, the smell of a path would make me stop still, to enjoy the special pleasure that each of them gave me, and also because they appeared to be concealing, beyond what my eyes could see, something which they invited me to come and take but which despite all my efforts I never managed to discover. Since I felt that this something was to be found in them, I would stand there motionless, looking, breathing, endeavoring to penetrate with my mind, beyond the thing seen or smelt... I would concentrate on recalling exactly the line of the roof, the color of the stone, which, without my being able to understand why, had seemed to me to be bursting, ready to open, to yield up to me the secret treasure of which they were themselves no more than the lids. (1:195)

In some ways, *In Search of Lost Time* can be seen as Marcel's attempt to decipher the meaning of these mysterious moments in time. The answer to this endless striving to understand the secrets concealed behind the world of physical objects is not revealed until the final volume, in the library of the Prince de Guermantes in *Time Regained*.

"Combray" is one of the great classics of childhood literature, and the lyrical descriptions of the French countryside and the sleepy provincial town become as real to the reader as to the narrator.

Not a footstep was to be heard on any of the paths. Quartering the topmost branches of one of the tall trees, an invisible bird was striving to make the day seem shorter, exploring with a long-drawn note the solitude that pressed it on every side, but it received at once so unanimous an answer, so powerful a repercussion of silence and of immobility, that one felt it had arrested for all eternity the moment which it had been trying to make pass more quickly. (1:149–50)

The sight of water lilies on the Vivonne and the smell of hawthorn bushes in bloom remain as powerful images of innocent joy all through the rest of the novel: “It needs but a dismal autumn day when the sun sets unseen, a road drying after rain, as the coming of the earliest winter chills, to make us drunk on the remembered beauty of the past and the primal substance of our lives.”

All the subsequent volumes of *In Search of Lost Time* describe a world that is in a constant state of flux: fortunes rise and fall, people change, and Time transforms everything. But in Combray, nothing changes; it is an ordered world in which everything has a place and every person knows their place. Like childhood, Combray becomes an idealized symbol of security in an uncertain world.

Swann in Love

“Swann in Love” differs from the rest of the novel in that it is written in the third person and has a beginning, a middle, and an end. Some commentators have suggested that Proust wanted to demonstrate that he was capable of writing a conventional novel in order to deflect criticism from the apparent lack of structure in the rest of the work. It differs from the rest of the novel also in that the events it describes take place before Marcel was born. Marcel only learned the details from his grandmother and from Swann himself, many years later.

This is the story of an unhappy love affair between the wealthy art collector Charles Swann and a notorious “demimondaine.” The affair is played out against three distinct social backgrounds: the bourgeois but slightly bohemian world of the Verdurins, the aristocratic world of the Faubourg Saint-Germain, and the demimonde of Odette de Crécy. Each of these milieus is examined in much greater depth in succeeding volumes.



Charles Swann

Charles Swann is a well-known connoisseur with impeccable taste who moves in the highest levels of society and lives on the aristocratic and artistic Ile Saint-Louis. He is a “boulevardier,” a man-about-town who, despite his Jewish background, is invited to the best houses. He is a member of the Jockey Club and is a personal friend of both the Prince of Wales and the Duc d’Orléans, the pretender to the French throne; in fact, Swann’s house is on the Quai d’Orléans. Almost lethargically he begins a halfhearted affair with a rather vulgar courtesan,

Odette de Crécy, who pursues him shamelessly. Out of habit, what had begun as an amusing diversion for Swann slowly becomes an important part of his life. As he becomes increasingly used to her company, he becomes ever more in need of her. When he cannot be with her, he thinks about her obsessively and contrives to engineer their next meeting.

He uses his friend Charlus to create “accidental” meetings with Odette. He spies on her at night outside of what he mistakenly thinks is her house. He rushes manically from one fashionable Paris restaurant to another in order to “accidentally” meet her and escort her home. He pays her an allowance and tortures himself by asking questions about her other life and her other lovers. This neurotic questioning by the lover is a theme that is repeated many times throughout the course of the novel.

Odette lives in a new development close to the Arc de Triomphe on a street called La Pérouse; Swann’s obsession becomes so great that not only does he eat at a restaurant close to his home, simply because it is named Lapérouse, but even at a party, while talking to General de Froberville, he deliberately manipulates the conversation so that he can refer to the name of Odette’s street. There had been a famous French explorer called La Pérouse, and Swann keeps talking about him until the general agrees that he’s had a street named after him, which then gives Swann the opportunity to start talking about the street.



Odette de Crécy

“Oh, yes, of course, La Pérouse,” said the General. “It’s quite a well-known name. There’s a street called that.”

“Do you know anyone in Rue La Pérouse?” asked Swann excitedly.
(1:374)

Just as Swann deliberately kept repeating and making others repeat the name of the street on which his lover lived, so in later years Marcel would repeat and force his parents to repeat the name of Swann. Marcel was in love with Swann's daughter Gilberte, and in each case the obsessed lover would achieve a vicarious pleasure from repeating the name of something associated with the object of his desire.

As Swann's addiction grows, Odette gradually disengages herself, thus increasing his enslavement. Swann is more and more consumed by jealousy. He discards his old friends, the book he is writing, and his social position to be with Odette. He starts to spend time with her friends even though he finds them coarse and vulgar. In order to be accepted by Odette and her little circle, Swann "dumbs down" his conversation and tries to conceal his good taste.

The Verdurins

The world in which this affair has thrived is the salon of Mme Verdurin and her "little clan." The Verdurins are very wealthy haute bourgeoisie who, because they lack noble blood, are not admitted into the aristocratic world of the Faubourg Saint-Germain where Swann feels most at home. Rather than acknowledge this rejection by fashionable society, the Verdurins dismiss the Faubourg Saint-Germain as being full of "bores" and have created their own alternative and more bohemian society. Mme Verdurin's salon is filled with a cast of rather brash and buffoonish characters who worship "the Mistress" and slavishly attend all her Wednesday soirees. Unlike Combray, Mme Verdurin's salon reflects a society in a state of uncertainty, in which the guests strive not to offend the hosts or to break any of the confusing rules of the house. Nobody knows their place, and all the vulgar members of the group compete with one another to be accepted. Mme Verdurin rules her little clan with a brutal determination and will accept no threat to her authority.

From her high perch, Mme Verdurin can observe and control all her guests, making sure they all have a good time: "No ceremony here, you understand. We're all pals." Desperate to show that they are having more fun than all the bores in high society, the Verdurins maintain a feigned but continuous hilarity at all their social gatherings. Having once dislocated her jaw from laughing so heartily at one of her guests' witticisms, Mme Verdurin now preferred a new technique:

—she would utter a shrill cry, shut tight her little bird-like eyes, which were beginning to be clouded over by a cater-act, and quickly, as though she had only just time to avoid some indecent sight or to parry a mortal blow, burying her face in her hands, which completely engulfed it and hid it from view, would appear to be struggling to suppress, to annihilate, a laugh which, had she succumbed to it, must inevitably have left her inanimate. So, stupefied with the gaiety of the “faithful,” drunk with good-fellowship, scandal and asseveration, Mme Verdurin, perched on her high seat like a cage-bird whose biscuit has been steeped in mulled wine, would sit aloft and sob with affability. (1:224)

Affability, however, is far from Mme Verdurin’s nature, and she is one of the most relentless and ruthless characters in a novel filled with manipulative self-seekers.

Many of the apparently minor and foolish individuals we meet at the Verdurins evolve into more important characters in later volumes. Though presented as an oaf at the Verdurins’ soirees, Dr. Cottard later becomes an important and highly respected medical expert. The nameless painter who is referred to only as “M. Biche” is later to be revealed as Elstir, the great artist who so profoundly impresses the narrator in later volumes.

Swann joins the Verdurin salon in pursuit of Odette during the early days of their affair, and at first he is welcomed for his charm and good humor. It is in the Verdurins’ salon that he first becomes aware of Vinteuil’s sonata. One evening the Verdurins persuade Swann to listen to a sonata in F-sharp that they had discovered. Swann is delighted to recognize the music as something he had heard before but had never been able to track down or discover its name. That evening at the Verdurins he “felt as though he had met, in a friend’s drawing room, a woman whom he had seen and admired in the street and had despaired of ever seeing her again.” As he listened to the music, Swann

... had suddenly become aware of the mass of the piano-part beginning to surge upward in plashing waves of sound, multiform but indivisible, smooth yet restless, like the deep blue tumult of the sea, silvered and charmed into a minor key by the moonlight. But then at a certain moment, without being able to distinguish any clear outline, or give a name to what was pleasing him, suddenly enraptured, he had tried to grasp the phrase or harmony—he did not know which—that had just been played and that had opened and expanded his soul, as the fragrance of

certain roses, wafted upon the moist air of evening, has the power of dilating one's nostrils.... This time he had distinguished quite clearly a phrase which emerged for a few moments above the waves of sound. It had at once suggested to him a world of inexpressible delights, of whose existence, before hearing it, he had never dreamed, into which he felt that nothing else could initiate him; and he had been filled with love for it, as with a new and strange desire. (1:227–28)

The little phrase by Vinteuil quickly becomes the “national anthem” of Swann and Odette's love affair. Odette plays the little phrase (badly) for Swann on her piano and in later volumes she also plays it for Marcel. Swann hears it played at Mme de Saint-Euverte's, and Marcel plays it for Albertine. The little phrase of Vinteuil's becomes a running motif throughout all seven volumes of the novel.

Gradually Mme Verdurin learns of Swann's connections to the bores and interprets his aristocratic background as a direct and personal betrayal. Not only is Swann ejected from the little clan, but Mme Verdurin encourages Odette to break away from Swann and to start an affair with the loud and oafish Baron de Forcheville (whom she marries toward the end of the novel).

Party at Saint-Euverte's

Toward the end of the affair, rejected by the Verdurins and abandoned by Odette, Swann returns to his old world of the Faubourg Saint-Germain and attends a soiree at the Marquise de Saint-Euverte's. Trying to forget Odette, Swann is attracted to a young provincial noblewoman, Mme de Cambremer—Legrandin's elusive sister, who is to play a more important role in later volumes of the novel.

This is our first glimpse of the world of high society that Swann had abandoned. Proust is a master at describing glittering social gatherings where many characters intermingle, conversations overlap, and complex story lines and themes are seamlessly woven together. This is one of the first in a series of public occasions that gradually ascend the steps of the social hierarchy throughout the course of the novel. The first is the family dinner table, entertaining Charles Swann. The second level is the pretentious soiree at Mme Verdurin's when Odette introduces Swann. The third is this musical evening at Marquise de Saint-Euverte's and there will be many others, each more socially exalted: at Mme de Villeparisis's, at the Duchesse de Guermantes', and, finally,

the reception at the Princesse de Guermantes’.

It is at this musical evening that we meet the Duchesse de Guermantes in person for the first time. In “Combray” the narrator had described her in terms of an unattainable aristocratic ideal, but at the Marquise de Saint-Euverte’s soiree we see her as Oriane, exchanging caca jokes with her old friend Swann. She even makes a passing reference to Combray, which, she asserts, is reputed to be ugly: “But I must say I find the neighborhood not at all unattractive. I have a horror of ‘picturesque spots.’” Having established Combray as a rural ideal, it is typical of Proust to now portray it from a different perspective.

In later volumes, this same shift in perspective is even applied to Mme de Saint-Euverte’s apparently fashionable party. To people on the fringe of smart society, like Mme Cambremer, the soiree at Mme de Saint-Euverte’s is a glittering social occasion. Certainly it is presented as such in this first volume, even if some of Proust’s observations are tart. It is much later in the novel that we learn that truly smart society looks down its nose at what the Duchesse de Guermantes describes as “a bean feast” because “the whole of Paris will be there.” The real aristocracy regards Mme de Saint-Euverte’s parties as vulgar. The duchess only attends because she likes to do the unexpected. Charlus is even more disdainful and, within earshot of the unfortunate Mme de Saint-Euverte, describes her party as an open sewer that he would visit only if he had diarrhea (2:726).

But Swann’s attempts to forget Odette and to distract himself with Mme de Cambremer are doomed to failure when the musicians begin to play Vinteuil’s little sonata.

And before Swann had had time to understand what was happening and to say to himself: “It’s the little phrase from Vinteuil’s sonata—I mustn’t listen!”, all his memories of the days when Odette had been in love with him, which he had succeeded until that moment in keeping invisible in the depths of his being, deceived by this sudden reflection of a season of love whose sun, they supposed, had dawned again, had awakened from their slumber, had taken wing and risen to sing maddeningly in his ears, without pity for his present desolation, the forgotten strains of happiness. (1:375)

In addition to the world of the Verdurins and the Faubourg Saint-Germain, “Swann in Love” also introduces us to the demimonde of French society. Swann

first meets Odette at the theater, where his friend Charlus had recommended her as a ravishing creature with whom he might come to some understanding. We quickly realize that Odette is a woman of questionable morals but would still hesitate to call her a prostitute; certainly she makes poor Swann work for her favors. But eventually Swann learns that not only has Odette attended lesbian orgies and worked in brothels, but that procuresses still chase her on behalf of clients.

“There was one of them waited more than two hours for me yesterday —offered me any money I asked. It seems there’s an ambassador who said to her, ‘I’ll kill myself if you don’t bring her to me’—meaning me!” (1:402)

This is just a taste of the underbelly of Parisian society that Proust is to explore in subsequent volumes. Eventually Odette’s taunting and sadistic treatment pushes Swann too far and his obsession finally fades. He shifts his attentions to the young Mme de Cambremer, whom he had met at Mme de Saint-Euverte’s. The book ends with Swann’s bitter reflection on Odette:

“To think that I’ve wasted years of my life, that I’ve longed to die, that I’ve experienced my greatest love, for a woman who didn’t appeal to me, who wasn’t even my type!” (1:415)

Place-Names: The Name

Unlike “Combray” and “Swann in Love,” which are both self-contained novels, “Place Names: The Name” is a transitional chapter of about fifty pages, serving to place the previous two works in perspective and to prepare the reader for the following volume.

Many years have passed since the events of “Swann in Love,” and we realize that, despite his bitter reflections that Odette was not “his type,” Swann had obviously married her perhaps for the sake of their daughter. Odette de Crécy had become Mme Swann.

Marcel, still a young boy, and his family have returned from their vacation in Combray and are home in Paris, living near the Champs-Élysées with Françoise. Following Aunt Léonie’s death, Françoise had been inherited by the narrator’s family and—a mixed blessing—moves to Paris to serve and torment them.

In the Champs-Élysées

Against his will but on doctor’s orders, his parents make Marcel walk to the local park, the garden of the Champs-Élysées, with Françoise each day for his health. One afternoon, watching a group of children playing, he sees a little girl with red hair whom he recognizes as Gilberte, Swann’s daughter from Combray. Marcel is fascinated and, by hanging around the same spot every day, is eventually invited to join the other children in their game. Playing with Gilberte in the Champs-Élysées quickly becomes the high point of Marcel’s life, and when he is not actually playing there he anxiously anticipates his next visit. He spends hours worrying that, because of bad weather, Gilberte will not be able to come the next day.

... I now no longer thought of anything save not to let a single day pass without seeing Gilberte (so much so that once, when my grandmother had not come home by dinnertime, I could not resist the instinctive reflection that if she had been run over in the street and killed, I should not for some time be allowed to play in the Champs-Élysées; when one is in love one has no love left for anyone). (1:433)

Ironically, many years later, it is in this very park where he played with

Gilberte as a child that his grandmother suffers her first stroke, which eventually leads to her death.

Swann's obsessive jealousy of Odette, which had been so minutely described in "Swann in Love," is now repeated with Marcel's obsession for Gilberte. Marcel imagines to himself that Gilberte has written him a letter in which she describes her love for him, and he spends hours savoring the different ways she might choose to express that love and all the words and phrases she might use. But eventually he realizes that these dreams of his are counterproductive:

I had realized that if I was to receive a letter from Gilberte, it could not, in any case, be this letter, since it was I myself who had just composed it. And from then on I would strive to divert my thoughts from the words which I should have liked her to write to me, for fear that, by voicing them, I should be excluding just those words—the dearest, the most desired—from the field of possibilities. (1:443)

It is in the public lavatory in the Champs-Élysées that Marcel, while waiting for Françoise, experiences the second of his epiphanies, similar to the pleasure he felt when seeing the twin steeples at Martinville while riding near Combray. The musty smell of the place filled him with an ill-defined pleasure, which seemed to promise a truth that was lasting and certain but unexplained. As with the steeples at Martinville, Marcel wanted to remain motionless and try to understand the source of this overwhelming pleasure and "descend into the underlying reality which it had not yet disclosed to me." Unfortunately, his thoughts are interrupted by the lavatory attendant, an elderly dame with painted cheeks and an auburn wig who had become great friends with Françoise and who offers Marcel "a nice clean one, and I shan't charge you anything." Many years later, this same "Marquise of the Water Closet" remembered him with affection and offered him free use of her facilities while, in an adjoining stall, his grandmother suffered a fatal stroke. In Proust, the sublime and the ridiculous are never far apart.

Sometimes Swann himself comes to the park to collect Gilberte and walk her home. Although Swann appears not to recognize Marcel, the narrator now recalls everything he heard about Swann years before in Combray and idolizes him even to the extent of wishing that he himself were bald like Swann. It would appear that relations have cooled between Marcel's parents and Swann since their return to Paris, despite Marcel's obsessive attempt to make his parents talk about Swann or even to mention his name (1:447). Marcel tries to introduce the

word “Swann” into every conversation just as, many years previously, when first courting Odette, Swann himself had kept repeating the name of the street where Odette lived, La Pérouse. When he is not playing in the park, Marcel drags Françoise around the streets of Paris so that they can walk past the Swanns’ house or to the Bois de Boulogne where Mme Swann is known to promenade along the Allée des Acacias.

It is against this innocent background of the narrator’s adolescent love that Proust brings us back to earth with a chance conversation between two men as they see Mme Swann drive past them in the Bois de Boulogne.

“Odette de Crécy! Why, I thought as much. Those great, sad eyes.... But I say, you know, she can’t be as young as she was once, eh? I remember I slept with her on the day MacMahon resigned.”

“I shouldn’t remind her of it, if I were you. She’s now Mme Swann, the wife of a gentleman in the Jockey Club, a friend of the Prince of Wales. But she still looks superb.” (1:455)

The volume ends on a mournful note with the reappearance of the narrator as the middle-aged man whom we first encountered lying in bed, unable to sleep and striving to recall his past life. In this case he is walking along the Allée des Acacias remembering the glamour of Odette de Crécy and a period of style that has now been lost forever. The world of Odette has been replaced by the motorcar and modern women who are “just women, in whose elegance I had no belief, and whose clothes seemed to me unimportant.”

Within a Budding Grove

Madame Swann at Home

Three of Proust's major themes are quickly developed within the first few pages of this second volume: the contradictory ways that individuals are perceived by society, the disappointment that invariably accompanies the satisfaction of our desires, and the unpredictable consequences of our actions.

Proust's characters are presented in the novel "as people do in life, that is to say scarcely known at first and often discovered long afterwards to be the opposite of what was thought." In the first volume, Odette de Crécy was clearly portrayed as a high-class tart. In this second volume, Proust now presents her as Mme Swann, a picture of bourgeois respectability whom everybody wishes to know. This is a very Proustian technique, to create a very strong impression of a character and then to show them from a completely different and unexpected perspective. When describing his novel to his publishers, Proust wrote, "... there are a great many characters; they are prepared in the first volume, in such a way that in the second they will do exactly the opposite of what one would have expected from the first."

These changes in perspective are made very clear in the opening paragraph. Dr. Cottard, whom we already know to be a mediocre sycophant of Mme Verdurin's little clan, is now described by Marcel's father as a "distinguished man of science." Swann, on the other hand, whom we know to be a man of discretion and the utmost refinement, is described as "an impossible vulgarian and a pestilent fellow."

The first half of this volume describes a Paris of the upper middle-class—the haute bourgeoisie—and is focused on the two separate households of Marcel's parents and Swann's family. Both families live close to the Champs-Élysées, Marcel's at the southern end near the park and the Swanns toward the Arc de Triomphe, possibly near the rue de Berri. Marcel, now almost a teenager, still plays with Gilberte in the park, and much of the book concerns his attempt to gain acceptance by Gilberte's family. Of course, when he has finally gained admittance and is able to visit Gilberte at home whenever he wishes, he becomes disappointed and contrives to end the relationship.

Berma and the Opera

The idea of inevitable disappointment that was introduced in *Swann's Way* when Marcel first saw the Duchesse de Guermantes in church occurs very early in this second volume. Marcel has dreamed for years of attending the opera and of hearing the great singer Berma in one of her famous roles, but his father has always prevented him from attending on account of his illness. However, when he is finally allowed to attend the opera, he is disillusioned by the naturalness of Berma and the vulgar insensitivity of the audience. The other actresses on the stage could be seen to be acting with grand gestures; they were "theatrical," which is what Marcel, in his youthful ignorance, had anticipated. Berma, however, was not theatrical. Failing to understand true art, he was disappointed. "I listened to her... as though Phèdre herself had at that moment uttered the words that I was hearing."

Norpois and Writing

Marcel's father only allowed him to attend the opera because M. de Norpois, a family friend, suggests it would be a good experience. As an ex-ambassador, M. de Norpois is held in very high esteem by Marcel's father, but Proust ignores no opportunity to portray him as a pompous fool and a stuffed shirt. Not only is de Norpois dismissive of Marcel's own writing skills, he is also very critical of the writings of Bergotte, Marcel's hero. Marcel has read all of Bergotte's books, and one of the reasons he is so keen to be invited to Swann's house is because he knows that Bergotte is a regular dinner guest. Norpois reveals his own literary tastes when he praises a promising young writer that he much admires who has written a treatise on the "Repeating Rifle in the Bulgarian Army."

Norpois is a regular visitor at the Swanns' house and provides Marcel's family with endless gossip on the state of the Swanns' marriage and of Odette's social climbing. Marcel tells him of his friendship with Gilberte and asks Norpois to put in a good word for him so that he might be invited to their house. This would have been a very simple social task for Norpois to perform and would normally have resulted in an automatic invitation from the Swanns. However, because Marcel makes his request with such heartfelt enthusiasm, Norpois realizes that it is more significant than just a polite social exchange, and that gaining an invitation is actually important to the boy. He would be performing a significant act, benefiting Marcel, but with no benefit to himself. Therefore—and Marcel realizes this even while he is still speaking—Norpois, for that reason alone, will avoid taking on such a responsibility.

And I realized that this mission was one he would never discharge, that he might see Mme Swann daily, for years to come, without ever mentioning my name. (1:517)

Proust is the world's master of convoluted and tortured motives. Marcel does eventually get his invitation to the Swanns', not because he politely asked de Norpois for an introduction, but because Dr. Cottard thought he did not need one.

When Marcel is ill in bed one day and being treated by Dr. Cottard, Marcel's old school friend Bloch pays a visit. As usual, Bloch is showing off and wishes to impress Dr. Cottard, whom he knows to be a friend of Mme Swann. Wishing to bring Mme Swann into the conversation and show that he, too, is a friend, Bloch tells a lie. He says that he was told at dinner the previous evening how much Mme Swann is fond of Marcel. This makes Cottard think that Marcel is already well known and liked by the Swanns and that therefore in praising Marcel on his next visit to the Swanns' he would be doing himself a favor, with no benefit to Marcel.

Cottard ... concluded that to remark, when next he saw her, that I was a charming young fellow and a great friend of his could not be of the smallest use to me and would be advantageous to himself, two reasons which induced him to speak of me to Odette whenever an opportunity arose. (1:541-42)

And so it is not by the direct approach, but as the unforeseen consequence of something else entirely that Marcel is finally admitted to the Swanns' household where he can spend time with Gilberte and finally make the acquaintance of his hero Bergotte.

Chez Swann

It should be no surprise by now that when Marcel is finally invited by the Swanns to meet Bergotte at lunch, he is again disillusioned by reality: "My greeting was returned by a youngish, uncouth, thickset and myopic little man, with a red nose curled like a snail shell and a goatee beard. I was cruelly disappointed ..." The disappointment with the reality of the man extends to his books, "... which at once began to fall in my estimation (bringing down with

them the whole value of Beauty, of the world, of life itself), until they seemed to have been merely the casual recreation of a man with a goatee beard.” Making the acquaintance of Bergotte seemed such an impossible dream through much of the first two volumes that it is with shock that we read later, in *Balbec*, that Marcel is disappointed when the letter he receives is not from the servant girl as he had hoped: “Alas, it was only from Bergotte who, as he happened to be passing, had tried to see me.”

Marcel is now a regular visitor to the Swanns’ house, and Odette plays Vinteuil’s sonata on the piano for him, just as she used to play it for Swann. Indeed, Marcel now grows closer to the mother as his relationship with Gilberte begins to wane. Marcel’s love for Gilberte began to fade from the moment that he was accepted as one of her closest friends, for “... love, which, ever unsatisfied, lives always in the moment that is about to come.”

At the Swanns’ house Marcel meets their friends, many of whom are already familiar from Mme Verdurin’s soirees and none of whom have lost their embarrassing social insecurities. It is apparent that Mme Swann and Mme Verdurin are now in competition for the same little clan to attend their social gatherings. The snobbery and bitchiness of the conversations among the ladies drinking tea in Mme Swann’s drawing room show Proust at his most wicked and droll.

Mme Verdurin, whose new house in the center of Paris is to have electricity installed—with “lights in every room”—misses no opportunity to criticize Odette for living so far out, close to the Arc de Triomphe. For example, when Mme Cottard mentions that she is most grateful to Mme Bontemps for offering her a ride home from afternoon tea at Mme Swanns’, Mme Verdurin swoops in.

“Especially,” broke in the Mistress, who felt that she must say something, since she knew Mme Bontemps slightly and had just invited her to her Wednesdays, “as at Mme de Crécy’s house you’re not very near home. Oh, good gracious, I shall never get into the habit of saying Mme Swann!” It was a recognized joke in the little clan, among those who were not over-endowed with wit, to pretend that they could never grow used to saying “Mme Swann”: “I’ve been so accustomed to saying Mme de Crécy that I nearly went wrong again!” Only Mme Verdurin, when she spoke to Odette, was not content with the nearly, but went wrong on purpose.

“Don’t you feel afraid, Odette, living out in the wilds like this? I’m sure I shouldn’t feel at all comfortable, coming home after dark. Besides, it’s so

damp. It can't be at all good for your husband's eczema. You haven't rats in the house, I hope!" "Oh, dear no. What a horrid idea!" "That's a good thing; I was told you had. I'm glad to know it's not true, because I have a perfect horror of the creatures, and I should never have come to see you again. Good-bye, my dear child, we shall meet again soon; you know what a pleasure it is to me to see you. You don't know how to arrange chrysanthemums," she added as she prepared to leave the room, Mme Swann having risen to escort her. "They are Japanese flowers; you must arrange them the same way as the Japanese."

"I do not agree with Mme Verdurin, although she is the fount of wisdom to me in all things! There's no one like you, Odette, for finding such lovely chrysanthemums, or chrysanthema rather, for it seems that's what we ought to call them now," declared Mme Cottard as soon as the Mistress had shut the door behind her.

"Dear Mme Verdurin is not always very kind about other people's flowers," said Odette sweetly. (1:648)

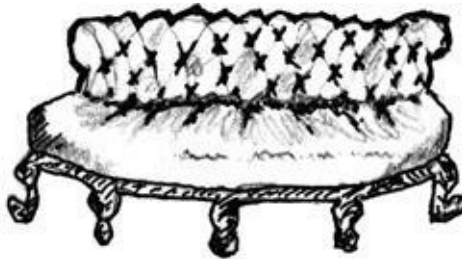
Kept informed by Norpois and others, Marcel's parents observe Mme Swann's social ascent with a detached amusement. While others cannot understand why Odette should continue to accept socially unimportant people such as Mme Cottard into her house for her "teas," Mamma understood that Odette's social success would be meaningless without at least one of her old friends on hand to witness it. Just as a bee by visiting all the different flowers will spread the pollen throughout the garden, so Mme Cottard, who maintained contact with all Odette's old associates, would be able to spread word of the brilliance of the new friends who had replaced them, and thus spread envy and wonder, which was Odette's true source of pleasure.

During these afternoon tea parties, the niece of Mme Bontemps is occasionally referred to as being somewhat disreputable but we never actually meet her. Though we do not yet know it, this Albertine in later volumes is to become the love of Marcel's life.

It is during this period that Bloch takes Marcel to his first brothel. The madam keeps offering him the services of a Jewish girl called Rachel whom he nicknames "Rachel when from the Lord." Although he could have had her for twenty francs, Marcel decides she is not worth it and continues to reject her, despite continuing pressure from the madam. He is further put off when he hears

her casually say to the madam as she leaves the house, “If you get someone, just send for me.” Marcel reflects that she will service just anybody. He meets Rachel again in a later volume when she is introduced as the great love of his best friend—putting Marcel in a difficult position.

One of the reasons that Marcel ceased to go to that particular brothel was that he had once presented the madam with some pieces of old furniture, including a large sofa from his aunt Léonie’s house. Now whenever he saw them again in the brothel “where these women were putting them to their own uses” he felt overwhelmed with guilt for betraying all the virtues of Combray. The sight of his aunt’s sofa in such a place also sparked the involuntary memory that “it was upon that same sofa that, many years before, I had tasted for the first time the sweets of love with one of my girl cousins.”



Aunt Léonie's sofa

These unexpected and incongruous images are used by Proust throughout the novel to great comic effect. What adds to the humor is the straight face with which Proust tells his stories and the tone of melancholy with which he describes, for example, the maiden aunt’s sofa from Combray being “used” in a seedy Paris brothel.

Having finally achieved his desire to be accepted by Gilberte’s parents, Marcel now decides to end his relationship with her.

There can be no peace of mind in love, since what one has obtained is never anything but a new starting-point for further desires. So long as I had been unable to go to her house, with my eyes fixed upon that inaccessible happiness, I could not even imagine the fresh grounds for anxiety that lay in wait for me there. Once the resistance of her parents was broken, and the problem solved at last, it began to set itself anew, each time in different terms. (1:625)

Their relationship becomes stale and they spend long, boring afternoons at her house engaged in banal conversations about the weather or the evenings drawing in. "In vain was my polite: 'I thought, the other day, that the clock was slow, if anything'; she evidently understood me to mean: 'How tiresome you are being!'" He matches her moods of polite indifference with a feigned coldness, and, like an old married couple, they torture each other.

The storm that was blowing in my heart was so violent that I made my way home battered and bruised, feeling that I could recover my breath only by retracing my steps, by returning, upon whatever pretext, into Gilberte's presence. But she would have said to herself: "Back again! Evidently I can do what I like with him: he'll come back every time, and the more wretched he is when he leaves me the more docile he'll be." (1: 629)

Because he cannot get from her a complete declaration of love on her part, Marcel can never be satisfied and, having decided that he has lost her, he starts to avoid her: "It was a slow and painful suicide of that self which loved Gilberte." Ironically, in order to avoid meeting with Gilberte, Marcel refused an invitation to a dinner at which he would also have met Mme Bontemps' niece Albertine. The older narrator interrupts the younger Marcel with the benefit of hindsight.

So it is that the different periods of our life overlap one another. We scornfully decline, because of one whom we love and who will some day be of so little account, to see another who is of no account today, whom we shall love tomorrow, whom we might perhaps, had we consented to see her now, have loved a little sooner and who would thus have put a term to our present sufferings, bringing others, it is true, in their place. (1:674)

After a long and anguished period of feigned indifference, interrupted with brief moments of passionate hope, Marcel's love for Gilberte gradually wanes, and he visits the Swann household only when he knows that Gilberte will be away. The end finally arrives. After spending all of his aunt Léonie's money on flowers, and while on his way to present them in person, he sees Gilberte walking along the Champs-Élysées arm in arm with a young man. It is many years later that he discovers that the unknown companion was in fact Léa, a notorious lesbian, dressed as a man. During this long and painful breakup, Marcel's only consolation is the thought that one day his pretended coldness will become real, his love for Gilberte will be gone, and he will be able to visit her

and flaunt his lack of feeling —despite all her imagined efforts to win back his love. However, many years later, when they meet at a party, Swann tells Marcel that he ought to visit Gilberte, but Marcel no longer cares.

“She has really grown up now and altered, you wouldn’t know her. She would be so pleased!” [said Swann]. I no longer loved Gilberte. She was for me like a dead person for whom one has long mourned, and then forgetfulness has come ... I no longer had any desire to see her, not even that desire to show her that I did not wish to see her which, every day, when I was in love with her, I vowed to myself that I would flaunt before her when I loved her no longer. (2:739)

Madame Swann

The first volume ended with Marcel watching from afar as Mme Swann strolled through the Bois de Boulogne to the admiring gaze of passersby and the sordid memories of past lovers. “Madame Swann at Home” ends with a triumphal description of Marcel accompanying her, even holding her jacket, on her daily noontime stroll along the Avenue des Bois. Dressed elegantly in the latest fashion, holding her silken parasol and basking in the admiring glances of the crowds, Odette de Crécy had become a triumphant Madame Swann. But the ambivalence remains not far below the surface. The Prince de Sagen, riding past on his horse, wheels around to face Odette and to doff his cap with a grand theatrical gesture:

... in which he displayed all the chivalrous courtesy of the great nobleman bowing in token of respect for Womanhood, even if it was embodied in a woman whom it was impossible for his mother or his sister to know. (1:689)

Marcel’s love for Gilberte is over, but his worshipful adoration of her mother remains:

... now that the sorrows that I once felt on Gilberte’s account have long since faded and vanished, there has survived them the pleasure that I still derive—whenever I close my eyes and read, as it were upon the face of a sundial, the minutes that are recorded between a quarter past twelve and one o’clock in the month of May—from seeing myself once again strolling

and talking thus with Mme Swann, beneath her parasol, as though in the colored shade of a wisteria bower. (1:689–90)

Place-Names: The Place

Two years pass and Marcel has arrived in a state of “almost complete indifference to Gilberte” when he goes with his grandmother to Balbec on the coast of Normandy. Like “Combray,” there is a freshness and optimism about this book that does not exist in the more confined Parisian sections of the novel.

The Joys of Sex

It is in this book that Marcel, by now a teenager, discovers the joys of sex. The meaning of the volume’s strange title thus becomes clear: *À l’ombre des jeunes filles en fleur* (In the shade of young girls in bloom—translated into English as *Within a Budding Grove*). Its pages are filled with lyrical descriptions of girls and young women whom Marcel sees everywhere, like flowers of the field. There is the milkmaid on the train to Balbec, the Norman girls on the bridge, and the handsome fisher-girl with the look of contempt for her surroundings and whose inner being he so wanted to penetrate (1:769). Everywhere Marcel looks, there are girls:

... a farm girl driving her cow or reclining on the back of a wagon, a shopkeeper’s daughter taking the air, a fashionable young lady erect on the back seat of a landau, facing her parents. (1:764)

There are girls everywhere, and he wants to possess and penetrate them all. There is Mlle de Stermaria, who awakens his lust in the Grand Hotel at Balbec, and the milk-girl who delivers cream to the hotel and whose imagined letter he prefers to a real note from a famous writer. Even an anonymous girl who briefly enters the compartment of Balbec’s little train evokes wild and glorious longings:

... I never saw again, and never identified, the handsome girl with the cigarette. We shall see, moreover, why for a long time I ceased to look for her. But I never forgot her. I find myself at times, when I think of her, seized by a wild longing. But these recurrences of desire oblige us to reflect that if we wish to rediscover these girls with the same pleasure we must also return to the year which has since been followed by ten others in the course of which her bloom has faded. We can sometimes find a person

again, but we cannot abolish time. (2:912–13)

Eventually, walking along the seafront, Marcel sees a little band of girls walking together and, forsaking everything else, he loses his heart to all of them. Thanks to his friend Bloch, Marcel now knows that his sexual yearnings are not impossible—even though he himself is in no position to assuage them.

And even if I were fated, now that I was ill and did not go out by myself, never to be able to make love to them, I was happy all the same, like a child born in a prison or a hospital who, having long supposed that the human organism was capable of digesting only dry bread and “physic,” has learned suddenly that peaches, apricots and grapes are not simply part of the decoration of the country scene but delicious and easily assimilated food. Even if his jailer or his nurse does not allow him to pluck those tempting fruits, still the world seems to him a better place and existence in it more clement.... As to the pretty girls who went past, from the day on which I had first known that their cheeks could be kissed, I had become curious about their souls. And the universe had appeared to me more interesting. (1:765)

Balbec

Following an agonizing farewell scene with his mother at the station, Marcel takes the train from Paris to Balbec with his grandmother and Françoise. While his grandmother, as always, reads her favorite book, the *Letters of Mme de Sévigné*, Marcel gets very pleasantly and amusingly drunk. In Balbec they stay in the Grand Hotel overlooking the seafront and Marcel spends many pages adjusting himself to this new and unfamiliar bedroom. (Bedrooms play an important role throughout the novel—as they did in Proust’s own life.) As they settle into the rhythm of life at the hotel, we are introduced to the local society of provincial dignitaries and minor squires and all their petty gossip and snobberies. As always, Proust’s descriptions of these social pretensions are as funny and as accurate as they are cruel. Much of the social life revolves around invitations to the Cambremer garden parties. The Marquis and Marquise de Cambremer are related to the snobbish and hypocritical M. Legrandin, whom we had met in Combray and who so skillfully avoided introducing his sister to Marcel’s father. The Cambremer family name had also been the subject of very scrofulous jokes

between Swann and the Duchesse de Guermantes in “Swann in Love,” in which they agree that it means “shit,” whichever way you look at it (1:371; see also page 38). By coloring our perception of the Cambremer family even before they are introduced into the narrative, it adds to the humor when all the locals treat them with such awe.

Early in their stay at the hotel Marcel and his grandmother are removed from their table in the dining room by the snobbish M. de Stermaria and his daughter. As beautiful as she is cold and aloof, Mlle de Stermaria does not even acknowledge Marcel’s existence and, of course, this makes her utterly irresistible to him. Though she does not play an important role in the novel, she remains, throughout, a symbol of unattainable desire and roiling female sensuality. For the rest of his stay in the Grand Hotel, he tries unsuccessfully to make her notice him.



The Grand Hotel de Cabourg (“Balbec”)

The relationship between Marcel and his grandmother is very delicately developed in this part of the novel. In the hotel, the two of them sleep in adjoining rooms with just a thin wall between their beds so that Marcel can knock three times if he needs anything. Needing a glass of milk during the night, Marcel knocks timidly at his grandmother’s wall, not wanting to wake her if she is asleep.

And scarcely had I given my taps than I heard three others, in a different tone from mine, stamped with a calm authority, repeated twice over so that there should be no mistake, and saying to me plainly: “Don’t get agitated; I’ve heard you; I shall be with you in a minute!” and shortly

afterwards my grandmother would appear. I would explain to her that I had been afraid she would not hear me, or might think that it was someone in the room beyond who was tapping; at which she would smile: “Mistake my poor pet’s knocking for anyone else’s! Why, Granny could tell it a mile away! Do you suppose there’s anyone else in the world who’s such a silly-billy, with such febrile little knuckles, so afraid of waking me up and of not making me understand? Even if it just gave the tiniest scratch, Granny could tell her mouse’s sound at once, especially such a poor miserable little mouse as mine is. I could hear it just now, trying to make up its mind, and rustling the bedclothes, and going through all its tricks.” (1:719–20)

“Good” characters are notoriously difficult to portray in literature; readers prefer vice to virtue. By the slow accumulation of kind words and wisdom around the grandmother, Proust has created a character so selflessly generous that we share her grandson’s heartfelt grief when she eventually dies in a later volume.

De Villeparisis

After pretending not to have seen each other for several days, the grandmother and a fellow guest, Mme de Villeparisis, are forced to acknowledge each other. They had been friends at school and now become inseparable. Mme de Villeparisis, who stays at the hotel with a whole retinue of her own servants, takes Marcel and his grandmother for rides in her carriage around the countryside.

It is on one of these rides that Marcel experiences his third epiphany:

Suddenly I was overwhelmed with a profound happiness which I had not felt since Combray, a happiness analogous to that which had been given me by—among other things—the steeples of Martinville. But this time it remained incomplete. I had just seen, standing a little way back from the hog’s-back road along which we were travelling, three trees which probably marked the entry to a covered driveway and formed a pattern which I was not seeing for the first time.... I looked at the three trees; I could see them plainly, but my mind felt that they were concealing something which it could not grasp, as when an object is placed out of our reach, so that our fingers, stretched out at arm’s length, can only touch for a moment its outer surface, without managing to take hold of anything. (1:770–71)

Again, as in the lavatory on the Champs-Élysées, Marcel feels that if he could only stand still and focus on the experience, the true meaning of life, hidden just below the surface, would be revealed. But Mme Villeparisis's carriage moves forward and the three trees are left behind.

I watched the trees gradually recede, waving their despairing arms, seeming to say to me: "What you fail to learn from us today, you will never know. If you allow us to drop back into the hollow of this road from which we sought to raise ourselves to you, a whole part of yourself which we were bringing to you will vanish forever into thin air..." And when, the road having forked and the carriage with it, I turned my back on them and ceased to see them, while Mme Villeparisis asked me what I was dreaming about, I was as wretched as if I had just lost a friend, had died to myself, had broken faith with the dead or repudiated a god. (1:773)

Gradually Marcel realizes that this old lady, whom he had always dismissed as one of his grandmother's unfashionable friends, is actually an amazingly well-connected and wealthy aristocrat. All the great writers whom Marcel so admired—Balzac, Stendhal, Victor Hugo—had been regular guests in her family's home and were to be judged not by their writing but only by how amusing they could be at the dinner table. Eventually Marcel learns that Mme de Villeparisis is herself related to the Guermantes family, and the Duchesse de Guermantes is her niece.

Saint-Loup

Mme de Villeparisis introduces Marcel to her great-nephew, Robert, Marquis de Saint-Loup, who has come to visit her in Balbec. With no hint of homosexual undertones, Marcel and Robert immediately become the best of friends, and it is a genuine friendship that continues throughout the novel. Handsome, wealthy, aristocratic, and charming but also kind, generous, and modest, Robert represents the ideal nobleman and the Proustian epitome of a gentleman. Robert and Marcel share an interest in music, literature, and philosophy, which is stimulating to both of them and allows Proust to discuss many of the themes in contemporary culture that interested him. Unlike most of the relationships described in *In Search of Lost Time*, which prove to be illusory, corrupt, or sexually ambivalent, the relationship between Marcel and Robert is

straightforward and pure, a platonic ideal.



Baron de Charlus

Marcel also meets Robert's uncle, the Baron de Charlus, who is the very opposite of the platonic ideal. Charlus is presented as a virile and haughty aristocrat whose many mistresses are reputed (according to the gossips of Combray) to include Mme Swann. Robert holds him in the greatest of awe, speaks admiringly of his amorous conquests, and explains how Charlus, who despises anything effeminate, exhibits a particular loathing for young men who do not measure up to his manly ideal. He describes how Charlus and two of his equally good-looking friends once thrashed a man within an inch of his life for being homosexual. But Marcel finds Charlus's behavior strange; he stares at Marcel from a distance but will not look him in the eye; he visits Marcel's room in the middle of the night; and his moods swing from one extreme to another, one moment warm and charming and the next cold and abusive.

Marcel is astounded to learn that Charlus is first cousin to Marcel's idol, the duchess. As Duc de Brabant, Charlus is also a direct descendant of Geneviève de Brabant, one of the historical characters that Marcel read about in his bedroom at Combray while waiting for his mother's kiss. With such a noble and romantic pedigree, Charlus's strange behavior can be excused as just one more of those things that make the aristocracy different.

Another thing that makes the aristocracy different is their habit of inbreeding. Charlus is not only first cousin to the Duchesse de Guermantes, he is also brother to her husband. The fathers of the duke and duchess were brothers from the Guermantes family, and their mothers were also sisters from the de Bouillon

family. The third sister, Mme de Villeparisis, born Mlle de Bouillon, was thus aunt to both the duchess and her husband the duke. (See part 2 for a family tree of the Guermantes relationships.)



Bloch

Marcel's childhood friend Bloch, who unexpectedly appears and disappears throughout the novel, arrives in Balbec with his sisters and his parents. Bloch invites Marcel and Saint-Loup to dinner with his Jewish family, where Proust's description of their vulgarity and ignorance has led some to accuse him of being anti-Semitic. At one point during the conversation, after rudely making fun of Saint-Loup's uncle Charlus, Bloch describes how he recently had sex with Mme Swann on a train:

“... three times running, and in the most rarefied manner, between Paris and the Point-du-Jour. I'm bound to see her again some night.”
(1:835)

Saint-Loup himself spends a lot of time worrying about his mistress, an actress in Paris. He telegraphs her daily and confides to Marcel how much he loves and worships her, but fears that she does not love him back. Apparently his friends and family all oppose the relationship, but the actress has convinced Saint-Loup that it's because they are jealous and want to have sex with her themselves.

Things come to a head when Robert persuades his aunt, the Duchesse de Guermantes, to let his mistress give a recital before a large party at her house one evening:

... to recite some fragments of a symbolist play in which she had once

appeared in an avant-garde theatre, and for which she had brought him to share the admiration that she herself professed.

But when she appeared in the room, with a large lily in her hand, and wearing a costume ... which she had persuaded Saint-Loup was an absolute “vision of beauty,” her entrance had been greeted, in that assemblage of clubmen and duchesses, with smiles which the monotonous tone of her sing-song, the oddity of certain words and their frequent repetition, had changed into fits of giggles, stifled at first but presently so uncontrollable that the wretched reciter had been unable to go on. Next day Saint-Loup’s aunt had been universally censured for having allowed so grotesque an actress to appear in her drawing room.

As for the actress, she left the house with Saint-Loup exclaiming: “What do you mean by letting me in for all those old hens, those uneducated bitches, those dirty corner-boys? I don’t mind telling you, there wasn’t a man in the room who hadn’t leered at me or tried to paw me, and it was because I wouldn’t look at them that they were out to get their revenge.” (1:841–42)

Meantime Marcel becomes annoyed with his grandmother, who had most unexpectedly agreed to have her photograph taken by Saint-Loup. He is annoyed because his grandmother represents the highest moral and ethical standards, and yet she is behaving like a young girl, worrying which dress and which bonnet to wear for the photograph. This demonstration of “vanity” by his grandmother is the only time that Marcel is ever critical, and during this period he makes a point of being very unpleasant to her. It is in a much later volume that Marcel learns that his grandmother had just been told that she was soon to die and had decided on the photograph as a way to leave him a keepsake. Far from being an expression of vanity, the photograph was yet another example of his grandmother’s selfless devotion to him. This is a typical Proustian device, to describe in great detail some extraordinarily petty incident of day-to-day life and then to move on. The significance of the event does not become clear till much later, but when it does, the effect is much more powerful and “real.”

The story takes a new direction when Saint-Loup has to spend more time with his regiment in the nearby garrison town of Doncières. The two friends spend their evenings eating and drinking in the neighborhood town of Rivebelle where they meet the famous painter Elstir and are invited to visit his studio. After years of empty socializing in the salon of Mme Verdurin, Elstir had retired

to the Normandy coast to concentrate on his painting. His works are now eagerly sought after by wealthy Parisian collectors such as Swann and the Guermantes.

While looking through some old stacked canvases in a corner of Elstir's studio, Marcel finds a watercolor of a provocative young woman in a bowler hat painted when Elstir was a much younger man. There is a sexually ambivalent eroticism in the painting, "belonging to the world of love-making and playacting," and the painting is inscribed *Miss Sacripant: October, 1872*. Elstir is very vague about the model for the painting and quickly hides it again when he hears his wife approaching the studio. It is not until many years later that Marcel learns the true identity of the model. Following the death of Marcel's uncle Adolphe, Charlie Morel, the son of the uncle's valet, brings Marcel a rather racy collection of photographs and paintings of Adolphe's various lady friends. Morel confirms that Elstir's model for Miss Sacripant was Odette de Crécy, and we are reminded that Elstir was reputed to have been her lover. If Marcel was born in 1871, like Proust, and Gilberte was about the same age as Marcel, then Odette posed for the painting at the height of her affair with Swann. Morel also confirms that Odette was the famous lady in pink whom Uncle Adolphe was entertaining when Marcel paid his unfortunate visit as a young boy.

The Little Band

Left alone during the daytime while Robert returns to his regiment, Marcel becomes aware of a little band of girls who stroll along the seafront, pushing bikes and carrying golf clubs. This "little band" of

... five or six young girls as different in appearance and manner from all the people one was accustomed to see at Balbec as would have been a flock of gulls arriving from God knows where and performing with measured tread upon the sands.... (1:845–46)

He loses his heart to all of them. Without exception they are all beautiful and exude health and athletic vitality; totally self-contained, they live in a world of their own. Marcel becomes fascinated and falls hopelessly in love, indiscriminately, with them all. But he accepts there is no way that he can ever get to know them or become part of their group.

And no doubt the fact that we had, these girls and I, not one habit—as we had not one idea—in common must make it more difficult for me to

make friends with them and to win their regard. But perhaps, also, it was thanks to those differences, to my consciousness that not a single element that I knew or possessed entered into the composition of the nature and actions of these girls, that satiety had been succeeded in me by a thirst—akin to that with which a parched land burns—for a life which my soul, because it had never until now received one drop of it, would absorb all the more greedily, in long draughts, with a more perfect inhibition. (1:852)

Though he is in love with all the girls in the little band, he is particularly captivated by one who seems to be their natural leader, with her “brilliant, laughing eyes and plump, matt cheeks, a black polo cap ... pushing a bicycle.” He later discovers her name is Albertine Simonet.

Albertine is later to become the great love of his life, and his feelings of love for her are always associated with this image of her, carefree and independent, leading her little band of friends along the seafront. Popular, attractive, healthy, and desirable, Albertine strolling in front of the Grand Hotel represents everything that Marcel is not and can never hope to be.

The sense of loneliness and adolescent yearning, the detailed observations of this shadowy band as the features of its individual members slowly emerge, the youthful vitality and beauty of these young women all combine to make this some of Proust’s most evocative and lyrical writing.

Never, among actresses or peasants or convent girls, had I seen anything so beautiful, impregnated with so much that was unknown, so inestimably precious, so apparently inaccessible. (1:855)

The aurora of adolescence with which the faces of these girls still glowed ... shed its light on everything around them and, like the fluid painting of certain Primitives, brought out in relief the most insignificant details of their daily lives against a golden background. Their faces were for the most part blurred with this misty effulgence of a dawn from which their actual features had not yet emerged. One saw only a charming glow of color beneath which what in a few years’ time would be a profile was not discernible.... It comes so soon, the moment when there is nothing left to wait for, when the body is fixed in an immobility which holds no fresh surprises in store, when one loses all hope on seeing—as on a tree in the height of summer one sees leaves already brown—round a face still young hair that is growing thin or turning gray; it is so short, that radiant morning

time, that one comes to like only the very youngest girls, those in whom the flesh, like a precious leaven, is still at work. (1:966)

While visiting Elstir's studio one day, Marcel discovers that the painter is a great friend of the little band of girls, one of whom is Albertine Simonet. He learns she is the niece of Mme Bontemps—whom we have already met at the Swanns' and also at Mme Verdurin's salons. Initially disappointed to learn they are respectable young ladies from good families like his own instead of the romantic dissolutes he had imagined them to be, he quickly becomes infatuated and uses his friendship with Elstir to make their acquaintance.

Having persuaded Elstir to walk with him along the seafront where there was a good chance of meeting the girls, he sees them approaching from a distance and deliberately stands back, pretending to be looking in an antique-shop window while allowing Elstir to move forward and greet them.

I was not sorry to give the appearance of being able to think of something other than these girls, and I was already dimly aware that when Elstir did call me up to introduce me to them I should wear that sort of inquiring expression which betrays not surprise but the wish to look surprised—such bad actors are we all, or such good mind-readers our fellow men—, that I should even go so far as to point a finger to my breast, as who should ask “Are you calling me?” and then run to join him, my head lowered in compliance and docility and my face coldly masking my annoyance at being torn from the study of old pottery in order to be introduced to people whom I had no wish to know. Meanwhile I contemplated the window and waited for the moment when my name, shouted by Elstir, would come to strike me like an expected and innocuous bullet. The certainty of being introduced to these girls had had the effect of making me not only feign indifference to them, but actually feel it. (1:914–15)

Of course, by the time he finally turns his head, it is only to see Elstir waving his farewell to the girls, and by the time Marcel has rejoined him, the girls are gone. Once again, Marcel's extreme self-consciousness has proved his undoing.

Eventually, however, at a party that Elstir organizes, Marcel is finally introduced to Albertine Simonet and through her meets the rest of the little band. Abandoning his friend Saint-Loup and his enthusiasm for the paintings of Elstir,

Marcel spends every waking hour with them. Everything else is forgotten; only the girls remain.

The emotions which a perfectly ordinary girl arouses in us can enable us to bring to the surface of our consciousness some of the innermost parts of our being, more personal, more remote, more quintessential than any that might be evoked by the pleasure we derive from the conversation of a great man, or even from the contemplation of his work.

It is with Andrée, one of the little band and with whom he is sometimes in love, that he experiences the fourth of his “madeleine moments,” an unexpected surge of pleasure.

Suddenly, in the little sunken path, I stopped short, touched to the heart by an exquisite memory of my childhood. I had just recognized, from the fretted and glossy leaves which it thrust out towards me, a hawthorn-bush, flowerless, alas, now that spring was over. Around me floated an atmosphere of far-off Months of Mary, of Sunday afternoons, of beliefs, of errors long since forgotten. I wanted to seize hold of it. (1:983)

All the memories of hawthorn blossoms in the road outside Swann’s estate, where he first saw Gilberte, come flooding back. These moments of sudden and unexpected pleasure recur again and again throughout the novel, like the little phrase of Vinteuil’s sonata, and become a private memory shared by narrator and reader alike.

The Kiss

One night Albertine stays in the Grand Hotel in order to catch an early morning train to visit relatives the following day. After she invites Marcel to visit her bedroom, his fantasies rush ahead of him:

I now had only two or three steps to take along the corridor before coming to that room in which was enshrined the precious substance of that rosy form—that room which, even if there were to be done in it delicious things, would keep that air of changelessness, of being, to a chance visitor who knew nothing of its history, just like any other room, which makes of inanimate things the obstinately mute witnesses, the scrupulous confidants, the inviolable depositaries of our pleasure. Those few steps from the

landing to Albertine's door, those few steps which no one could stop, I took with rapture but with prudence, as though plunged in a new and strange element, as if in going forward I had been gently displacing a liquid stream of happiness, and at the same time with a strange feeling of omnipotence, and of entering at last into an inheritance which had belonged to me from time immemorial. Then suddenly I reflected that I was wrong to be in any doubt; she had told me to come when she was in bed. It was as clear as daylight; I pranced for joy, I nearly knocked over Françoise who was standing in my way, and I ran, with sparkling eyes, towards my beloved's room. I found Albertine in bed. (1:994–95)

Inflamed with lust at the sight of Albertine in bed, her throat bare beneath her nightgown, Marcel attempts to kiss her on the lips and, outraged, she rings the alarm bell. Marcel's love, like his passion, swiftly deflates. It will take two more volumes before it is rekindled. Meanwhile, the season has ended, the visitors have departed, the summer is over, and it is time to return to Paris.

The Guermantes Way

New Home in Paris

The story picks up again when Marcel is in his late teens or early twenties. For the sake of the grandmother's health, the family has moved into a new home in Paris, close to their old home near the Champs-Élysées but with "cleaner air." Françoise, like the narrator, is unhappy with the new surroundings and the move reminds her of the joys she left behind in Combray when Aunt Léonie died.

"At any rate you know what you're about there [Combray], and what time of year it is. It isn't like here [Paris] where you won't find one wretched buttercup flowering at holy Easter any more than you would find at Christmas, and I can't hear so much as the tiniest angelus ring when I lift my old bones out of bed in the morning. Down there, you can hear every hour. It's only a poor old bell, but you say to yourself: 'My brother will be coming in from the fields now,' and you watch the daylight fade, and the bell rings to bless the fruits of the earth, and you have time to take a turn before you light the lamp. But here, it's day-time and it's night-time, and you go to bed, and you can't say any more than the dumb beasts what you've been about." (2:19–20)

The rhythm of bourgeois life in Marcel's new home is delightfully described and the upstairs/downstairs balance of power between masters and servants is sharply observed. While the servants completed their midday meal in the kitchen, the family waited for lunch to be served, and Marcel's mother wondered what could be causing the delay.

And she rang timidly three or four times. Françoise, "her" footman and the butler heard the bell ring, not as a summons to themselves, and with no thought of answering it, but rather as the first sounds of the instruments being tuned when the next part of a concert will soon begin, and one knows there will be only a few minutes more of interval. And so, when the peals were repeated and became more urgent, our servants began to pay attention, and, judging that they had not much time left and that the resumption of work was at hand, at a peal somewhat louder than the rest gave a collective

sigh and went their several ways, the footman slipping downstairs to smoke a cigarette outside the door, Françoise, after a string of reflections on ourselves, such as: “They’ve got the jumps today all-right,” going up to tidy her attic, while the butler, having supplied himself first with note-paper from my bedroom, polished-off the arrears of his private correspondence. (2:22–23)

Proust finds humor in the most ordinary incidents of daily life: Françoise, for example, complains to the footman about having to make breakfast toast for Marcel’s father. She was convinced that he ordered toast just to give himself airs and to annoy her.

“I can tell you frankly,” the young footman assured her, “that I never saw the like.” He said this as if he had seen everything, and as if for him the range of an inexhaustible experience extended over all countries and their customs, among which was nowhere to be found the custom of eating thin slices of toast. (2:22)

The Duchesse de Guermantes

The new apartment is part of the Hôtel de Guermantes, where many members of the Guermantes family live, including the grandmother’s great friend Mme de Villeparisis, which is probably why Marcel’s family had decided to move there. Their apartment overlooks the central yard of the hotel, and both the narrator and Françoise manage to temper their unhappiness about adapting to an unfamiliar environment with curiosity about their new neighbors. In addition to various servants and tradespeople such as Jupien, the tailor who runs a waistcoat shop in the courtyard, there are the comings and goings of the Guermantes family to observe, as well as all their aristocratic visitors.

For all of Marcel’s life, since his nurse used to sing him to sleep with lullabies about the Guermantes family, he has associated their name with medieval fairy stories and the stained-glass windows of the church at Combray: “And yet the fairy must perish if we come in contact with the real person to whom her name corresponds.” Living in such close proximity to the duchess changes the way that Marcel thinks about her. Both Marcel and Françoise become obsessed with the life of the Guermantes.

In the house in which we had now come to live, the great lady at the end of the courtyard was a Duchess, elegant and still young. She was, in fact, Mme de Guermantes and, thanks to Françoise, I soon came to know all about her household. (2:10)

Through servants' gossip, assiduously collected and repeated by Françoise, Marcel learns about the exalted social life of the duke and duchess: their visits to the opera and to the houses of the leading members of the aristocracy and European royalty. Through a friend of his father, Marcel learns that the Duchesse de Guermantes "has the highest position in the Faubourg Saint-Germain; hers is the leading house in the Faubourg Saint-Germain." In addition to the servants' gossip and talk among his parents' friends, Marcel follows the social activities of the duchess by observing her in her carriage, following her in the street, and reading about her in the newspaper. She has the remote, celebratory allure of a young Princess Margaret or Jacqueline Onassis in more recent times.

The Faubourg Saint-Germain was that part of Paris on the left bank—now the 7th arrondissement—where the aristocracy had built their town houses and palaces in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Consequently, the Faubourg Saint-Germain had become a term used to describe the upper level of Parisian society, even though, as in the case of the Guermantes, many of them now lived in the Faubourg Saint-Honoré on the right bank of the river—now the 8th arrondissement. (See "Marcel Proust's Paris" in part 3.)

After worshipping her as a distant idyll of medieval romance, Marcel begins to see the duchess as an equally remote symbol of modern aristocracy and the Faubourg Saint-Germain. She remains remote even though her home is so close that he can hear the carpets being beaten in the morning and can see that her doormat is threadbare and "in a shocking state." However, that doormat is like the equator and marks an impossible line that he can never cross. Her home could be as far away as Africa for all his chance of going there. Marcel develops a fascination with the duchess, even more powerful and obsessive than he had felt before, for Gilberte or Mme Swann. He dreams of becoming a part of her world.

Unlike the duchess, her husband is very loud and visible, and he treats Paris as though it were his country estate. He shaves at the open window in his nightshirt, bellows at everybody, and races his horses through the narrow streets of the Faubourg Saint-Honoré where they live. Marcel's father considers him a distasteful lout. But while the duke's large and overwhelming presence cannot be

avoided, his wife retains an elusive mystery.

A Night at the Opera

Visiting the opera one evening to see Berma, once more playing the role of Phèdre, Marcel finds himself with a clear view of the Princesse de Guermantes' box. The princess is a cousin of the duchess and is commonly agreed to be not only the most beautiful woman in society but also the most socially exalted. Marcel is captivated by all the beautiful people in her box and is delighted when the Duchesse de Guermantes makes a fashionably late entrance to join her cousin and her guests. The princess and the duchess in their splendid costumes prove more enthralling to the narrator than the drama being enacted upon the stage, and he observes every movement and every exchange as though he were watching the gods and goddesses on Mount Olympus. Listening to the comments of his fellow guests in the stalls as they observe the aristocracy in their boxes, Marcel realizes that snobbery is not confined to the upper classes but is pervasive throughout society.

What is already a magical evening becomes a night to remember when the duchess recognizes him:

... the Duchess had indeed seen me once with her husband, but could surely have kept no memory of that, and I was not distressed that she should find herself, owing to the position that she occupied in the box, gazing down upon the nameless, collective madrepores of the audience in the stalls, for I was happily aware that my being was dissolved in their midst, when, at the moment in which, by virtue of the laws of refraction, the blurred shape of the protozoon devoid of any individual existence which was myself must have come to be reflected in the impassive current of those two blue eyes, I saw a ray illumine them: the Duchess, goddess turned woman, and appearing in that moment a thousand times more lovely, raised towards me the white-gloved hand which had been resting on the balustrade of the box and waved it in token of friendship, my gaze was caught in the spontaneous incandescence of the flashing eyes of the Princess, who had unwittingly set them ablaze merely by turning her head to see who it might be that her cousin was thus greeting, and the latter, who had recognized me, showered upon me the sparkling and celestial torrent of her smile. (2:54–55)

Hopelessly smitten, Marcel becomes, perhaps, history's first celebrity stalker, and he follows the duchess relentlessly on her daily excursions. Once he has learned the pattern of her walks, he leaves at an earlier hour so that he will "accidentally" encounter her going in the opposite direction. Swann, of course, had done the same thing years before when pursuing Odette, and Marcel had already played this role with his earlier love objects, but never to such an extent as with the Duchesse de Guermantes. His obsessive stalking was unfavorably commented on by the servants, and he was criticized by both Françoise and his mother. But nothing would diminish his desire to become recognized and accepted by the duchess. Sadly, her radiant smile was never repeated and her looks of benign indifference were gradually replaced by glares of annoyance at his daily "accidents." Finally, even Marcel understood that far from helping his cause, his compulsive behavior was annoying the duchess, and so he decided upon a new course of action.

Doncières

Taking up Robert de Saint-Loup's invitation to pay a visit, Marcel leaves Paris to join his friend at his garrison in Doncières. Robert, of course, is the nephew of the duchess, and Marcel hopes to persuade him to put in a good word and arrange an introduction to his aunt. Robert is overjoyed to see him and, ever solicitous, introduces him to all his friends and attends to all his needs. For the first night in Doncières, Marcel stays in Robert's room where he sees a photograph of the duchess. Despite all his entreaties, Robert will not give him the photograph of his aunt but does promise him to make an introduction the next time he is in Paris. The problem is that Saint-Loup's girlfriend troubles have not improved, and his mistress seldom lets him visit Paris. Robert worships her, and it is obvious that she must be a truly special person. She is not only an actress but also an intellectual with a circle of very talented avant-garde friends who regard Robert as a philistine unworthy of her affections. Marcel has still never met her but is very much in awe of someone who can enjoy such a profound hold over his friend.

Spending his time with Saint-Loup's fellow officers, Marcel finds the visit to Doncières filled with discussions of military matters and the threat of war. This is also the first time that the Dreyfus Affair is seriously introduced in the novel. The Dreyfus Affair was perceived as a conflict between the military nobility and honor of France on the one hand and as a Jewish Socialist plot to undermine the moral authority of the state on the other. By supporting Dreyfus, Robert de

Saint-Loup was defying not only his own aristocratic background but also the military caste of which he was a member. It was only because he was so highly respected by his men and his fellow officers that he was somehow able to maintain such an unpopular political balancing act. The Dreyfus Affair is one of the underlying themes of the novel, and eventually all the characters reveal themselves as being either Dreyfusards or anti-Dreyfusards with much the same sort of passion that modern Americans are either pro-choice or pro-life.

Another important theme of the novel is also introduced at Doncières, and that is the role of the nobility. Robert de Saint-Loup is a member of the *ancien régime*, the old aristocracy that had been overthrown a hundred years previously during the French Revolution. Despite the grandeur of their titles and their noble history, Robert and his Guermantes relatives have no meaningful role to play in modern society. Earlier in the book, at the opera, one of Marcel's neighbors had commented on the absurdity of the title "Princesse de Guermantes" in a modern republic. Robert himself, charming and likable though he is, is no more than an idle playboy and, like all the Guermantes, has no real job and no responsibilities.

However, Robert's commanding officer the Prince de Borodino, is part of the new aristocracy created by Napoleon, and there is even the suggestion that he might have the blood of both Napoleon I and III in his veins.

Belonging on the other hand, to a nobility whose titles still preserved their meaning, possessed as they still were of the rich emoluments given in reward for glorious services and bringing to mind the record of high offices in which one is in command of numberless men and must know how to deal with men, the Prince de Borodino—not perhaps very distinctly or in the personal awareness of his conscious mind, but at any rate in his body, which revealed it by its attitudes and manners—regarded his rank as a prerogative that was still effective; those same commoners whom Saint-Loup would have slapped on the shoulder and taken by the arm he addressed with a majestic affability, in which a reserve instinct with grandeur tempered the smiling good-fellowship that came naturally to him, in a tone marked at once by a genuine kindness and a stiffness deliberately assumed. This was due, no doubt, to his being not so far removed from the chancelleries and the Court itself, at which his father had held the highest posts, and where the manners of Saint-Loup, his elbow on the table and his foot in his hand, would not have been well received; but principally it was due to the fact that he was less contemptuous of the middle class since it was the great reservoir from which the first Emperor had chosen his

marshals and his nobles. (2:131–32)

Despite the glamour and romance of their names, and the traditions of good manners and culture that they represented, the old aristocracy of the Guermantes and the Faubourg Saint-Germain were already irrelevant and merely killing time. Proust himself was from the middle class and though they lacked the grace and romance of the aristocracy, he knew their time had come. As a novel, *The Guermantes Way* reveals the essential hollowness and irrelevance of the old aristocracy and the ascendancy of the new bourgeoisie.

Rachel when from the Lord

Called back to Paris because of his grandmother's declining health, Marcel is soon rejoined by Robert, who invites him to finally meet his mistress at her home in the western suburbs of the city. The plan is to collect her at her house and then escort her by train to Paris where she is scheduled to perform. While Robert goes into the house to get her, Marcel stays in the street admiring the trees and flowers of the suburban gardens.

Suddenly Saint-Loup appeared, accompanied by his mistress, and then, in this woman who was for him the epitome of love, of all the sweet things of life, whose personality, mysteriously enshrined as in a tabernacle, was the object that occupied incessantly his toiling imagination, whom he felt that he would never really know, as to whom he asked himself what could be her secret self, behind the veil of eyes and flesh—in this woman I recognized instantaneously “Rachel when from the Lord,” she who, but a few years since ... used to say to the procuress: “Tomorrow evening, then, if you want me for someone, you'll send round for me, won't you?”

And when they had “come round” for her, and she found herself alone in the room with the “someone,” she knew so well what was required of her that after locking the door, as a womanly precaution or a ritual gesture, she would quickly remove all her clothes, as one does before the doctor who is going to examine one, and did not pause in the process unless the “someone,” not caring for nudity, told her that she might keep on her shift, as specialists do sometimes, who, having an extremely fine ear and being afraid of their patient's catching a chill, are satisfied with listening to his breathing and the beating of his heart through his shirt. (2:160)

Robert's mistress was one of the whores who had so misused his poor aunt's sofa in the Paris brothel a few years earlier. Marcel is struck by the irony of the situation.

I saw that what had appeared to me to be not worth twenty francs when it had been offered to me for twenty francs in a brothel [was for Saint-Loup] ... worth more than a million, more than family affection, more than all the most coveted positions in life.... No doubt it was the same thin and narrow face that we saw, Robert and I. But we had arrived at it by two opposite ways which would never converge, and we would never both see it from the same side. That face, with its looks, its smiles, the movements of its mouth, I had known from the outside as being that of a woman of the sort who for twenty francs would do anything that I asked.... But what to me had in a sense been offered at the start, that consenting face, had been for Robert an ultimate goal towards which he had made his way through endless hopes and doubts, suspicions and dreams. Yes, he had given more than a million francs in order to have, in order that others should not have, what had been offered to me, as to all and sundry, for twenty. (2:161–62)

Rachel does not recognize Marcel and the three of them return to Paris and go for lunch in a restaurant run by Aimé, the headwaiter from Balbec.

She was so clumsy with her hands when eating that one felt she must appear extremely awkward on the stage. She recovered her dexterity only when making love, with that touching prescience of women who love the male so intensely that they immediately guess what will give the most pleasure to that body which is yet so different from their own. (2:170)

By flirting with the headwaiter Aimé at lunch and with one of the actors later at the theater, Rachel provokes Robert's jealousy and the day is spent in passionate quarrels and "makeup" sex. Indeed, one of the quarrels is so violent that Robert storms out of the restaurant and takes a private room, leaving Rachel and Marcel to finish their meal alone.

Party at Mme de Villeparisis's

Robert and Marcel arrange to meet at the afternoon party being given by his aunt, Mme de Villeparisis. This party is one of the major set pieces in the novel

and Proust devotes more than a hundred pages to describing the complex interactions of the various characters. Although she is descended from the Tour d'Auvergne dynasty, one of the top families in France, Mme Villeparisis's salon is not regarded as fashionable by the Faubourg Saint-Germain because of various indiscretions, probably sexual, that she had committed in her past. Apart from family members who are obliged to attend, the guests are mainly

third-rate people, drawn from the middle classes or from a nobility either provincial or tainted in some way, whose presence there has long since driven away all such smart and snobbish folk as are not obliged to come to the house by ties of blood or the claims of a friendship too old to be ignored. (2:187)

Mme de Villeparisis was one of a group of three ladies in Paris of the noblest birth who had nonetheless somehow disgraced themselves in their youth and were now excluded from the Faubourg Saint-Germain and forced to rely on each other, nobodies, or family to fill their salons.

Certain very old men, and young women who had heard it from those men, told me that if these ladies were no longer received in society it was because of the extraordinary dissoluteness of their conduct, which, when I objected that dissolute conduct was not necessarily a barrier to social success, was represented to me as having gone far beyond anything to be met with today.... In a word, these three Parcae with their white or blue or pink hair had been the ruin of an incalculable number of gentlemen. (2:201)

The lack of exclusivity is soon shown by the presence of Bloch, now a successful playwright, whom Mme de Villeparisis hopes will persuade some of his actress friends to perform one of his pieces at her next soiree for a reasonable fee. In addition to smashing a vase, Bloch's vulgarity and bad manners at the party are so appalling that Mme de Villeparisis finally pretends to be asleep rather than speak to him when he is leaving. Another surprising visitor is Legrandin, whose sickening obsequiousness is as embarrassing at the party as it was years earlier outside the church in Combray.

Top Hats

One of the amusing subthemes of the party at Mme de Villeparisis's

concerns the subject of gentlemen's top hats. Bloch rudely introduces the subject when he makes his usual graceless entry to the drawing room with the words "Take care of my top hat." Mme Villeparisis immediately expands on the theme when she tells the historian of the Fronde and Bloch about her father's aristocratic visitors. She criticizes a certain M. Molé for coming downstairs to dinner in his own house with his top hat in his hands: "Ah! How evocative that is of what must have been a pretty perniciously philistine epoch, for it was no doubt a universal habit to carry one's hat in one's hand in one's own house," observed Bloch.

Mme Villeparisis swiftly corrects him. "Oh dear, no.... It was simply a habit of M. Molé's. I never saw my father carry his hat in the house, except of course when the King came, because the King being at home wherever he is, the master of the house is then only a visitor in his own drawing room." (2:197)

The subject of hats reappears a few moments later with the arrival of the Duc de Châtellerauld and the Baron de Guermantes.

Following a custom which was the fashion at that time, they laid their top hats on the floor beside them. The historian of the Fronde assumed they must be embarrassed, like peasants coming into the mayor's office and not knowing what to do with their hats....

"No, no," he said, "don't leave them on the floor, they'll be trodden on."...

"No, it's a new fashion with these young men to put their hats on the floor," Mme de Villeparisis explained. "I'm like you, I can never get used to it. Still, it's better than my nephew Robert, who always leaves his in the hall. I tell him, when I see him come in like that, that he looks just like a clockmaker, and I ask him if he's come to wind the clocks."

"You were speaking just now, Madame la Marquise, of M. Molé's hat; we shall soon be able, like Aristotle, to compile a chapter on hats," said the historian of the Fronde, somewhat reassured by Mme de Villeparisis' intervention, but in so faint a voice that no one heard him except me. (2:218)

This remark about "a chapter on hats," made by the historian but heard by no one "except me," is a typical Proustian aside—a humorous way of creating a private bond between author and reader.

Mme de Villeparisis's longtime lover, M. de Norpois, was a late arrival at the same party. Being rather stuffy and by nature devious, he did not want it known that he had spent the day in Mme de Villeparisis's private quarters: "for M. de Norpois, to give the impression he had just come in from the street and had not yet seen his hostess, had picked-up the first hat he found in the vestibule, one which I thought I recognized, and came forward to kiss Mme de Villeparisis' hand."

It is only when he is shaking hands with M. de Norpois himself that Marcel finally recognizes the hat: "I took the opportunity to relieve him politely of the hat which he had felt obliged to bring ceremonially into the room, for I saw that it was my own which he had picked-up at random."

Later during the party, while talking with Mme Swann, "I was keeping an eye on my hat among all those that littered the carpet, and I wondered with a vague curiosity to whom could belong one that was not the Duc de Guermantes' and yet in the lining of which a capital 'G' was surmounted by a ducal coronet. I knew who everyone in the room was and could not think of anyone whose hat this could possibly be."

Marcel knew that it was not the duke's hat because he had specifically observed the Duc de Guermantes place his hat beside him on the carpet when he first entered the room.

Later on Marcel sees Baron de Charlus pick up the mysterious hat with the capital "G" and a ducal coronet.

"You'd better take care, Monsieur," I warned him. "You have picked-up the wrong hat by mistake."

"Do you want to prevent me from taking my own hat?"

I assumed a similar mishap having recently occurred to myself, that, someone else having taken his hat, he had seized upon one at random so as not to go home bareheaded and that I had placed him in a difficulty by exposing his stratagem. So I did not pursue the matter. (2:287)

Marcel would appear to be still ignorant of the precise details of Charlus's family background. Knowing Charlus was first cousin to the duchess, Marcel did not yet realize he was also brother to her husband, the Duc de Guermantes. The "Guermantes" hat was indeed his. However, the whole business of the hats at this afternoon party merely prepares us for a splendidly hilarious incident

involving Charlus's top hat later in the volume, following the dinner party at the Duchesse de Guermantes'.

Dreyfus Affair

Following a lot of catty gossip concerning Robert de Saint-Loup's mistress, Rachel, and her responsibility for making him betray his social loyalties by becoming a Dreyfusard, among other crimes, Robert arrives at the party, much to the delight of his mother, the Marquise de Marsantes. True to his word, Robert introduces Marcel to his aunt, the Duchesse de Guermantes, and the magical moment, so long anticipated, but so sudden and unexpected, falls comically flat. Robert explains that Marcel has long been one of her admirers.

“Oh, but that's very nice of him,” said Mme de Guermantes in a deliberately casual tone, as if I had brought her her coat. “I'm most flattered.”

“Look, I must go and talk with my mother for a minute; take my chair,” said Saint-Loup, thus forcing me to sit down next to his aunt.

We were both silent.

“I see you sometimes in the morning,” she said, as though she were giving me a piece of news and as though I for my part never saw her. “It's so good for one, a walk.” (2: 263)

The anticlimax of this long-awaited meeting is exquisite in its banality.

A major subtheme of the party is a conversation in which Bloch tries to clarify Norpois' opinion on the Dreyfus Affair. The more Bloch tries to pin him down, the more the devious diplomat's long and cliché-riddled answers leave him confused, while Norpois continues to straddle the fence. The Dreyfus Affair is much discussed at the party, not least because of the effect it is having on society. People who used to be unacceptable are now being received in the best houses because of their professed anti-Dreyfus sympathies. As the duchess observes, society is no longer exclusive: “Nowadays one finds all the people one has spent one's life trying to avoid, on the pretext that they're against Dreyfus, and others of whom you have no idea who they can be.” As though to prove the point, Mme Swann, now a prominent and ardent anti-Dreyfusard, has been included on the guest list, but when she arrives, the duchess decides to leave so

that she will not be obliged to meet her. Robert de Saint-Loup puts it more crudely:

“I don’t want my mother to introduce me to Mme Swann,” Saint-Loup said to me. “She’s an ex-whore. Her husband’s a Jew, and she comes here to pose as a Nationalist” [anti-Dreyfusard]. (2:272)

A Walk on the Wild Side with Charlus

When it is time to leave, Baron de Charlus, who was also at the party, generously offers to walk Marcel home. When she hears this news, Mme de Villeparisis mysteriously becomes very anxious and tries to persuade Marcel to leave at once, without Charlus: “You’d much better go now quickly while his back is turned.” But Charlus chases after him and, slipping his arm affectionately through Marcel’s as they walk, conducts a bizarre conversation in which he offers to guide Marcel into society and to act as his mentor while at the same time accusing him of being unworthy of the honor. He advises Marcel to be careful in his selection of men friends, most of whom are “little bounders.”

“My nephew Saint-Loup, now, he might be a suitable companion for you at a pinch. As far as your future is concerned, he can be of no possible use to you, but for that I will suffice.... At least he’s a man, not one of those effeminate creatures one sees so many of nowadays, who look like little renters and at any moment may bring their innocent victims to the gallows.” (2:305)

Charlus also asks many questions about Marcel’s friend Bloch, “if he was young, good looking and so forth,” while at the same time spewing a stream of anti-Semitic obscenities against the Bloch family. Increasingly perplexed by his new friend, Marcel wonders how it is possible that goodness and wickedness can coexist in the same heart.

After rejecting several possible cabs, Charlus finally selects one that is zigzagging along the street because the driver, a young man, is sprawled drunkenly among the cushions. When the driver asks, “Which way are you going?” Charlus replies, “Yours,” jumps in the cab, takes the reins, and sets off at a brisk trot into the night.

Grandmother’s Death

Following the giddy success of his first venture into society, Marcel is brought back to earth by the ill health of his beloved grandmother. The fifty or so pages describing his grandmother's slow death are as graphic as they are painful. Nothing could better reveal the depths of sorrow that Proust still felt concerning his own mother's death.

The anguish with which Marcel describes the slow progress of her illness adds a new dimension to the comments he had made years earlier. As a young boy he was so obsessed about his games with Gilberte in the Champs-Élysées, he worried that if his grandmother should be knocked down in the street and killed, the obligatory period of mourning would interrupt his days of playing in the park. At that time he could imagine nothing worse than an interruption to his games with Gilberte.

Ironically, it is in the Champs-Élysées, walking through the very park in which he used to play with Gilberte, that his grandmother, after concealing her illness from him for so many years, has her final and ultimately fatal stroke: "She smiled at me sorrowfully and gripped my hand. She had realized that there was no need to hide from me what I had at once guessed, that she had had a slight stroke."

The pathos of her suffering is balanced against Marcel's banal exchange with the lavatory attendant while his grandmother is inside being sick. Remembering him from his days as a youngster with Françoise (who thought her very posh, a "Marquise"), she offers Marcel the use of a free toilet stall, which he declines.

"No? You're sure you won't?" she persisted, smiling. "Well, just as you please. You're welcome to it, but of course, not having to pay for a thing won't make you want to do it if you've got nothing to do."

At this moment a shabbily dressed woman hurried into the place who seemed to be feeling precisely the want in question. But she did not belong to the "Marquise's" world, for the latter, with the ferocity of a snob, said to her curtly:

"I've nothing vacant, Madame."

"Will they be long?" asked the poor lady, flushed beneath the yellow flowers in her hat.

"Well, ma'am, if you want my advice you'd better try somewhere else. You see, there's still these two gentlemen waiting, and I've only one closet;

the others are out of order.”

“Looked like a bad payer to me,” she explained when the other had gone. “That’s not the sort we want here, either; they’re not clean, don’t treat the place with respect. It’d be me who’d have to spend the next hour cleaning up after her ladyship. I’m not sorry to lose her couple of sous.” (2: 321–22)

However tragic the circumstances, however low on the social scale, snobbery and cruelty always have a major role to play.

Leaving his grandmother to rest on a bench in the Champs-Élysées, Marcel looks for a cab and runs into a distinguished doctor who is also a family friend. The doctor is more concerned that he will be late for a dinner date with the minister of commerce and that his suit will not be prepared properly to display his decorations than he is with the health of Marcel’s grandmother. Much against his will, he agrees to examine her, but when Marcel brings his grandmother to his office, the doctor’s professional habit takes over and he treats her with great charm and cheerfulness. However, while his grandmother is in another room getting dressed, the doctor tells Marcel the bad news.

“Your grandmother is doomed,” he said to me. “It is a stroke brought on by uremia. In itself, uremia is not necessarily fatal, but this case seems to me to be hopeless” ... “Excuse me,” he broke off as a maid came into the room with his tail-coat over her arm. “As I told you, I’m dining with the Minister of Commerce, and I have a call to pay first. Ah! Life is not all a bed of roses, as one is apt to think at your age.” (2:328)

Later, outside the doctor’s office, while waiting for the lift to take Marcel and his grandmother to the ground floor,

... my grandmother and I heard a great shout of rage. The maid had forgotten to cut and hem the buttonhole for the decorations. This would take another ten minutes. The Professor continued to storm while I stood on the landing gazing at my grandmother who was doomed. Each of us is indeed alone. We set off homewards. (2: 328)

On the way home, Marcel meanly chastises the barely conscious old lady for not acknowledging Legrandin, who had waved to them when their open cab passed him in the street. This is just the first in a long list of superficial distractions with which the living unconsciously avoid the reality of death. The

sickness, deterioration, and final death of the grandmother is one of the most drawn-out and painful episodes in the novel. Marcel Proust, the author, was not only the son of a doctor but he also had access to the agonized notes his mother had made during the death of her own mother, Adèle Weil, upon whom the character of the grandmother is partly based. The fictional grandmother's protracted kidney failure and death from uremia, like Proust's own mother, is thus described with unblinking candor and unsparing detail.

Against a background of cynical observations of the living faced with the dying, we watch this beloved and sensitive woman degenerate into a caricature of her previous self.

We went into the sickroom. Bent in a semi-circle on the bed, a creature other than my grandmother, a sort of beast that had put on her hair and crouched among her bedclothes, lay panting, groaning, making the blankets heave with its convulsions. The eyelids were closed, and it was because they did not shut properly rather than because they opened that they disclosed a chink of eyeball, blurred, rheumy, reflecting the dimness of an organic vision and of a hidden, internal pain. All this agitation was not addressed to us, whom she neither saw nor knew. But if it was only a beast that was stirring there, where was my grandmother? Yes, I could recognize the shape of her nose, which bore no relation now to the rest of her face, but to the corner of which a beauty spot still adhered, and the hand that kept thrusting the blankets aside with a gesture which formerly would have meant that those blankets were oppressing her, but now meant nothing. (2:348)

Various characters arrive during this period in order to console the family. Bergotte visits almost daily and identifies with the grandmother as he contemplates his own mortality. Saint-Loup visits briefly from an ingrained sense of noblesse oblige but is angry with Marcel, whom he suspects of cheating on him with Rachel. Meanwhile, the Duc de Guermantes blunders noisily through the death scene quite oblivious to the family's suffering, believing the honor of his visit is more important than the grandmother's death. Delighted to find Saint-Loup in the hallway of the house, the duke loudly declares it to be his lucky day. M. de Norpois lets it be known that he has graciously given up a most important committee meeting to visit the house, and the grandmother's two crazy sisters are unable to leave Combray for the funeral because of a Beethoven recital they did not wish to miss. Françoise meanwhile prepares a dress for the

funeral because, like all women when confronted with major issues of life and death, she worried that she would have nothing to wear. The events surrounding the grandmother's death provoke some of Proust's most savage observations of human behavior. But eventually she dies with a smile, and in her final moments the beauty of her youth is restored.

On that funeral couch, death, like a sculptor of the Middle Ages, had laid her down in the form of a young girl. (2:357)

New Loves

Having finally broken with Rachel and recovered from his jealousy, Robert de Saint-Loup renews his friendship with Marcel and writes to him from Morocco, where his regiment is now stationed. Robert explains that he had met with Mlle (now Mme) de Stermaria, who had been recently married and divorced, and he suggests that Marcel might want to make contact with her. Marcel is immediately plunged into a new sexual frenzy and recalls the promise of smoldering female sensuality that Mme Stermaria had excited in him when she ignored him in Balbec. Reading between the lines of Robert's letter, Marcel decides she must have insatiable tastes and starts planning a passionate affair. His feelings about Mme Stermaria and his desire to "possess" her foreshadow his tortured and complex relationship with Albertine in later volumes, in which we learn that to "posses" her has more of an ownership meaning than a sexual one.

What I wanted was to possess Mme de Stermaria: for several days my desires had been actively and incessantly preparing my imagination for this pleasure, and this pleasure alone; any other pleasure (pleasure with another woman) would not have been ready, pleasure being but the realization of a prior craving which is not always the same but changes according to the endless variations of one's fancies, the accidents of one's memory, the state of one's sexual disposition, the order of availability of one's desires, the most recently assuaged of which lie dormant until the disappointment of their fulfillment has been to some extent forgotten.... To take possession of Mme de Stermaria on the island in the Bois de Boulogne where I had asked her to dine with me: this was the pleasure that I pictured to myself all the time. It would naturally have been destroyed if I had dined on that island without Mme de Stermaria; but perhaps as greatly diminished had I dined,

even with her, somewhere else. (2:398)

It is during this same period that Albertine pays him a visit. Once more he finds himself physically attracted to her and this time she allows him to kiss her. In fact, again displaying her uncanny sense of timing, Françoise enters his bedroom and finds them rolling around together on the sheets.

No longer in love with the Duchesse de Guermantes and despite the tantalizing possibilities offered by Albertine, Marcel is single-minded in his focus on the seduction of Mme de Stermaria. By letter he invites her to dinner on an island in the Bois de Boulogne and she accepts.

Because he had been rolling around in bed with Albertine, he arrives late at a reception given by Mme de Villeparisis and enters when most of the other guests are leaving. This time the Duchesse de Guermantes is very friendly and sits down beside him while Mme de Villeparisis invites him to join the duchess and herself at dinner the following Wednesday. However, this is the evening of the planned seduction in the Bois de Boulogne and so Marcel declines.

After months of obsessively striving to be invited into the world of the Faubourg Saint-Germain, Marcel is now turning down much sought-after social invitations. In the Faubourg Saint-Germain, being hard to get hold of is no impediment to social success.

“Why do you never come to see me?” inquired Mme de Guermantes when Mme de Villeparisis had left us.... “It’s such a bore never to see each other except in other people’s houses. Since you won’t dine with me at my aunt’s, why not come and dine at my house?” ...

“You wouldn’t be free on Friday, now, for a small dinner party? It would be so nice. There’ll be the Princess de Parme, who’s charming, not that I’d ask you to meet anyone who wasn’t agreeable.” (2:389-90)

Meantime Marcel is more preoccupied with his assignation with Mme de Stermaria and he takes Albertine with him to the restaurant on the island to order the food and to arrange a private room. As he looks at Albertine’s ripening body,

I told myself that had there been any risk of Saint-Loup’s being mistaken, or of my having misunderstood his letter, so that my dinner with Mme de Stermaria might lead to no satisfactory result, I should have made an appointment for later the same evening with Albertine, in order to forget,

during an hour of purely sensual pleasure, holding in my arms a body of which my curiosity had once computed, weighed-up all the possible charms in which it now abounded, the emotions and perhaps the regrets of this burgeoning love for Mme de Stermaria. (2:402)

After such a cynical expression of his “romantic feelings,” our hero gets no more than he deserves. On the day of the planned dinner, he receives a letter from Mme de Stermaria expressing her regrets. Although she had been so looking forward to it, she will be unable to attend the dinner in the Bois.

Dinner with the Duchess

The soiree at Mme de Villeparisis’s was the major set piece of this volume because it involved the interplay of so many different characters. The dinner party at the duchess’s is even longer and more significant because Marcel is finally able to cross the shockingly threadbare doormat of their front door and enter the mysterious world of the Guermantes.

It was only then that I perceived that, having until this evening... been accustomed in my mother’s drawing room, in Combray and in Paris, to the patronizing or defensive attitudes of prim bourgeois ladies who treated me as a child, I was now witnessing a change of surroundings comparable to that which introduces Parsifal suddenly into the midst of the flower-maidens. Those who surrounded me now, their necks and shoulders entirely bare (the naked flesh appearing on either side of a sinuous spray of mimosa or the petals of a full-blown rose), accompanied their salutations with long, caressing glances, as though shyness alone restrained them from kissing me. Many of them were nevertheless highly respectable from the moral standpoint; many, not all, for the more virtuous did not feel the same revulsion as my mother would have done for those of easier virtue. The vagaries of conduct, denied by saintlier friends in the face of the evidence, seemed in the Guermantes world to matter far less than the social relations one had been able to maintain. One pretended not to know that the body of a hostess was at the disposal of all comers, provided that her visiting list showed no gaps. (2:439)

Marcel makes an immediate faux pas by asking to look at the Elstir paintings and then inadvertently making everybody wait for dinner while he examined

them. In the world of the Guermantes, paintings are for owning, not for looking at.

As soon as Marcel arrives in the main room, the duke immediately propels him to meet the guest of honor, who bestows an especially warm greeting as though she were an old and close friend, delighted to see him again. She is introduced as the Princesse de Parme and she tells him how sorry she is that her son, Albert, is not also present to meet him. Racking his memory to recall an old school friend called Albert, Marcel cannot understand why the princess should be so charming to and delighted to see somebody she has never met before and who can be of so little consequence. Gradually, as the evening progresses and he observes the behavior of the old aristocracy, he begins to understand the true nature of their good manners and politeness. It is precisely because he is of so little consequence that he is treated with such warmth and consideration. The Princesse de Parme had been taught from her earliest years to be gracious and kind to those less fortunate than herself.

Her mother... had instilled into her from her earliest childhood the arrogantly humble precepts of an evangelical snobbery; and today every line of the daughter's face, the curve of her shoulders, the movements of her arms, seemed to repeat the lesson: "Remember that if God has caused you to be born on the steps of a throne you ought not to make that a reason for looking down upon those to whom Divine Providence has willed (wherefore His Name be praised) that you should be superior by birth and fortune. On the contrary, you must be kind to the lowly. Your ancestors were Princes of Cleves and Juliers from the year 647; God in His bounty has decreed that you should hold practically all the shares of the Suez Canal and three times as many Royal Dutch as Edmond de Rothschild; your pedigree in a direct line has been established by genealogists from the year 63 of the Christian era; you have as sisters-in-law two empresses. Therefore never seem in your speech to be recalling these great privileges, not that they are precarious (for nothing can alter the antiquity of blood, while the world will always need oil), but because it is unnecessary to point out that you are better born than other people or that your investments are all gilt-edged, since everyone knows these facts already. Be helpful to the needy. Give to all those whom the bounty of heaven has been graciously pleased to put beneath you as much as you can give them without forfeiting your rank, that is to say help in the form of money, even your personal service by their sickbeds, but of course never any invitations to your soirées, which would do them no possible good and, by diminishing your prestige, would reduce

the efficacy of your benevolent activities.” (2:443–44)

Marcel finds many of the guests’ conversations and many of the views expressed at the party to be old-fashioned and, especially in terms of literature and art, to be completely alien to his own modernist taste. Having finally achieved his dream of playing a role upon the glamorous stage of the Faubourg Saint-Germain, disappointment and disillusion, as always, are already stirring uneasily in the wings. But when he thinks about the evening’s conversations later, in the cab after leaving the Guermantes, he has another of those epiphanies, similar to the times he saw the twin spires of Martinville against the setting sun or the avenue of trees near Balbec from Mme de Villeparisis’s carriage. “Like a tipsy man filled with tender feeling for the waiter who has been serving him, I marveled at my good fortune, a good fortune not realized by me, it is true, at the actual moment, in having dined with a person who knew William II so well, and had told stories about him that were—upon my word—really witty.” Just as he had been stimulated to immediately write a couple of pages after seeing the spires of Martinville, so now, in his excitement, he wanted to repeat all the stories he had heard at the duchess’s table and he laughed out loud with sheer pleasure. He especially looked forward to sharing the stories with the Baron de Charlus later that evening.

M. de Charlus at Home

The reason Marcel took a cab instead of walking home across the courtyard was because Robert de Saint-Loup had told him that his uncle Charlus wanted Marcel to visit his house after he had finished dining with the duchess.

Shown into the drawing room by the baron’s footman, Marcel is forced to wait for half an hour before he is finally admitted into Charlus’s presence. Charlus does not smile or speak but lies sprawled among the cushions in a dressing gown while Marcel stands awkwardly. When he finally sits—in the wrong chair—Charlus begins to scream a torrent of furious abuse and accuses Marcel of everything and nothing. Caught by surprise, Marcel apologizes, unsure if he has inadvertently done or said something to insult the baron.

“And who says that I am offended?” he furiously screamed, raising himself into an erect posture on the sofa on which hitherto he had been reclining motionless, while, as the pallid, frothing snakes twisted and stiffened in his face, his voice became alternately shrill and solemn like the

deafening onrush of a storm. (The force with which he habitually spoke, which made strangers turn round in the street, was multiplied a hundredfold, as in a musical *forte* if, instead of being played on the piano, it is played by an orchestra, and changed into a *fortissimo* as well. M. de Charlus roared.) “Do you suppose that it is within your power to offend me? You are evidently not aware to whom you are speaking? Do you imagine that the envenomed spittle of five hundred little gentlemen of your type, heaped one upon another, would succeed in slobbering so much as the tips of my august toes?” (2:579–80)

The insults and the screams gradually build to an explosion of vicious invective until Marcel can stand it no more. Expanding delightfully upon the theme previously introduced at Mme Villeparisis’s party,

I seized the Baron’s new silk hat, flung it to the ground, trampled it, picked it up again, began blindly pulling it to pieces, wrenched off the brim, tore the crown in two, heedless of the continuing vociferations of M. de Charlus, and, crossing the room in order to leave, opened the door. (2:580)

The destruction of the hat has the effect of calming them both and Charlus becomes friendlier. He summoned a footman and “ordered him without a trace of self-consciousness to clear away the remains of the shattered hat, which was replaced by another” (2:581). Later, while walking Marcel to the front door, Charlus shows him some family treasures. “Look, in this cabinet I have all the hats worn by Madame Elizabeth, by the Princesse de Lamballe, and by the Queen.”

The baron still insists, however, that because of Marcel’s mysterious “betrayal,” their relationship is finished and they can no longer be friends. They continue to talk while riding together in the cab and, as usual with Charlus, the conversation ranges all over the place: sometimes angry, sometimes sad, and mostly crazy. At one point he tells Marcel that the Duchesse de Guermantes is nothing socially compared to the Princesse de Guermantes but that there is no possible way to be invited to the princess’s salon unless he, Charlus, first approves.

After taking Marcel’s chin between his fingers, he says,

“Ah! how pleasant it would be to look at the ‘blue light of the moon’ in the Bois with someone like yourself,” he said to me with a sudden and

almost involuntary gentleness, and then, sadly: “For you’re nice, really; you could be nicer than anyone,” he went on, laying his hand in a fatherly way on my shoulder. “Originally, I must confess that I found you quite insignificant.” (2:584)

The Duchess’s Shoes

About two months after this strange encounter with Charlus, Marcel receives an invitation to a reception at the palace of the Prince and Princesse de Guermantes. Unable to understand why he has received such an impossibly prized invitation and fearing it to be a joke, he visits the duke and duchess to ask their opinion. This visit to the duke and duchess constitutes the final scene in *The Guermantes Way*, and brings to a head all the empty frivolity and superficiality that Proust has been suggesting throughout the book. There is an echo of the grandmother’s death as he contrasts the grim reality of the dying with the tawdry distractions of the living.

While visiting the Guermantes, Marcel meets Charles Swann, whom he has not seen for a long time, and is surprised by how aged and ill he is looking. Later that evening Swann tells Marcel that he ought to visit Gilberte: “She would be so pleased.” Years earlier, when he was still in love with her, Marcel dreamed of one day flaunting his indifference to Gilberte. But now that his indifference is genuine and he no longer loves her, he has no need to flaunt it.

While Marcel and Swann wait in the drawing room, the duke and duchess are both in their dressing rooms, preparing for a busy evening. The evening will begin with a dinner party at Mme de Saint-Euverte’s after which they will attend the reception in the palace of their cousin the Prince de Guermantes, and finally, at midnight they will change into costume in order to attend a masked ball. The duke is extremely excited as he will be dressed as Louis XI and the duchess as Isabel of Bavaria. He has been looking forward to this ball and planning his costume for some considerable time, and he has also arranged an assignation with his latest mistress.

The only possible threat to the duke’s long-anticipated evening of pleasure is the fact that his close cousin, Amanien, Marquis d’Osmond, is on his deathbed and unlikely to survive the night. If he should die, the duke would be obliged to go into mourning and thus miss the masked ball. The duke, having earlier established that Amanien is still alive, has ordered the servants to stop making

inquiries so that nobody can bring him word of his cousin's death. For this reason he is anxious to get out of the house as quickly as possible and gives his servants the night off. They will thus be unavailable to track him down with any bad news if his cousin should be so inconsiderate as to die during the evening.

He rubbed his hands. "He's alive; what more could anyone want? After all that he's gone through, it's a great step forward. Upon my word, I envy him having such a constitution. Ah! these invalids, you know, people do all sorts of things for them that they don't do for us. For instance, today some beggar of a chef sent me up a leg of mutton with *béarnaise* sauce—it was done to a turn, I must admit, but just for that very reason I took so much of it that it's still lying on my stomach. However, that doesn't make people come to inquire after me as they do after dear Amanien. We do too much inquiring. It only tires him. We must leave him room to breathe. They're killing the poor fellow by sending round to him all the time."
(2:611)

Just as the duke and duchess are about to leave for dinner, Swann mentions that his doctors have just given him a few months to live, and he will be unable to join them on their planned visit to Italy because by then he will have been dead for several months. The duchess is torn between her social obligation to leave for dinner and the conflicting obligation to console her oldest friend, realizing "in a vague way that the dinner party to which she was going must count for less to Swann than his own death." However, the duke ignores Swann's news and forces her to leave, explaining that they are already late and that Mme de Saint-Euverte insists on sitting down to dinner at eight o'clock sharp.

But when stepping into the carriage, the duke notices that his wife is wearing black shoes with a red dress. He forces her to go back upstairs to change, and when she protests that they are already late, he says it doesn't matter because "even if we turn up at half past eight they'll wait for us, but you can't possibly go there in a red dress and black shoes." The correct shoes are more important to the duke than the impending death of an old friend. While Oriane returns to her room to get changed, the duke tells Swann he ought to leave.

"If she finds you still here she'll start talking again. She's already very tired, and she'll reach the dinner table quite dead. Besides, I tell you frankly, I'm dying of hunger. I had a wretched luncheon this morning when I came from the train. There was a devil of a *béarnaise* sauce ..."

The Duke felt no compunction in speaking thus of his wife's ailments and his own to a dying man, for the former interested him more and therefore appeared to him more important. And so it was simply from good breeding and good fellowship that, after politely showing us out, he shouted in a stentorian voice from the porch to Swann, who was already in the courtyard: "You, now, don't let yourself be alarmed by the nonsense of those damned doctors. They're fools. You're as sound as a bell. You'll bury us all!" (2:620)

Cities of the Plain

It is hard to know what Proust's original turn-of-the-twentieth-century readers thought about the Baron de Charlus as he is described in the first three volumes of the novel or how they interpreted his strange behavior. But there can be no twenty-first-century reader who does not quickly realize that the baron is a violently repressed homosexual, strongly attracted to Marcel, who is by now an attractive young man.

Charlus and Jupien

The theme of book 4, *Cities of the Plain*, is plainly Sodom and Gomorrah, and this theme is introduced on page 1 when Jupien the tailor meets the Baron de Charlus for the first time. Charlus is just leaving the home of his aunt, Mme de Villeparisis, when he meets Jupien in the courtyard. Neither man has ever met the other, and what follows are several very humorous pages, best described as a courtship dance, with many allusions to birds, bees, and flowers, Jupien being the orchid and Charlus the bumblebee (2:626-632).

... the Baron, having suddenly opened wide his half-shut eyes, was gazing with extraordinary attentiveness at the extailor poised on the threshold of his shop, while the latter, rooted suddenly to the spot in front of M. de Charlus, implanted there like a tree, contemplated with a look of wonderment the plump form of the ageing Baron. But, more astounding still, M. de Charlus's pose having altered, Jupien's, as though in obedience to the laws of an occult art, at once brought itself into harmony with it... Meanwhile Jupien, shedding at once the humble, kindly expression which I had always associated with him, had—in perfect symmetry with the Baron—thrown back his head, given a becoming tilt to his body, placed his hand with grotesque effrontery on his hip, stuck out his behind, struck poses with the coquetry that the orchid might have adapted on the providential arrival of the bee. (2:626-27)

Like two birds preening and fluffing their feathers, the two men watch each other and strike poses until finally, not without glancing back several times, Jupien heads off into the street. After a few moments the baron hurries after him and they both vanish from sight.

A few minutes later, engaging my attention afresh, Jupien ... returned, followed by the Baron. The latter, deciding to precipitate matters, asked the tailor for a light, but at once observed: "I ask you for a light, but I see I've left my cigars at home." The laws of hospitality prevailed over the rules of coquetry. "Come inside, you shall have everything you wish," said the tailor, on whose features disdain now gave place to joy. The door of the shop closed behind them and I could hear no more. I had lost sight of the bumblebee. (2:628-29)

Ever the voyeur, Marcel sneaks into a neighboring shop and listens through the thin partition.

For from what I heard at first in Jupien's quarters, which was only a series of inarticulate sounds, I imagine that few words had been exchanged. It is true that these sounds were so violent that, if they had not always been taken up an octave higher by a parallel plaint, I might have thought that one person was slitting another's throat within a few feet of me, and that subsequently the murderer and his resuscitated victim were taking a bath to wash away traces of the crime. I concluded from this later on that there is another thing as vociferous as pain, namely pleasure ... an immediate concern about cleanliness.... Finally, after about half an hour ... the Baron emerged and a conversation began. Jupien refused with insistence the money that M. de Charlus was trying to press upon him. (2:631)

There followed a conversation in which the baron tried to persuade Jupien to introduce him to some local bus conductors or deliverymen, and at first Jupien is offended. Eventually, however, Jupien relented:

... for he studied the Baron's face, plump and flushed beneath his gray hair, with the supremely blissful air of a person whose self esteem has just been profoundly flattered, and, deciding to grant M. de Charlus the favor he had just asked of him, after various remarks lacking in refinement such as "What a big bum you have!" said to the Baron with an air at once smiling, impassioned, superior and grateful: "All right, you big baby, come along!" (2:632)

After a long discussion about the appeal of young working-men, Charlus explains his feelings for young gentlemen:

“That is why, as an antidote to the boredom of returning home alone, I should rather like to make friends with a sleeping-car attendant or a bus conductor. Now, don’t be shocked,” the Baron wound up, “it is all a question of type. With what you might call ‘young gentlemen,’ for instance, I feel no desire for physical possession, but I am never satisfied until I have touched them, I don’t mean physically, but touched a responsive chord. As soon as, instead of leaving my letters unanswered, a young man starts writing to me incessantly, when he is morally, as it were, at my disposal, I am assuaged, or at least I would be were I not immediately seized with an obsession for another. Rather curious, is it not?” (2:633-34)

Shocked by what he has witnessed, Marcel finally begins to understand the baron’s strange behavior—even the insulting outburst that led to the destruction of the top hat two months earlier. Charlus is only able to indulge his physical desires with men of the lower orders, “renters,” whom he can pay. With men of his own social class his satisfaction had to be more circumspect and verbal. As Marcel had himself discovered, games of domination would culminate in a torrent of verbal abuse.

Sometimes, as had doubtless been the case with me on the evening on which I had been summoned by him after the Guermantes dinner-party, the relief was effected by a violent diatribe which the Baron flung in his visitor’s face, just as certain flowers, by means of a hidden spring, spray from a distance the disconcerted but unconsciously collaborating insect. M. de Charlus, the dominated one turned dominator, feeling purged of his agitation and calmed, would send away the visitor who had at once ceased to appear to him desirable. (2:652-53)

When reading what Proust has to say about homosexuality, the modern reader should remember that not only was it a strictly taboo subject at the time, but the practice was also illegal. The baron might have exaggerated when he referred to “little renters sending him to the gallows,” but, like the author, he faced real public disgrace and certain imprisonment if his sexual orientation should be revealed. Proust’s homosexual English friend, the very successful and well-known writer Oscar Wilde, was not only imprisoned and disgraced, but he died in exile, a broken man. In the following quotation, Proust describes the loneliness and anguish of the homosexual and refers to the disgrace of his friend Oscar Wilde. In addition to the passion of the sentiments expressed, this sentence

is also noteworthy as being the longest ever written by Proust—and probably by anyone, in any language. I quote just the first 140 words of the 942-word total.

Their honor precarious, their liberty provisional, lasting only until the discovery of their crime; their position unstable, like that of the poet one day fêted in every drawing room and applauded in every theatre in London, and the next driven from every lodging, unable to find a pillow upon which to lay his head, turning the mill like Samson and saying like him: “The two sexes shall die, each in a place apart!”; excluded even, save on the days of general misfortune when the majority rally round the victim as the Jews rallied around Dreyfus, from the sympathy—at times from the society—of their fellows, in whom they inspire only disgust at seeing themselves as they are, portrayed in a mirror which, ceasing to flatter them, accentuates every blemish that they have refused to observe in themselves... (2:638)

The passage is also noteworthy for the way that Proust associates and compares the position of Jews and homosexuals in society, suggesting that both are persecuted but shameful minorities. Proust, of course, was both Jewish and homosexual. It should be noted that Proust does not use the term “homosexual” himself; he prefers the expression “invert,” meaning a woman trapped in the body of a man.

André Maurois quotes Proust’s own comments on homosexuality from Proust’s private notebooks in the possession of his niece Mme Mante-Proust. “When one is young one is no more aware that one is a homosexual than one is aware that one is a poet, a snob or a bad lot. The snob is not a man who loves snobs, but merely a man who cannot set eyes on a duchess without finding her charming. A homosexual is not a man who loves homosexuals, but a man who, seeing a soldier, immediately wants to have him for a friend.” The meeting, later in this volume, between Charlus and Morel in his military uniform is a vibrant example of this.

The Princess’s Reception

After all the other dinners and receptions described in the novel, attending a reception at the Princesse de Guermantes’ means that Marcel has reached the innermost circle of the Faubourg Saint-Germain.

When entering a formal reception in high society, the guests line up and their

names are individually and loudly announced by the usher as they enter the room. Marcel was worried that his invitation was a hoax and that when his name was announced he would be greeted with laughter and expelled from the room. The person preceding him in line was the young Duc de Châtelleraut, who is even more nervous than Marcel, but for a different reason. Several days earlier he had picked up another young man in the Champs-Élysées and the two had spent a physically exhausting but enjoyable evening together. Preferring to remain anonymous while indulging in the “English vice,” he had pretended to be an English tourist and refused to speak a word of French. Imagine his horror when, handing over his card for the usher to announce his name, he recognized him as the young man from the Champs-Élysées. After blindly ignoring the obvious signs of homosexuality for the first three books of the novel, the narrator suddenly recognizes the signs around him everywhere as he wanders through the reception.

Mme de Surgis-le-Duc was so low on the social scale that it was a wonder she had even been invited, and yet the haughty Baron de Charlus had paid her court all evening much to Marcel’s puzzlement. All is explained when he sees her two sons, who look like two young and virile Greek gods, accompanying her. For the rest of the evening Marcel watches Charlus carefully applying the honey and preparing the seduction.

The diplomat M. de Vaugoubert is the very essence of the closeted queen who dreams endlessly of the street arabs of his youth but no longer dares act out his desires for fear of disgrace.

... he had the air of a caged animal, casting in every direction glances expressive of fear, craving and stupidity. This last was so dense that it did not occur to him that the street-arabs of his adolescence were boys no longer, and when a news vendor bawled in his face: “*La Presse!*” he shuddered with terror even more than with longing, imagining himself recognized and denounced. (2:667)

For the duration of the party he embarrasses the more discreet Charlus by making eyes at any good-looking young man and wondering if he is “one of us.” Marcel asks Vaugoubert to introduce him to the prince but instead Vaugoubert introduces him to his wife, who is so mannish in appearance that her husband had selected her because she reminded him of a “market porter.”

Marcel spends much of the party trying to find someone who will introduce

him to the prince. One person makes the introduction only when the prince's back happens to be turned; Charlus simply refuses, while another pretends not to have heard the request: "Such is the cowardice of society people."

After the introduction is finally accomplished and Marcel has been suitably impressed by his host's dry and dignified manner, the prince takes Charles Swann, who is also present, by the arm and escorts him to the far end of the garden. Speculation is rife among the guests for much of the evening that the prince is ejecting Swann for being a Jew. Even among his oldest friends, nobody wishes to be associated with Swann or to share in his disgrace, given the passions surrounding the Dreyfus Affair. In fact, as Swann later reveals, the prince was confiding in him that he had become convinced of Dreyfus's innocence and had completely reversed his opinions and his political stance. He also revealed that the princess had also become a Dreyfusard and had paid to have a Catholic Mass said on his behalf. In his conversation with Swann concerning Dreyfus, the prince shows himself to be a reflective and courageous man of integrity, unlike the majority of his guests.

The slow and thoughtful conversion of the prince is contrasted to the superficial positions of his cousins. No longer influenced by Rachel and her intellectual circle, Robert has given up all his pro-Dreyfus sympathies and, reverting to caste, has become an anti-Dreyfus supporter. The duke, on the other hand, influenced by three beautiful princesses whom he tried to seduce at a spa, has temporarily reversed his opinions and become, like his cousin the prince, an ardent Dreyfus supporter. Charlus, of course, has a different perspective from everybody. He argues that since Dreyfus is a Jew, he is not really a Frenchman and therefore cannot be guilty of treason: "Only of breaching the laws of hospitality." The duchess herself condemns Dreyfus simply on the basis of his poor letter-writing style.

"In any case, if this man Dreyfus is innocent," the Duchess broke in, "he hasn't done much to prove it. What idiotic, turgid letters he writes from his island. I don't know whether M. Esterhazy is any better, but at least he has more of a knack of phrase making, a different tone altogether. That can't be very welcome to the supporters of M. Dreyfus. What a pity for them that they can't exchange innocents." (2:246)

Robert de Saint-Loup arrives and makes so many admiring comments about Charlus's womanizing that it would appear he does not have a clue concerning his uncle's true tastes. Robert himself seems more coarse since his split from

Rachel, as he describes the pleasures of various Parisian brothels that he would love to visit now that he is a free man. The irony, of course, is that if he had visited the brothels earlier, he could have had Rachel for a mere fraction of the cost, and with none of the anguish.

In describing the pleasures of Parisian brothels, Robert happens to mention two unusual girls whom he had recently enjoyed. One was a well-brought-up young society girl, Mlle de l'Orgeville, while the other was "that big, fair girl, Mme Putbus' maid. She goes with women too, but I don't suppose you mind that. I tell you frankly, I've never seen such a gorgeous creature." Mme Putbus's maid now takes root in Marcel's imagination as a wanton symbol of carnal desire, and he starts trying to organize introductions to the unfashionable Mme Putbus and tracking her social calendar so that he will have an opportunity to meet her maid. Until the very end of the novel, the very mention of Mme Putbus's maid is enough to inflame all his desires.

The duke and duchess drive Marcel home in their carriage because they need to get changed for their masked ball, and Marcel has a midnight rendezvous with Albertine. The duchess asks Marcel if there are any other salons to which he would like an introduction and is both surprised, and horrified, when all he requests is an introduction to the distinctly unfashionable Mme Putbus. When they arrive back at the house, two of the duke's aunts are waiting for them with the news that his cousin has just died. But nothing is going to keep the duke from wearing his costume and attending the ball. He refuses to believe them: "He's dead! No, no, they're exaggerating, they're exaggerating!"

Paris Salons

In addition to the salons of the Faubourg Saint-Germain, which have been opened to him by his friendship with the duchess, Marcel also becomes familiar with other Parisian salons. Mme Verdurin's salon is rising in importance thanks to her cultivation of Russian musicians and dancers who were fast becoming the latest fashion in France. Mme Swann's salon was also becoming more fashionable. Despite being married to a Jew, Odette had come out strongly against Dreyfus and was riding the anti-Dreyfus wave in society. Additionally, Bergotte had remained a loyal friend through the years, and his books had recently become extremely popular. The best way to make the acquaintance of this famous author was to be invited to Mme Swann's soirees. Odette's ascent was also helped by the fact that her daughter, Gilberte, had just inherited 80

million francs from one of Swann's uncles. This meant that she was one of the wealthiest heiresses in France and that "the Faubourg Saint-Germain was beginning to take notice of her." Women with unmarried sons, such as Mme de Marsantes, Robert's mother, were especially interested.

Return to Balbec

Accompanied by his mother and Françoise, Marcel makes his second visit to Balbec to spend the summer beside the sea for health reasons. Unknown to either of them, Marcel's ulterior motive was to meet Mme Putbus's maid. The Verdurins had arranged to rent La Raspelière, the country estate outside Balbec belonging to the Cambremers, for the summer season. Among the many guests invited to visit the Verdurins during the summer, Marcel discovered that Mme Putbus was expected, and his careful research further confirmed that she would be accompanied by her maid. Robert de Saint-Loup wrote letters to the Cambremers on Marcel's behalf so that he would be well received and the maid would be duly impressed with his excellent connections.

All the happy expectations of the visit are destroyed during the first night at the hotel when he bends over to remove his boots and memories of his grandmother come flooding back. This section of the novel is called "Intermittencies of the Heart," which for a while was to be the title of the whole novel. The human heart can only absorb so much sorrow at one time, and the reality of somebody's death takes a long period to be fully digested.

For the first time since her death, Marcel is overwhelmed by the realization that she is gone forever. He turns down invitations to the Cambremers and even from Albertine and stays alone in his grief, sharing it only with his mother. The only way he can explain his sorrow is in the simple phrase, "She was my grandmother and I was her grandson." Lying in bed at night he dares not even touch the adjoining wall to the room where his grandmother used to sleep.

I knew that I might knock now, even louder, and that I should hear no response, that my grandmother would never come again. And I asked nothing more of God, if a paradise exists, than to be able, there, to knock on that wall with three little raps which my grandmother would recognize among a thousand, and to which she would give those answering knocks which meant: "Don't fuss, little mouse, I know you're impatient, but I'm just coming," and that he would let me stay with her throughout eternity, which would not be too long for the two of us. (2:790)

Marcel's sense of remorse and guilt are further compounded by Françoise's revelations about his grandmother's ill health during the first visit to Balbec. She was so unwell that she didn't think she would leave Balbec alive and only encouraged Marcel to go out to dinner with Saint-Loup because she herself was unable to eat and didn't want to worry him. She had asked Saint-Loup to take her photograph despite being sick, so that Marcel would have a photograph of her to keep. "Whatever happens, Françoise,' she says to me, 'you must never let my grandson know.'"

Albertine Again

Slowly, however, like the neighboring apple trees in blossom, he emerges from his grief and resumes his friendship with Albertine and her friends. He even receives a visit from the Cambremers, Legrandin's snobbish sister and her mother-in-law the dowager Marquise de Cambremer. Albertine's solicitous care reawakens his desire for happiness.

As his relationship with Albertine evolves, so too does his suspicion that she has lesbian tendencies. When she dances with her friend Andrée in the casino at Balbec, Dr. Cottard observes them with distaste:

"There now look" he went on, pointing to Albertine and Andrée who were waltzing slowly, tightly clasped together, "I've left my glasses behind and I can't see very well, but they are certainly keenly roused. It's not sufficiently known that women derive most excitement through their breasts. And theirs, as you can see, are touching completely." And indeed the contact between the breasts of Andrée and Albertine had been constant. (2:823-24)

Just as Swann used to wonder about Odette's secret life when she was not with him, so Marcel increasingly tortures himself with thoughts of Albertine and her girlfriends. He painfully observes her surreptitiously watching other women in the mirror of the hotel foyer. Even Bloch's sister creates a scandal when she makes out with an ex-actress in public: "in a corner of the big ballroom that was not even dark, on a sofa, they made no more attempt to conceal what they were doing than if they had been in bed." Bloch's cousin, meanwhile, sits in the hotel restaurant with an attractive young woman while they amorously entwine their

legs and hands together under the table and beneath the very nose of her guileless husband. Elsewhere in the Grand Hotel, Bloch's respected and wealthy uncle always ate his lunch, away from his family, in the dining room where he was conducting an affair with a waiter. He never failed to occupy his seat at the lunch table, as a man who was keeping a dancer from the corps de ballet might occupy his seat in the stalls.

In fact, at least through Marcel's eyes, Balbec seems to be a town filled with sexually perverse relationships, described by one writer as the Provincetown of the Belle Époque: "Often, in the hall of the casino, when two girls were smitten with mutual desire, a luminous phenomenon occurred, a sort of phosphorescent train passing from one to the other." In the casino, on the beach, leaving the tennis court, and in the street, attractive young women exchange discreet but "luminous" glances, which Albertine pretends not to notice. Observing signs of lesbianism everywhere, Marcel becomes increasingly suspicious of Albertine's tendencies when he is not around to "protect" her. Having originally come to Balbec in order to meet Mme Putbus's maid for his own carnal pleasures at the Verdurins', Marcel now becomes terrified of her visit. He remembers that Robert had already told him that "she goes with women too, but I don't suppose you mind that." He contacts the Verdurins to find out when Mme Putbus's visit is expected.

I trembled at the thought that, as it was about the time when Mme Putbus was due to arrive at the Verdurins', her maid, whose tastes Saint-Loup had not concealed from me, might take it into her head to come down to the beach, and, if it were a day on which I was not with Albertine, might seek to corrupt her. (2:870)

To keep Albertine distracted he took her by "the little train" from Balbec to meet Robert de Saint-Loup at Doncières. The little train runs between the various towns and villages along the Normandy coast, and much of the novel's action and many of the conversations take place on the little train as the different characters move from one location in the story to another. For example, from Balbec they take the little train to visit the Cambremers at Féterne and the Verdurins at La Raspelière. Robert had only received the telegram advising him of their visit at the last moment, as he had been with his uncle Charlus, who was also visiting. Having made other arrangements, Robert could only meet with them for a short while before returning to the garrison.

While Marcel and Albertine wait for the train to take them back to Balbec,

they are joined at the station by Charlus, who is returning to Paris in the opposite direction. Marcel recognizes a military bandsman also waiting on the platform as Charles Morel, the son of his uncle Adolphe's valet. Marcel had met Morel some years earlier, following his uncle's death, when the young man had brought him a collection of paintings and photographs of his uncle's many mistresses. Among the photographs was one of Odette de Crécy, and Morel had confirmed that she had been the lady in pink whom Uncle Adolphe was entertaining the day that Marcel had visited—and that had led to his uncle's famous quarrel with Marcel's father and grandfather. While Marcel and Morel are talking, Charlus joins them and offers Morel five hundred francs for a "musical soirée," and the two of them wander off to make music together.

And remembering the manner in which M. de Charlus had come up to Morel and myself, I saw at once the resemblance to certain of his relatives when they picked up a woman in the street. The desired object had merely changed sex. (2:891)

The bisexual Morel is probably the most unrelentingly vicious character in the novel, and this moment marks the beginning of his destructive affair with Charlus.

The Verdurins still have their "Wednesdays" when they entertain the little clan, most of whom have stayed loyal since the days, years before, when Swann had courted Odette. Marcel joins them in order to find out when Mme Putbus is expected to arrive. If Mme Putbus is already there, his plan is to check out the maid and see if she is "one of them." He also needs to discover if and when she plans to visit the beach at Balbec so that he can make sure that Albertine will be out of town.

Wednesday at the Verdurins'

The reception at the Princesse de Guermantes' in the first half of the book represented the height of social achievement, and all the previous social gatherings had represented carefully graded steps on the ascent of the Mount Olympus of Parisian society. We now begin the descent, on the other side of the social mountain. The glittering sophistication of the princess's party—however hollow and empty it may have proved—is sharply contrasted with the boorish pretensions of Mme Verdurin's attempt to impress the provincial nobility of Balbec.

Mme Verdurin's salon has barely changed since it was first described in "Swann in Love." The Verdurins still govern through fear and manipulation and "the faithful" still loyally attend every Wednesday. They may have grown older and plumper, and some—such as Dr. Cottard, who is now a professor—more successful, but they still display their vulgarity and their social inadequacies. The only sign that Mme Verdurin has made any concessions to the bores is that she now expects her guests to wear dinner jackets. Her guests themselves have become a little more fashion conscious, and the habits of smart young noblemen, like the Duc de Châtellerauld, are being adopted by the middle classes. Echoing the trend introduced at Mme de Villeparisis's party, even Brichot now knows what to do with his hat. His colleagues at the Sorbonne are impressed by the

... elegance of the mundane philosopher's attire, an elegance which they had mistaken at first for slovenliness until their colleague had benevolently explained to them that a top hat could quite acceptably be placed on the floor when one was paying a call and was not the right thing for dinners in the country, however smart, where it should be replaced by a trilby, which was perfectly all right with a dinner jacket. (2:898)

Morel, the handsome young bandsman from the railway station is—despite his other vices—a very talented violinist and one of Mme Verdurin's recent "discoveries." He has been invited to play for the guests and will be bringing his new mentor, the Baron de Charlus. Other guests include the Verdurins' landlords, the Cambremers. Mme Verdurin pretends that the only reason she invites the marquis and his wife is so that they might lower the rent the following year—which will justify an otherwise boring evening. Mme de Cambremer, on the other hand, pretends that the only reason she attends the dinner is to negotiate a higher rent for the following season: "You know we're going to dine with our tenants, that will be well worth an increased rent."

Marcel was already familiar with the Cambremers and with the various vulgar jokes concerning their name, and he also knew they were regarded as provincial nobodies back in Paris. Mme de Cambremer is Legrandin's sister, and a symbol of social striving all through the novel, but Proust also has tremendous fun with the rest of the family, from the mother-in-law's false teeth to the son's big nose.

The dowager Marquise [de Cambremer] ... had two remarkable habits, due at once to her exalted passion for the arts (especially for music) and to her want of teeth. Whenever she talked of aesthetic subjects her salivary glands—like those of certain animals when in rut—became so overcharged

that the old lady's edentate mouth allowed to trickle from the corners of her faintly mustachioed lips a few drops of misplaced moisture. Immediately she drew it in again with a deep sigh, like a person recovering his breath. (2:836)

Her son, the Marquis de Cambremer, has an even more interesting face and

... his personal appearance was startling. No doubt one grew accustomed to it. But his nose had chosen, in placing itself askew above his mouth, perhaps the only oblique line, among so many possible ones, that one would never have thought of tracing upon this face, and one that indicated a vulgar stupidity, aggravated still further by the proximity of a Norman complexion on cheeks that were like two red apples.... but those eyelids, heavy, bleared and drooping, would have prevented the least flash of intelligence from escaping. And so, discouraged by the meagerness of that azure gaze, one returned to the big crooked nose. By a transposition of the senses, M. de Cambremer looked at you with his nose. This nose of his was not ugly; it was if anything too handsome, too bold, too proud of its own importance. Arched, polished, gleaming, brand-new, it was amply prepared to make up for the spiritual inadequacy of the eyes. Unfortunately, if the eyes are sometimes the organ through which our intelligence is revealed, the nose (whatever the intimate solidarity and the unsuspected repercussion of one feature on another), the nose is generally the organ in which stupidity is most readily displayed. (2:942-43)

There are a number of laughable misunderstandings when Charlus eventually arrives at the party. Dr. Cottard has an uncontrollable wink in his eye, especially when he removes his monocle, so when he greets Charlus with a smile and a wink, Charlus fears that it is an indiscreet come-on from "one of us." Things get worse when M. Verdurin tries to reassure Charlus that the other guests were fellow intellectuals with whom he would feel at home. Charlus had misunderstood what he was suggesting when he used the phrase "one of us:"

"Forgive my mentioning these trifles," [M. Verduran] began, "for I can well imagine how little importance you attach to them. Middle-class minds take them seriously, but the others, the artists, the people who are really *of our sort*, don't give a rap for them. Now, from the first words we exchanged, I realized that you were *one of us!*" M. de Charlus, who attached a very different meaning to this expression, gave a start.... His

host's insulting frankness took his breath away. "Don't protest, my dear sir, you are *one of us*, it's as clear as daylight," M. Verdurin went on. (2:973)

Despite their pretended scorn for the bores and hierarchies of conventional society, both M. and Mme Verdurin are always trying to get things right and to do things properly. Because they do not understand the complexities of the social order, they usually get things wrong.

M. Verdurin explains why he has placed Charlus to the left at the dinner table:

"“But,” explained M. Verdurin, hurt, “we did it on purpose. I attach no importance whatever to titles of nobility,” he went on with that contemptuous smile which I have seen so many people I have known ... assume when they speak of something they do not possess to those who will thereby, they imagine, be prevented from using it to show their superiority over them. “But you see, since we happened to have M. de Cambremer here, and he's a marquis, while you're only a baron ...”

“Pardon me,” M. de Charlus haughtily replied to the astonished Verdurin, “I am also Duke of Brabant, Squire of Montargis, Prince of Oléron, of Carençy, Viareggio and of the Dunes. However, it's not of the slightest importance. Please don't distress yourself,” he concluded, resuming his delicate smile which blossomed at these final words: “I could see at a glance that you were out of your depth.” (2:974)

By this and other exchanges we know that the Verdurins will eventually wreak their revenge upon Charlus for his arrogance. Just as they had previously managed to split up Swann and Odette, the Verdurins will eventually split up Morel and Charlus. For the moment, however, Charlus tries to keep his haughtiness in check and defers to the Verdurins because their friendship and hospitality provide a safe haven for his passionate affair with the musician. During this period at Balbec, Charlus works hard to become one of the most faithful of the Verdurins' little clan.

Charlus and Morel

Morel and Charlus become inseparable and drive together along the coast near Balbec and eat together in restaurants “where M. de Charlus was taken for an old and penniless servant and Morel, whose duty it was to pay the bills, for a

too kind hearted gentleman.” At table they would seek to excite each other with their fantasies:

“Do you know,” said Morel, anxious to excite the Baron’s senses in a fashion which he considered less compromising for himself (although it was actually more immoral), “what I’d like would be to find a girl who was absolutely pure, make her fall in love with me, and take her virginity.”

M. de Charlus could not refrain from pinching Morel’s ear affectionately, but added ingenuously: “What good would that do you? If you took her maidenhead, you would be obliged to marry her.”

“Marry her?” cried Morel, feeling that the Baron must be tipsy ... “Marry her? No fear! I’d promise, but once the little operation was performed, I’d ditch her that very evening.” (2:1040-41)

Although Charlus supported him financially, he permitted Morel to continue with his musical career and indeed encouraged him:

M. de Charlus wanted him to continue, however much money he had to give him ... because he was afraid lest, having nothing to do and remaining perpetually in his company, the violinist might grow bored. Moreover he did not wish to deprive himself of the pleasure which he felt, at certain grand concerts, in saying to himself: “The person they are applauding at this moment is coming home with me to-night.” (2:1094)

Though he spends most of his time with the baron, Morel insists on keeping certain evenings to himself with the excuse that he needs to practice his violin or that he is taking algebra lessons. Like all of Proust’s lovers, the baron is soon stimulated by jealousy and starts spying on his boyfriend:

In any case Morel, whatever objection might be made, reserved certain evening hours, whether for algebra or for the violin. On one occasion it was for neither, but for the Prince de Guermantes who ... met the musician without knowing who he was or being known to him either, and offered him fifty francs to spend the night with him in the brothel at Maineville; a two-fold pleasure for Morel, in the remuneration he received from M. de Guermantes and in the delight of being surrounded by women who would flaunt their tawny breasts uncovered. (2:1113)

This results in an amusing series of farcical misadventures in which Morel and the prince make several attempts to consummate their affair but are constantly thwarted by Charlus's and Jupien's attempts to spy on them. Despite the ludicrously entertaining scenes in the brothel with naked girls, spy holes, and backdoor escapes, neither the prince nor Charlus ever realizes that they were both competing for the same rent-boy.

Love for Albertine

Like Charlus and Morel, Marcel and Albertine also spend a lazy summer enjoying the "indolent charm of seaside existence." Both couples spend their days driving through the Normandy countryside, drinking cider and calvados in charming country restaurants and riding "the little train" to visit their various friends at the Cambremers' home or at the Verdurins'. For Proust, there is little if any difference between homosexual and heterosexual relationships—both involve the pursuer and the pursued, and both ultimately are doomed. Whether Swann and Odette, Marcel and Albertine, or Charlus and Morel, relationships always involve rich men and their dependent love-objects. Even the Duc de Guermantes maintains his hold over the duchess by controlling her access to his money. Swann, while discussing Norpois and his various lovers, had previously expressed the concept prophetically.

"Highly-strung people ought always to love, as the lower orders say, 'beneath' them, so that their women have a material inducement to be at their disposal..."

"The danger of that kind of love, however, is that the woman's subjection calms the man's jealousy for a time but also makes it more exacting. After a while he will force his mistress to live like one of those prisoners whose cells are kept lighted day and night, to prevent their escaping. And that generally ends in trouble." (1:606-7)

Marcel's relationship waxes and wanes. The passion for Albertine has never really been rekindled, and he remains suspicious about her secret life. There are many echoes of Swann's early relationship with Odette. One of the reasons that he maintains the liaison is because of the continuing disapproval of Françoise and his mother.

After a meeting with Mme Bontemps, his mother tells him:

“But I seemed to gather from what was said that a marriage between you and Albertine would be the joy of her aunt’s life. I think the real reason is that they are all extremely fond of you. At the same time the style in which they imagine that you would be able to keep her, the sort of connections they more or less know that we have—all that is not, I fancy, entirely irrelevant, although it may be a minor consideration. I wouldn’t have mentioned it to you myself, because I’m not keen on it, but as I imagine they’ll mention it to you, I thought I’d get a word in first.” “But you yourself, what do you think of her?” I asked my mother. “Well, I’m not the one who is going to marry her. You could certainly do a great deal better in terms of marriage. But I feel that your grandmother would not have liked me to influence you. As a matter of fact I can’t say what I think of Albertine; I don’t think of her. All I can say to you is, like Madame de Sévigné: ‘She has good qualities or so I believe. But at this first stage I can praise her only by negatives. She is not this: she has not the [local] Rennes accent. In time, I shall perhaps say: she is that.’ And I shall always think well of her if she can make you happy.” (2:958)

There is nothing like parental disapproval to kindle the fires of love.

Eventually, however, Marcel gets bored with Albertine and decides to break off the relationship: “It is always thus, impelled by a state of mind which is destined not to last, that we make our irrevocable decisions.” In any event, her friend Andrée is due back in Balbec, and he thinks that he might really be in love with her instead. He assures his mother that the affair is over, and he concludes, from a practical point of view, “The idea of marrying Albertine appeared to me to be madness.”

However, the night before he’d decided to announce the news of their breakup, he took Albertine on a final visit to the Verdurins at La Raspelière. While returning from the visit on the little train and just approaching the station at Parville, Albertine suddenly reveals that she used to be friends with Mlle Vinteuil. Indeed, she used to call Mlle Vinteuil and her friend her two big sisters. Worse still, the two of them are shortly to visit Balbec and then the three of them plan to take a cruise together.

Albertine tells him this because she is anxious to help him in his research concerning Vinteuil’s sonata. She does not realize that he already knows about Mlle Vinteuil’s lesbian tastes. For Marcel, this is final, irrefutable proof of all his suspicions concerning Albertine, and he is overwhelmed with sickening images

of Mlle Vinteuil. Immediately he recalls the scene at Montjouvain when he had watched through the window as Mlle Vinteuil and her friend made Sapphic love while defiling the photograph of her dead father. This time he saw Albertine's face superimposed on the body of the friend.

Marcel is mortified, and he feels this is a divine punishment for allowing his grandmother to die. Whatever happens, even if he has to keep her locked up, Marcel must protect Albertine from her own vicious nature. He persuades her to leave Balbec and move back to Paris with him, immediately.

Almost hysterical, he tells his disapproving mother:

“I absolutely must—and let's settle the matter at once, because I'm quite clear about it now, because I won't change my mind again, because I couldn't live without it—I absolutely must marry Albertine.” (2:1169)

The Captive

The next two volumes, *The Captive* and *The Fugitive*, are the most difficult and least satisfactory of all seven volumes. This is partly due to the fact that they were unfinished when Proust died and did not receive the compulsive editing and restructuring that he devoted to the other volumes. But another problem is the subject matter. Both volumes concern Marcel's long, on-again, off-again relationship with Albertine and go over territory already explored with Swann and Odette and other love affairs in the novel. This is Proust being Woody Allen at his most neurotically annoying, and there are many times when the reader is tempted to throw down the book and say, "Enough already! Get over it." Having said all that, the hundred or so pages describing the musical evening at Mme Verdurin's is one of the greatest set pieces in the whole of Proust's work.

The main subject of *The Captive* is the relationship between Marcel and Albertine, living in his parents' house in Paris. But there are two other threads to the novel that are interwoven with this dysfunctional affair. The death of the writer Bergotte occurs halfway through the book and in many ways prefigures Proust's own death. The relationship between Charlus and Morel provides the second theme of the story. Their liaison culminates in the musical soiree at Mme Verdurin's when Charlus is publicly humiliated and disgraced. The destruction of Charlus at the Verdurins is a masterful drama that combines low comedy with sublime tragedy and shows Proust as a master of his art.

Albertine in Paris

Despite Marcel's mother's timid disapproval and Françoise's vocal disgust, Albertine moves into the family home. She has her own bedroom down the hall but spends most of her time in Marcel's.

However all this may be, and even apart from any question of propriety, I doubt whether Mamma could have put up with Albertine, since she had retained from Combray, from my aunt Léonie, from all her kindred, habits of punctuality and order of which my mistress had not the remotest conception. She would never think of shutting a door and, by the same token, would no more hesitate to enter a room if the door stood open than would a dog or a cat. Her somewhat inconvenient charm was, in fact, that of behaving in the household not so much like a girl as like a domestic

animal which comes into a room and goes out again and is to be found wherever one least expects to find it, and she would often—something that I found profoundly restful—come and lie down beside me on my bed, making a place for herself from which she never stirred, without disturbing me as a person would have done. She ended, however, by conforming to my hours of sleep, and not only never attempted to enter my room but would take care not to make a sound until I had rung my bell. It was Françoise who impressed these rules of conduct upon her. (3:7)

From the very beginning, like the household pet, Albertine is in a subservient, if not compromised, position, and Marcel extends little hope of improvement:

I had spoken to [Albertine] of the remote possibility of our marriage; but I had never made her any formal promise; she herself, from discretion, when I said to her: “I don’t know, but it might perhaps be possible,” had shaken her head with a melancholy smile, as much as to say “Oh, no it won’t,” which meant: “I’m too poor.” (3:9)

Jealousy and Power

Despite the apparent domestic bliss and notwithstanding his lack of actual love for Albertine, Marcel’s feelings of jealousy grow stronger by the day. Having once saved her from the temptations of Balbec, he is now taunted by the possibilities of Paris.

Her taste for sensual pleasure was chronic too, and was perhaps only waiting for an opportunity to be given its head. Now Paris provided just as many opportunities as Balbec. In any town whatsoever, she had no need to seek, for the evil existed not in Albertine alone, but in others to whom any opportunity for pleasure is good. A glance from one, understood at once by the other, brings the two famished souls in contact. And it is easy for an astute woman to appear not to have seen, then five minutes later to join, the person who has read her glance and is waiting for her in a side street, and to make an assignation in a trice. Who will ever know? (3:14)

He hires their mutual friend Andrée as chaperone and one of Morel’s friends as a chauffeur so that he will be able to monitor her movements, receiving

reports on everywhere she goes and everyone she meets. But despite all these controls, Marcel's jealous imagination leaves him no rest. He questions her about her friendship with Gilberte, when the two were young schoolgirls, years before. He remembers a remark made long before by Aimé, the headwaiter in Balbec, and reinterprets it as a sinister allusion to lesbianism and, remembering them dancing "breast to breast," he starts to question her relationship with Andrée.

One evening he arrives home with a bunch of syringa lilacs for Albertine and meets Andrée on the stairs outside the apartment. Andrée is somewhat agitated and tells Marcel that both she and Albertine are allergic to syringa. The otherwise trivial conversation is described in great detail, which usually means, in Proust, that it will prove significant later. He spends his days endlessly questioning Albertine and trying to trick her into an admission of lies and can only love her when she is asleep. He spends hours standing over her sleeping form in bed and it is only then that his suffering ceases and he loves her again. He can only love her when her personality, her "self," which is different from his, has been subdued by sleep.

By shutting her eyes, by losing consciousness, Albertine had stripped off, one after another, the different human personalities with which she had deceived me ever since the day when I had first made her acquaintance. She was animated now [when asleep] only by the unconscious life of plants, of trees, a life more different from my own, more alien, and yet one that belonged more to me. Her personality was not constantly escaping, as when we talked, by the outlets of her unacknowledged thoughts and of her eyes. She had called back into herself everything of her that lay outside, had withdrawn, enclosed, reabsorbed herself into her body. In keeping it in front of my eyes, in my hands, I had an impression of possessing her entirely which I never had when she was awake. Her life was submitted to me, exhaled towards me its gentle breath. (3:64)

When he is not standing over her, watching her sleep, he lies beside her on the bed and places his mouth on hers to share her breathing.

Sometimes it afforded me a pleasure that was less pure. For this I had no need to make any movement, but allowed my leg to dangle against hers, like an oar which one trails in the water, imparting to it now and again a gentle oscillation like the intermittent wing beat of a bird asleep in the air. [3:66]

But again and again, Marcel's feelings are related to ownership and trying to recapture and possess his original impression of her on the seafront at Balbec, free and available to the entire world.

Was she not... the girl whom I had seen the first time at Balbec, beneath her flat cap, with her insistent laughing eyes, a stranger still, slender as a silhouette projected against the waves?... In the charm that Albertine had in Paris, by my fireside, there still survived the desire that had been aroused in me by that insolent and blossoming cortège along the beach ... She was so effectively caged that on certain evenings I did not even ask her to leave her room for mine, she whom at one time all the world pursued.... Had not Albertine been—out there in front of the hotel—like a great actress of the blazing beach, arousing jealousy when she advanced upon that natural stage, speaking to no one, jostling the habitués, dominating her friends? And was not this so greatly coveted actress the same who, withdrawn by me from the stage, shut up in my house, was now here, shielded from the desires of all those who might henceforth seek for her in vain, sitting now in my room, now in her own, engaged in some work of design or engraving? (3:61-62)

It is not love he feels for Albertine but the power of possession:

It was a soothing power the like of which I had not experienced since the evenings at Combray long ago when my mother, stooping over my bed, brought me repose in a kiss.... For my pleasure in having Albertine to live with me was much less a positive pleasure than the pleasure of having withdrawn from the world, where everyone was free to enjoy her in turn, the blossoming girl who, if she did not bring me any great joy, was at least withholding joy from others. Ambition and fame would have left me unmoved. Even more was I incapable of feeling hatred. And yet to love carnally was none the less, for me, to enjoy a triumph over countless rivals. I can never repeat it often enough: it was more than anything else an appeasement. (3:71)

As suggested earlier, this was not a healthy relationship.

In the one passage in the novel where he describes her naked body, Marcel reveals with astonishing candor all the confused sexual ambivalence of the

narrator and of the author himself.

Her two little uplifted breasts were so round that they seemed not so much to be an integral part of her body as to have ripened there like fruit; and her belly (concealing the place where a man's is disfigured as though by an iron clamp left sticking in a statue that has been taken down from its niche) was closed, at the junction of her thighs, by two valves with a curve as languid, as reposeful, as cloistral as that of the horizon after the sun has set. (3:74)

The peace he feels when she is asleep is dispelled as soon as she is awake once more with a mind of her own. Immediately the jealousy is reawakened and the questioning begins again. He prevents her from going to a popular park, the Buttes-Chaumont, for fear of what she might do there with Andrée. Even when she wants to go to the Bon Marché, a fashionable store in the Faubourg Saint-Germain, to buy a white bodice, he immediately suspects the worst.

To allow Albertine to go by herself into a big shop crowded with people perpetually brushing against one, provided with so many exits that a woman can always say that when she came out she could not find the carriage which was waiting farther along the street, was something that I was quite determined never to consent to, but the thought of it made me extremely unhappy. (3:99)

When she is asleep in his bed, he has full control and finds peace, but the rest of the time is a frantic attempt to monitor her movements and thwart her lesbian proclivities. Albertine wants to pay a visit to the Verdurins, but Marcel discovers that Mlle Vinteuil is expected to visit their house at the same time. Desperately, Marcel persuades her instead to take Andrée to a performance at the Trocadéro and is relieved when she agrees without objection. Too late, he discovers by chance in the newspaper that the actress Léa, a notorious lesbian, will be performing at the Trocadéro that same evening, so he sends Françoise to bring them back. He even loses faith in the chauffeur when he discovers that during a visit to Versailles, Albertine had been alone and unescorted for seven hours before he drove her home again. Luckily, a few days later, the chauffeur (prompted by Marcel's friend Morel) explains that he had discreetly followed Albertine for the whole seven hours and that nothing untoward had happened. Reassured, Marcel allows the two of them to drive to Balbec for three days and is comforted to receive postcards from her every day professing her love.

But the only time his love, or at least his ardor, comes alive is when he is suffering for her and suspecting her of betraying him. It is only when he thinks that she is being desired by some other woman, or young man, that he can remember her beauty advancing along the seafront at Balbec in all her glory, “surrounded by a congregation of other girls like seagulls alighted from who knew where.” Otherwise she simply bores him.

I might very well have divided her stay with me into two periods, in the first of which she was still, although less so every day, the glittering actress of the beach, and in the second of which, become the gray captive, reduced to her drab self, she needed these flashes in which I remembered the past to restore her color to her. (3:171)

Albertine was consuming so much of his time that Marcel had given up all his other social activities and, not daring to leave her unattended for a moment, had abandoned all his old friends. He avoids Saint-Loup because Albertine had flirted with him that afternoon at the railway station at Doncières. He visits the Duchesse de Guermantes only to ask her advice about fashionable clothes for Albertine.

... for a long time past I had been declining several invitations a week from her. It was not only from her, moreover, that I received them in such profusion. Certainly, she and many other women had always been extremely friendly to me. But my seclusion had undoubtedly multiplied their friendliness tenfold. It seems that in our social life, a minor echo of what occurs in love, the best way to get oneself sought after is to withhold oneself. (3:376-77)

Not only had he discarded his social life, he had even abandoned his attempt to become a writer, just as Swann, years before, had abandoned his book on Vermeer while he was chasing Odette. Marcel had submitted the little article he had written on the twin spires at Martinville for publication in *Le Figaro* and from time to time he would read the newspaper to see if he had been published. It was by reading *Le Figaro* from time to time that he learned what was happening outside the world of Albertine. It was by reading the paper that he learned that Léa was performing at the Trocadéro on the evening that Albertine and Andrée were there. It was in the paper also that he learned of the death of his friend Swann, and how he learned of the death of his old hero, the writer Bergotte.

Death of Bergotte

At the time of Marcel's grandmother's death, when Bergotte had visited every day, his health had been failing even as his fame increased daily. He was one of France's most popular writers and the crown jewel of Mme Swann's salon, but for years past had been unable to leave his room. In portraying the novelist as sickly, seeking solitude, and struggling with the demands of fame, Proust was identifying himself in Bergotte. In the description of Bergotte's death, Proust even put himself into the mind of his character. Bergotte had left his sickbed in order to visit an exhibition of Dutch paintings, specifically to see Vermeer's *View of Delft* and to examine "a little yellow patch of wall" mentioned by an art critic in the newspaper.

His dizziness increased; he fixed his gaze, like a child upon a yellow butterfly that it wants to catch, on the precious little patch of wall. "That's how I ought to have written," he said. "My last books were too dry, I ought to have gone over them with a few layers of color, made my language precious in itself, like this little patch of yellow wall." Meanwhile he was not unconscious of the gravity of his condition. In a celestial pair of scales there appeared to him, weighing down one of the pans, his own life, while the other contained the little patch of wall so beautifully painted in yellow. He felt that he had rashly sacrificed the former for the latter. "All the same," he said to himself, "I shouldn't like to be the headline news of this exhibition for the evening papers." (3:185)

Sinking back onto a settee and then sliding to the floor as attendants ran to his assistance, Bergotte died.

They buried him, but all through that night of mourning, in the lighted shop-windows, his books, arranged three by three, kept vigil like angels with outspread wings and seemed, for him who was no more, the symbol of his resurrection. (3:16)

Just before his own death, Proust himself attended an exhibition of Vermeer's paintings at the Trocadéro in order to study the *View of Delft*. The last known photograph of Proust alive was in fact taken outside the Vermeer exhibition.

While the death of Bergotte is treated with great dignity and sorrow, the death

of Swann is given no more attention than the fall of a sparrow. His death is first mentioned in a casual aside concerning one of the minor characters who mentions “a visit of condolence which she had paid to Mme Swann after the death of her husband” (2:899). Following the evening at which the duke had said, “You’ll bury us all,” and his cousin the prince had confided his change of heart concerning Dreyfus, Swann had simply vanished from the novel. True, the death of Swann was announced in a brief paragraph in the newspaper, but a newspaper, by its very nature, is thrown away and soon forgotten, while the books of Bergotte live on forever. Not being an artist, all that Swann could hope to offer posterity was his name, his child, and the warm memories of his friends. As we are so cruelly to learn later in the novel, all three of these hopes proved empty and futile. As Bergotte’s books demonstrated, only through art can we hope to defeat death and Time.

Albertine’s Lies

But the redemptive powers of art as described in the passages about the death of Bergotte are not sufficient to save Marcel from his increasingly dysfunctional relationship. In explaining her absence one afternoon, Albertine claimed to have bumped into Bergotte, whom she knew through Marcel, and to have had a long conversation with him. Marcel had no reason to doubt her story until he read in the newspaper that Bergotte had died.

Despite all his suspicions and tricks, this was the first significant lie in which he had caught her; more were to follow. He discovers that the three-day trip to Balbec with the chauffeur had been a lie and that she had remained in Paris, at Auteuil, and had friends mail the postcards from Balbec. He tricks her into an admission that she did in fact know Léa, the lesbian actress:

“I know her very well. Some of my friends and I went to see her act last year, and after the performance we went behind to her dressing-room. She changed in front of us. It was most interesting.” Then my mind was compelled to relinquish Mlle Vinteuil and, in a despairing effort, in that fruitless hunt through the abysses of possible reconstructions, attached itself to the actress, to that evening when Albertine had gone to see her in her dressing-room. (3:351)

Albertine’s aunt, Mme Bontemps, innocently reveals more lies that Albertine has told, about spending afternoons at the Buttes-Chaumont with Andrée and

why she had agreed to leave Balbec. In a fury of suspicion Marcel tries to discover the truth of her relationship with Andrée, but her determined evasiveness just makes the situation worse.

Marcel feels that he is losing control.

... for I could not project myself to all the points of time and space which I should have had to occupy; and besides, what instinct would have given me the sequence and the coordinates to enable me to surprise Albertine at such and such a time with Léa, or with the Balbec girls, or with that friend of Mme Bontemps whom she had brushed against, or with the girl on the tennis-court who had nudged her with her elbow, or with Mlle Vinteuil? (3:352)

Unable to control either Albertine's actions or his own insane jealousies and, after failing to get a good-night kiss, he decides finally to leave her.

Now that life with Albertine had become possible once again, I felt that I could derive nothing from it but misery, since she did not love me; better to part from her in the gentle solace of her acquiescence, which I would prolong in memory. Yes, this was the moment.... [I would] without seeing her again, set off for Venice. (3:421)

Morel and Jupien's Niece

The other theme of the book concerns the evolving relationship between Charlus and Morel. Since their return to Paris after their summer at Balbec, Charlus and Morel were in the habit of taking afternoon tea with Jupien and his niece at the tailor shop in the courtyard of the Hôtel de Guermantes. Jupien still acted as Charlus's general factotum and procurer, always looking for rough young workingmen to satisfy the baron's appetites. In return, Charlus had been very helpful to Jupien's niece in expanding her dressmaking business and introducing her to wealthy society ladies. Her business had thrived and she'd become financially secure. She was now received in respectable upper-middle-class society and employed a number of young assistants and seamstresses in the shop. The niece, Marie-Antoinette, had been in love with Morel since the day she first met him, and Charlus was very keen to encourage the relationship. He was already recognized as a kindly benefactor to the niece, and her presence as

Morel's fiancée would provide a respectable cover to his relationship with "Charlie." Additionally, Charlus was aware of some indiscretions committed by the niece when she was younger, and he believed that this knowledge would give him some control over the two young people after their marriage.

Morel was also open to the idea of marrying the niece, if only for the reason of deflowering somebody pure:

Morel was suffering at the time from violent cramp in the hand, and found himself obliged to contemplate the possibility of having to give up the violin. Since, in everything but his art, he was astonishingly lazy, he was faced with the necessity of finding someone to keep him; and he preferred that it should be Jupien's niece rather than M. de Charlus, this arrangement offering him greater freedom and also a wide choice of different kinds of women, ranging from the apprentices, perpetually changing, whom he would persuade Jupien's niece to procure for him, to the rich and beautiful ladies to whom he would prostitute her. That his future wife might refuse to lend herself to these ploys, that she could be to such a degree perverse, never entered Morel's calculations for a moment. (3:45)

Morel therefore asked Jupien for his niece's hand in marriage, and the four of them had become like a happy little family, taking tea together.

But Morel is a vicious brute, and behind Charlus and Jupien's back he treats Marie-Antoinette cruelly. Marcel could hear him across the courtyard calling her a whore and chasing her from the shop. He would also

... come into the shop and tease her in Jupien's absence. "What's the matter with you," he would say with a laugh, "with those big circles under your eyes? A broken heart? Dammit, time passes and things change. After all, a man has a right to try on a shoe, and all the more so a woman, and if she doesn't fit him ..." (3:316)

Musical Evening at Mme Verdurin's

As part of her inexorable social ascension, Mme Verdurin had moved her salon across the river to the Quai Conti on the left-bank, in the very heart of the Faubourg Saint-Germain. It was her fervent hope that Charlus would use his

influence to induce the ladies of the Faubourg to visit her splendid new home. She has planned a musical evening at which Morel will introduce a new and major work by Vinteuil, a septet. Although the composer had died many years before, his lesbian daughter and her friend had discovered his notebooks and painstakingly reconstructed his greatest and as-yet-unknown and unperformed masterpiece. The baron enthusiastically agrees to invite all his friends. Just as the evening was going to be Mme Verdurin's grand entrée into the highest society, so too was this the baron's opportunity to launch Morel, his young protégé, upon the Paris stage. The evening promised to be a major musical and social event, and everyone was excited.

Without telling Albertine where he was going, even Marcel emerged from his solitude to attend the soiree. Marcel's reason for going was to discover the truth about Mlle Vinteuil and her friend. Following the recent news of Swann's death, and never having visited the Verdurins at home in Paris, he was also curious to see the drawing room where Swann had courted Odette so many years before. However, on the way to the party, Brichot—a member of the little clan from the old days—explained that Swann and Odette had met in the drawing room of the Verdurins' old house, on the rue Montalivet in Saint-Honoré, and that the Verdurins had since moved to a grander house on Quai Conti.

Although Mme Verdurin and Charlus had a mutual interest in the success of the evening and even though Charlus had become the most faithful of the faithful at Balbec, he had nonetheless stretched her patience beyond endurance. The Verdurins' habit of destroying any relationship that could possibly threaten the cohesion and loyalty of the little clan was first demonstrated with Swann and Odette in "Swann in Love." Mme Verdurin regarded Morel as far more important to her social success than Odette had ever been, and she wanted his loyalty devoted exclusively to her, not to Charlus. Additionally, ever since Charlus's very first evening at La Raspelière, his arrogance and thinly veiled contempt had annoyed "the Mistress," and she was itching for revenge. "I must add that he gives himself airs in my house which I do not at all like." In saying this, she was referring to the baron's haughty and categorical veto of her proposed guest list and dismissing half the society ladies she wanted to invite as being "impossible."

She was especially excited about inviting Countess Molé and "had rejoiced in anticipation at the thought that the Countess would meet in her house all the noblest names, as the mistress said, 'of France and of Navarre.'" Unfortunately, for some unknown reason, Countess Molé had done something to offend Charlus

some years earlier and he struck her from the list.

“Goodness gracious me! I suppose it takes all sorts to make a world,” M. de Charlus had replied, “and if you, Madame, feel a desire to converse with Mme Piplet, Mme Gibout and Mme Joseph Proudhomme, I’m only too delighted, but let it be on an evening when I am not present. I could see as soon as you opened your mouth that we don’t speak the same language, since I was talking of aristocratic names and you come up with the most obscure names of parvenu commoners, sly, scandal-mongering and evil-minded, little women who imagine themselves patronesses of the arts because they echo an octave lower the manners of my Guermantes sister-in-law, like a jay trying to imitate a peacock. I must add that it would be positively indecent to admit to a celebration which I am pleased to give at Mme Verdurin’s a person whom I have with good reason excluded from my society, a goose of a woman devoid of birth, loyalty or wit... that upstart little toad trying to inflate herself... it’s enough, as the saying is, to make a cat laugh. The Molé! That is a name which must not be uttered in my hearing, or else I must simply withdraw,” he concluded with a smile, in the tone of a doctor who, having the good of his patient at heart in spite of the patient himself, lets it be understood that he will not tolerate the collaboration of a homeopath. (3:235)

Showing considerable restraint, Mme Verdurin awaited her moment but said nothing. Charlus was holding the trump card: in addition to all the glittering names of the Faubourg Saint-Germain whom he was bringing to her house, he had also invited the Queen of Naples—an actual crowned head of state, albeit a dethroned one.

It was about this time that Charlus, who was always jealous and suspicious of Morel’s love life, accidentally read a love letter to Morel from the notorious lesbian Léa and was shocked to discover the world of bisexuality.

[It] was written in the most passionate terms. Its indelicacy prevents us from reproducing it here, but we may mention that Léa addressed him throughout in the feminine gender, with such expressions as “Go on with you, naughty girl!” or “Of course you’re one of us, you pretty sweetheart.” ... What most disturbed the Baron was the phrase “one of us.” Ignorant at first of its application, he had eventually, now many moons ago, learned that he himself was “one of them.” And now this notion that he had acquired was thrown back into question. When he had discovered that he

was “one of them,” he had supposed this to mean that his tastes, as Saint-Simon says, did not lie in the direction of women. And here was this expression taking on, for Morel, an extension of meaning of which M. de Charlus was unaware, so much so that Morel gave proof, according to this letter, of being “one of them” by having the same taste as certain women for other women. From then on the Baron’s jealousy could no longer confine itself to the men of Morel’s acquaintance, but would have to extend to the women also. So, to be “one of them” meant not simply what he had hitherto assumed, but to belong to a whole vast section of the inhabitants of the planet, consisting of women as well as of men, of men loving not merely men but women also, and the Baron, in the face of this novel meaning of a phrase that was so familiar to him, felt himself tormented by an anxiety of the mind as well as of the heart, born of this twofold mystery which combined an extension of the field of his jealousy with the sudden inadequacy of a definition. (3:212)

So it was with a mixture of high-strung feelings of jealousy as well as the entertainer’s excitement at putting together a major social event that Charlus began the evening. His heavily powdered face, more obvious than usual, his manner more “camp” than he would normally have revealed in public; he appeared to have lost all sense of discretion. When Marcel asked him if he had seen Morel recently, Charlus replied, “He came in as it happened, for five minutes this morning while I was still half asleep, and sat down on the side of my bed, as though he wanted to ravish me.”

Charlus arrived early at the Verdurins with Marcel and some other members of the little clan, and they all handed their overcoats to the young footman.

Now M. de Charlus was inclined these days sometimes to “forget himself,” as they say, and did not always remember what was or what was not “done.” The praiseworthy desire that he had had at Balbec to show that certain topics did not alarm him, that he was not afraid to say of someone or other: “He’s a nice-looking boy,” to say, in a word, the same things as might have been said by somebody who was not like himself, this desire he had now begun to express by saying on the contrary things which nobody who was not like him could ever have said, things upon which his mind was so constantly fixed that he forgot that they do not form part of the habitual preoccupation of people in general. And so, looking at the new footman, he raised his forefinger in the air in a menacing fashion and, thinking that he

was making an excellent joke, said: “You are not to make eyes at me like that, do you hear?” and, turning to Brichot: “He has a quaint little face, that boy, his nose is rather fun”; then, rounding off his pleasantry, or yielding to a desire, he lowered his forefinger horizontally, hesitated for an instant, and, unable to control himself any longer, thrust it irresistibly towards the footman and touched the tip of his nose, saying “Pif!” then walked into the drawing room. (3:227-28)

Charlus was ready to party!

Charlus’s Pride

What ruined M. de Charlus that evening was the ill breeding—so common in their class—of the people whom he had invited and who were now beginning to arrive.

Having come there partly out of friendship for M. de Charlus and also out of curiosity to explore these novel surroundings, each duchess made straight for the Baron as though it were he who was giving the party, and then said to me, within a yard of the Verdurins, who could hear every word: “Show me which is Mother Verdurin. Do you think I really need to get myself introduced to her? I do hope, at least, that she won’t put my name in the paper tomorrow; nobody in my family would ever speak to me again. What, that woman with the white hair? But she looks quite presentable.” ...

And M. de Charlus, while his guests elbowed their way towards him to congratulate him and to thank him as though he were the master of the house, never thought of asking them to say a few words to Mme Verdurin. Only the Queen of Naples, in whom survived the same noble blood that had flowed in the veins of her sisters the Empress Elizabeth and the Duchess d’Alençon, made a point of talking to Mme Verdurin as though she had come for the pleasure of meeting her rather than for the music and for M. de Charlus ... (3:246-8)

After silencing “his” guests, Charlus introduced Morel and the musicians, and the music of Vinteuil’s sublime septet began to play. Throughout the novel Proust has provided some wonderful descriptions of Vinteuil’s music. This performance of the septet is no exception:

Meanwhile the septet, which had begun again, was moving towards its close; again and again one phrase or another from the sonata recurred, but altered each time, its rhythm and harmony different, the same and yet something else, as things recur in life; and they were phrases of the sort which, without our being able to understand what affinity assigns to them as their sole and necessary abode the past of a certain composer, are to be found only in his work, and appear constantly in his work, of which they are the spirits, the dryads, the familiar deities; I had at first distinguished in the septet two or three which reminded me of the sonata. Presently—bathed in the violet mist which was wont to arise particularly in Vinteuil's later works, so much so that, even when he introduced a dance measure, it remained captive in the heart of an opal—I caught a hint of another phrase from the sonata, still so distant that I scarcely recognized it; hesitantly it approached, vanished as though in alarm, then returned, intertwined with others that had come, as I later learned, from other works, summoned yet others which became in their turn seductive and persuasive as soon as they were tamed, and took their places in the round, the divine round....

Then the phrases withdrew, save one which I saw reappear five times or six without being able to distinguish its features, but so caressing, so different—as no doubt the little phrase from the sonata had been for Swann—from anything that any woman had ever made me desire, that this phrase—this invisible creature whose language I did not know but whom I understood so well—which offered me in so sweet a voice a happiness that it would really have been worth the struggle to obtain, is perhaps the only Unknown Woman that it has ever been my good fortune to meet. (3:261-62)

But against the transcendent beauty of the music, more mundane themes are also being developed in the Verdurins' drawing room.

I looked at the Mistress, whose fierce immobility seemed to be a protest against the rhythmic noddings of the ignorant heads of the ladies of the Faubourg. She did not say: "You realize, of course, that I know a thing or two about this music! If I were to express all that I feel, you'd never hear the end of it!" She did not say this. But her upright, motionless body, her expressionless eyes, her straying locks said it for her. They spoke also of her courage, said that the musicians could carry on, that they need not spare her nerves, that she would not flinch at the andante, would not cry out at the allegro. I looked at the musicians. The cellist was hunched over the

instrument which he clutched between his knees, his head bowed forward, his coarse features assuming an involuntary expression of disgust at the more mannerist moments; another leaned over his double bass, fingering it with the same domestic patience with which he might have peeled a cabbage, while, by his side the harpist, a mere girl in a short skirt, framed behind the diagonal rays of her golden quadrilateral, recalling those which, in the magic chamber of a Sybil... seemed to be picking out exquisite sounds here and there at designated points, just as though, a tiny allegorical goddess poised before the golden trellis of the heavenly vault, she were gathering, one by one, its stars. As for Morel, a lock, hitherto invisible and submerged in the rest of his hair, had fallen loose and formed a curl on his forehead.

I turned my head slightly towards the audience to discover what M. de Charlus might be feeling at the sight of this curl. But my eyes encountered only the face, or rather the hands, of Mme Verdurin, for the former was entirely buried in the latter. Did the Mistress wish to indicate by this meditative attitude that she considered herself as though in church, and regarded this music as no different from the most sublime of prayers? Did she wish, as some people do in church, to hide from prying eyes, out of modesty or shame, their presumed fervor or their culpable inattention or an irresistible urge to sleep? A regular noise which was not musical gave me momentarily to think that this last hypothesis was the correct one, but I realized later that it was produced by the snores, not of Mme Verdurin, but of her dog. (3:252-53)

Far from being asleep, Mme Verdurin is all too alert and conscious of the unforgivable insults that Charlus is continuing to heap upon her. Her revenge will be terrible indeed.

At the moment when, the music having come to an end, his guests came to take leave of him, M. de Charlus committed the same error as on their arrival. He did not ask them to shake hands with their hostess, to include her and her husband in the gratitude that was being showered upon himself. There was a long procession, a procession which led to the Baron alone, and of which he was clearly aware, for as he said to me a little later: "The form of the artistic celebration ended in a 'few-words-in-the-vestry' touch that was quite amusing." (3:267)

Completely ignoring the Verdurins, the guests not only talk loudly about the wonderful entertainment that Charlus has provided, but they negotiate with him to have his protégé Morel appear at their own soirees—soirees to which Mme Verdurin will not be invited. When Charlus does finally find a moment to speak with Mme Verdurin, it is to criticize her selection of coffee cups, which had confused his guests: “No more iced-coffee cups, remember! Give them to one of your friends whose house you wish to disfigure. But warn her not to have them in the drawing-room, or people might think that they had come into the wrong room, the things are so exactly like chamber pots.”

Puffed with the pride of success, Charlus is delighted with himself and expects Mme Verdurin to appreciate the honor he has done her. “You have had the Queen of Naples, the brother of the King of Bavaria, the three premier peers. If Vinteuil is Mahomet, we may say that we have brought to him some of the least movable of mountains.” But the cruelest blow was yet to come. Charlus’s final smug announcement to the horrified Mme Verdurin sealed his doom:

“The Duchesse de Duras was enchanted. She even asked me to tell you so,” added M. de Charlus, dwelling upon the words as though Mme Verdurin must regard this as a sufficient honor. Sufficient and indeed scarcely credible, for he thought it necessary, in order to be believed, to add “Yes, indeed,” completely carried away by the madness of those whom Jupiter has decided to destroy. “She has engaged Morel to come to her house, where the same program will be repeated, and I’m even thinking of asking her for an invitation for M. Verdurin.” This civility to the husband alone was, although no such idea even occurred to M. de Charlus, the most cruel insult to the wife, who, believing herself to possess with regard to the violinist, by virtue of a sort of ukase which prevailed in the little clan, the right to forbid him to perform elsewhere without her express authorization, was absolutely determined to forbid his appearance at Mme de Duras’s party. (3:279-80)

(With typically Proustian irony, following the death of M. Verdurin later in the novel, Mme Verdurin marries the recently widowed Duc de Duras and thus herself, for a short period, becomes the Duchesse de Duras.)

Charlus’s Fall

Flushed with success and encouraged by Brichot, whom Mme Verdurin had

asked to keep Charlus occupied, the baron regaled the little clan with all sorts of gossip and words of wisdom while they smoked cigars. Of his outrageously entertaining stories neither the narrator nor the reader knows what to believe. He discussed his relations with Odette de Crécy and how he had written all her love letters to Swann for her because she could not spell. He even organized the most dreadful orgies for her, with five or six other men. He claimed that three or four out of ten men in society were homosexual and then, out of the blue, claimed that the brother of Mme Putbus's maid "used to come down to the harbor to pick up now one sailor, now another, with the most infernal cheek, to go for a trip on the sea 'with extras.'"

Meantime, M. and Mme Verdurin were working their magic on Morel. They persuaded him that his relationship with Charlus was destroying his musical career and compromising him socially. They told him that the society women had been sniggering about their scandalous relationship. They warned him that to perform at Mme de Duras's house would be professional suicide. They suggested that Charlus was being watched by the police and being blackmailed to such an extent that he would soon be bankrupt. Finally Mme Verdurin applied the coup de grâce: "he told us ... your uncle was a footman." Morel was immensely proud. He was obsessed with hiding the fact that his father had been the valet to Marcel's uncle Adolphe. That Charlus could have talked about his family, as Mme Verdurin suggested, was the ultimate betrayal.

When M. de Charlus rejoined them, he approached Morel like a triumphant lover.

"Leave me alone. I forbid you to come near me," Morel shouted at the Baron. "You know what I mean all right. I'm not the first person you've tried to pervert!"

My sole consolation lay in the thought that I was about to see Morel and the Verdurins pulverized by M. de Charlus. For a thousand times less than that, I had been visited with his furious rage; no one was safe from it; a king would not have intimidated him. Instead of which, an extraordinary thing happened. M. de Charlus stood speechless, dumbfounded, measuring the depths of his misery without understanding its cause, unable to think of a word to say, raising his eyes to gaze at each of the company in turn, with a questioning, outraged, suppliant air, which seemed to be asking them not so much what had happened as what answer he ought to make.... Perhaps what now struck him speechless was—when he saw that M. and Mme Verdurin turned their eyes away from him and that no one was coming to

his rescue... The fact remains that, in this salon which he despised, this great nobleman ... could do nothing, in the paralysis of his every limb as well as his tongue, but cast around him terror-stricken, suppliant, bewildered glances, outraged by the violence that was being done to him. In a situation so cruelly unforeseen, this great talker could do no more than stammer: "What does it all mean? What's wrong?" His question was not even heard. And the eternal pantomime of panic terror has so little changed that this elderly gentleman to whom a disagreeable incident had occurred in a Parisian drawing-room unconsciously reenacted the basic formal attitudes in which the Greek sculptors of the earliest times symbolized the terror of nymphs pursued by the god Pan. (3:321-22)

While the Verdurins and the faithful move away and start making fun of him, the Queen of Naples returns to collect her fan, which she had forgotten. At a glance she takes in the scene and understands all. Coldly snubbing Mme Verdurin, she moves to the destroyed Charlus's side to support him.

And it was thus, taking the Baron on her arm and without having allowed Morel to be presented to her, that the glorious sister of the Empress Elizabeth left the house. (3:327)

The Verdurins' Drawing Room

The party at Mme Verdurin's is a splendid episode and combines scathing social satire with high drama, low comedy, and some profound writing about music. In the middle of all the social commotion, like a silent pause in a thunderstorm, Proust places one of the longer sentences in the novel (447 words), to describe the quiet essence of a room.

It is true that the longest of Proust's sentences are difficult to read; by the time you reach the end, you have forgotten how the sentence started and you need to begin all over again. Some people find them irritating, but there are rewards for those who persevere. If you take the extra effort to reread the long sentence that I quote below until you are familiar with all the themes and subclauses, there will come a moment of sudden clarity as you read it for the final time, when all the different thoughts and ideas coalesce simultaneously in your consciousness. You will be transported through time and place to the mind of the man who once shared those very thoughts and emotions.

The musical soiree just described took place in the Verdurins' drawing room, which originally, when Swann was courting Odette, was in their old house on the right bank on rue Montalivet. The Verdurins had moved their possessions to La Raspelière when they spent the season in Normandy and now everything was back in place in their new home, on Quai Conti on the left-bank. But the essence of the room was always the same—the Verdurin drawing room.

A sofa that had risen up from dreamland between a pair of new and thoroughly substantial armchairs, little chairs upholstered in pink silk, the brocaded covering of a card-table raised to the dignity of a person since, like a person, it had a past, a memory, retaining in the chill and gloom of the Quai Conti the tan of its sun-warming through the windows of the Rue Montalivet (where it could tell the time of day as accurately as Mme Verdurin herself) and through the glass doors at La Raspelière, where they had taken it and where it used to gaze out all day long over the flowerbeds of the garden at the valley below, until it was time for Cottard and the violinist to sit down to their game; a bouquet of violets and pansies in pastel, the gift of a painter friend, now dead, the sole surviving fragment of a life that had vanished without leaving any trace, epitomizing a great talent and a long friendship, recalling his gentle, searching eyes, his shapely, plump and melancholy hand as he painted it; the attractively disordered clutter of the presents from the faithful which had followed the lady of the house from place to place and had come in time to assume the fixity of a trait of character, of a line of destiny; the profusion of cut flowers, of chocolate-boxes, which here as in the country systematized their efflorescence in accordance with an identical mode of blossoming; the curious interpolation of those singular and superfluous objects which still appear to have just been taken from the box in which they were offered and remain for ever what they were at first, New Year presents; all those things, in short, which one could not have isolated from the rest but which for Brichot, an old habitu , of Verdurin festivities, had that patina, that velvety bloom of things to which, giving them a sort of depth, a spiritual *Doppelganger* has come to be attached—all this sent echoing round him so many scattered chords, as it were, awakening in his heart cherished resemblances, confused reminiscences which, here in this actual drawing-room that was speckled with them, cut out, defined, delimited—as on a fine day a shaft of sunlight cuts a section in the atmosphere—the furniture and carpets, pursued, from a cushion to a flower-stand, from a footstool to a lingering scent, from a lighting arrangement to a color scheme, sculpted,

evoked, spiritualized, called to life, a form which was as it were the idealization, immanent in each of their successive homes, of the Verdurin drawing-room. (3:287-88)

A single, perfect sentence.

It was after returning from the party that the quarrels with Albertine began in earnest. The lies began to unravel, there are no more kisses, and Marcel eventually decides to leave her behind and travel to Venice.

The next morning after his final decision to abandon Albertine, and wanting to buy a guidebook to Venice, he rang for Françoise from his bedroom. She was very relieved to hear his summons.

“I was very worried,” she said to me, “that Monsieur should be so late in ringing this morning. I didn’t know what I ought to do. This morning at eight o’clock Mademoiselle Albertine asked me for her boxes. I dared not refuse her, and I was afraid that Monsieur might scold me if I came and waked him. It was no use lecturing her, telling her to wait an hour because I expected all the time that Monsieur would ring; she wouldn’t have it, she left this letter with me for Monsieur, and at nine o’clock off she went.” (3:421-22)

“Mademoiselle Albertine has gone!”

The Fugitive

“Mademoiselle Albertine has gone!”

Even though he himself has been planning to leave her, convinced their relationship is finished, Marcel is devastated by the news of Albertine’s departure: “The present calamity was the worst that I had experienced in my life.” However, when he read the farewell letter she had left him, saying that “our life together has become impossible,” he merely dismissed it as “one of her tricks.”

He alternates between denial and despair, but as the days pass, he gradually accepts that she has indeed gone.

... and thus, at every moment, there was one more of those innumerable and humble “selves” that compose our personality which was still unaware of Albertine’s departure and must be informed of it; I was obliged—and this was more cruel than if they had been strangers and did not share my susceptibility to suffering—to announce to all these beings, to all these “selves” who did not yet know it, the calamity that had just occurred; each of them in turn must hear for the first time the words: “Albertine has asked for her boxes”—those coffin-shaped boxes which I had seen loaded on to the train at Balbec with my mother’s—“Albertine has gone.” Each of them had to be told of my grief. (3:437)

Desperate to bring her back, and finally accepting that he loves her and wants to marry her, he discovers that she has returned to her aunt, Mme Bontemps, at her house in Touraine. His rediscovered love for Albertine is now so strong that he even ignores overtures from the Duc de Guermantes, who is trying to arrange a marriage between Marcel and one of his nieces, “one of the prettiest girls in Paris.”

Marcel sends Saint-Loup to convince the aunt to send Albertine back to him. Robert is to reassure Mme Bontemps that Marcel’s intentions are strictly honorable and even to offer her money, but he must not let Albertine know that he has sent for her, and she must not learn of Saint-Loup’s visit. Marcel wants the aunt to send her back without Albertine knowing he has requested her. In the event, Albertine sees Saint-Loup in the house and writes, “My dear, you have sent your friend Saint-Loup to my aunt, which was foolish. My dearest, if you

needed me, why did you not write me direct? I should have been only too delighted to come back. Do not let us have any more of these absurd complications.”

Marcel is overjoyed to read her letter: “so that I said to myself: ‘How happy we are going to be!’ But, now that I was assured of her return, I must not appear to be seeking to hasten it, but must on the contrary efface the bad impression left by Saint-Loup’s intervention, which I could always disavow later on by saying that he had acted upon his own initiative, because he had always been in favor of our marriage.”

And so, with his happiness assured and success firmly in his grasp, all Marcel has to do is simply write back and tell Albertine he wants her. Eternal happiness is his for the taking. But instead he writes a preposterous letter to explain that the very morning she had left him he had just received a letter from his mother consenting to their marriage. How lucky she had left just then because otherwise, with the mother’s blessing, she might have been tempted to stay and they might have been linked together forever in a life that he now understands would have made her unhappy. He then goes on to mention that, not knowing she was leaving and confident of his mother’s consent to their union, he had made some purchases for their life together.

I had thought of organizing our existence in the most independent manner possible, and to begin with I wished you to have that yacht in which you could go cruising while I, not being well enough to accompany you, would wait for you in port (I had written to Elstir to ask for his advice, since you admire his taste); and on land I wished you to have a motor-car to yourself, for your very own, in which you could go out, could travel wherever you chose. The yacht was almost ready; it is named, after a wish that you expressed at Balbec, the *Swan*. And remembering that you preferred Rolls-Royces to any other cars, I had ordered one. But now that we are never to meet again, as I have no other hope of persuading you to accept either the boat or the car (to me they would be quite useless), I had thought—as I had ordered them through a middleman, in your name—that you might perhaps by countermanding them yourself save me the expense of the yacht and the car which are no longer required. But this, and many other matters, would have needed to be discussed. And I find that so long as I am capable of falling in love with you again, which will not be for long, it would be madness, for the sake of a sailing boat and a Rolls-Royce, to meet again and to jeopardize your life’s happiness since you have decided that it

lies in your living apart from me. (3:463-64)

To be fair to Marcel, he does debate whether this was the most sensible approach to have taken.

No doubt, just as I had said in the past to Albertine: “I don’t love you,” in order that she should love me, “I forget people when I don’t see them,” in order that she might see me often, “I have decided to leave you,” in order to forestall any idea of separation, now it was because I was absolutely determined that she must return within a week that I said to her: “Farewell for ever”; it was because I wished to see her again that I said to her: “I think it would be dangerous to see you”; it was because living apart from her seemed to me worse than death that I wrote to her: “You were right, we would be unhappy together.” (3:465)

Albertine pays him back in his own currency and writes that she is at his disposal for the countermanding of the Rolls.

“Dear friend, thank you for all the nice things you wrote to me. I am at your disposal for the countermanding of the Rolls, if you think that I can help in any way, as I am sure I can. You have only to let me know the name of the agents. You would let yourself be taken for a ride by these people who are only interested in selling, and what would you do with a motorcar, you who never stir out of the house? I am deeply touched that you have kept a happy memory of our last outing. You may be sure that for my part I shall never forget that doubly crepuscular drive (since night was falling and we were about to part) and that it will be effaced from my memory only when the darkness is complete.” (3:477)

Surprised by Albertine’s submissive response and her agreement to contact the agents, he dismisses her subtle declaration of “love until death” as “merely phrase-making.” Just as when he first saw Berma performing in *Phèdre* and had criticized her lack of theatrics and failed to understand the simplicity of her genius, so he now criticizes Albertine for her theatrics and fails to understand the poetic and heartfelt simplicity of her declaration. Instead, he smugly congratulates himself on having educated and improved her.

Marcel’s next brilliant stratagem is to write to Andrée and invite her to stay with him in Paris. Thinking that this will finally change Albertine’s mind, he

writes to tell her of Andrée's pending visit and suggests that Andrée's visit will probably result in marriage.

While Marcel is pondering his next irresistible move, Saint-Loup returns to Paris with the report of his unsuccessful expedition to Touraine. He describes his visit to the aunt's house and mentions seeing a shed, and then going down a long passage to the drawing room.

At these words, shed, passage, drawing room, and before he had even finished uttering them, my heart was shattered more instantaneously than by an electric current ... How I repeated to myself these words, shed, passage, drawing room, renewing the shock at will, after Saint-Loup had left me! In a shed one girl can hide with another. And in that drawing room, who knew what Albertine did when her aunt was not there? Had I then imagined the house in which she was living as incapable of possessing either a shed or a drawing room? No, I had not imagined it at all, except as a vague dwelling. I had suffered first of all where the place that Albertine was had acquired a geographical identity, when I had learned that, instead of being in two or three possible places, she was in Touraine; those words uttered by her concierge had marked in my heart as upon a map the place where I must suffer. But once I had grown accustomed to the idea that she was in a house in Touraine, I had still not seen the house; never had there occurred to my imagination this appalling idea of a drawing room, a shed, a passage, which struck me now ... as the rooms in which Albertine came and went, lived her life, as those rooms in particular and not an infinity of possible rooms which had cancelled one another out. With the words, shed, passage, drawing room, I became aware of my folly in having left Albertine for a week in that accursed place whose *existence* (instead of its mere possibility) had just been revealed to me. Alas! when Saint-Loup told me also that in this drawing room he had heard someone singing at the top of her voice in an adjoining room and that it was Albertine who was singing, I realized with despair that, rid of me at last, she was happy! She had regained her freedom....

Set free once more, released from the cage in which, here at home, I used to leave her for days on end without letting her come to my room, Albertine had regained all her attraction in my eyes; she had become once more the girl whom everyone pursued, the marvelous bird of the earliest days. (3:480-81)

Crazed with jealousy and rediscovered love, he finally stops playing games and tells her he wants her.

I forsook all pride with regard to Albertine, and sent her a despairing telegram begging her to return on any terms, telling her that she could do whatever she liked, that I asked only to be allowed to take her in my arms for a minute three times a week, before she went to bed. And if she had said once a week only, I would have accepted the restriction.

She never came back. My telegram had just gone off to her when I myself received one. It was from Mme Bontemps. The world is not created once and for all for each of us individually. There are added to it in the course of our lives things of which we have never had any suspicion. Alas! it was not a suppression of suffering that the first two lines of the telegram produced in me: “My poor friend, our little Albertine is no more. Forgive me for breaking the terrible news to you who were so fond of her. She was thrown by her horse against a tree while she was out riding. All our efforts to restore her to life were unavailing. If only I had died in her stead!” No, not the suppression of suffering, but a suffering until then unimagined, that of realizing that she would not come back. (3:485)

A few minutes later Françoise enters the room while Marcel is still holding the telegram and cheerfully tells him she has a couple of letters from Albertine. Obviously Albertine must have written them just before she went riding. The second and final letter was very short.

“Is it too late for me to return to you? If you have not yet written to Andrée, would you be prepared to take me back? I shall abide by your decision, but I beg you not to be long in making it known to me; you can imagine how impatiently I shall be waiting. If it is to tell me to return, I shall take the train at once. Yours with all my heart, Albertine.” (3:487)

The Search for Truth

Inconsolable with grief, Marcel suffers through the hot summer nights reliving his days with Albertine, struggling to accept the reality of her death. But the demons of jealousy resurface and he remembers some suggestion of lesbian activities in the bathhouses at Balbec; he wonders if Albertine was involved.

Needing, once and for all, to discover the truth, he decides to make inquiries.

I wondered who I could best send down to make inquiries on the spot, at Balbec. Aimé [the headwaiter] seemed to me to be a suitable person. Apart from his thorough knowledge of the place, he belonged to that category of working-class people who have a keen eye to their own advantage, are loyal to those they serve and indifferent to any form of morality, and of whom—because, if we pay them well, they prove themselves, in their obedience to our will, as incapable of indiscretion, lethargy or dishonesty as they are devoid of scruples—we say: “They are excellent people.” (3:502)

Aimé hastens to Balbec with instructions to question the woman in charge of the bathhouses concerning Albertine’s activities with other girls. After a while, Aimé reports back to Marcel by letter:

“Monsieur:

Monsieur will kindly forgive me for not having written sooner to Monsieur. The person whom Monsieur had instructed me to see had gone away for a few days, and, anxious to justify the confidence which Monsieur had placed in me, I did not wish to return empty-handed.” (3:525)

He then goes on to report that, among her other suspicious activities with young girls, Albertine would lock herself in the shower stall with another older woman and then pay a ten-franc tip. “As this person said to me, you can imagine that if they were just stringing beads they wouldn’t have given a tip often francs.”

The evidence that Aimé provides seems pretty conclusive, but Marcel remembers that his grandmother had described the bath attendant as “a woman who must suffer from a disease of mendacity.” Still uncertain, he therefore sends Aimé to Touraine to see what he can learn about Albertine’s activities when she stayed with her aunt, Mme Bontemps.

In a long and detailed second letter, Aimé reports how a young laundry girl described the early morning joys of frolicking naked on the riverbank in Touraine with her friends and Albertine.

“... as it is already very hot down there and the sun beats down on you even through the trees, they used to lie about on the grass drying themselves

and playing and stroking and tickling one another. The young laundry-girl confessed to me that she enjoyed playing around with her girl friends and that seeing that Mlle Albertine was always rubbing up against her in her bathing-wrap she made her take it off and used to caress her with her tongue along the throat and arms, even on the soles of her feet which Mlle Albertine held out to her. The laundry-girl undressed too, and they played at pushing each other into the water. After that she told me nothing more, but being always at your service and ready to do anything to oblige you, I took the young laundry-girl to bed with me. She asked me if I would like her to do to me what she used to do to Mlle Albertine when she took off her bathing-dress. And she said to me: (If you could have seen how she used to wriggle, that young lady, she said to me (oh, it's too heavenly) and she got so excited that she could not keep from biting me.) I could still see the marks on the laundry-girl's arms. And I can understand Mlle Albertine's pleasure, for that young wench is really a very good performer." (3:535-36)

Unlike many of the cheats and scoundrels in the novel, Aimé always went the extra inch for his clients.

Anyone less masochistic than Marcel would have ceased his inquiries at that point, but Marcel could not stop picking at his scab and decided to question Andrée about her Sapphic tastes: "I spoke to Andrée, not in a questioning tone but as though I had known all the time, perhaps from Albertine, of the fondness that she herself, Andrée, had for women and of her own relations with Mlle Vinteuil. She admitted it all without the slightest reluctance, smiling as she spoke." However, she denied that Albertine was in any way involved and insisted that Albertine had a horror of "that sort of thing."

So strong is his desire to understand the truth about Albertine's passions that Marcel pays two laundry girls to have sex together while he listens in an adjoining room. Similar to the original sexual encounter between Charlus and Jupien, Marcel does not observe directly but listens to the sounds of passion from behind "the curtain that is forever lowered for other people over what happens in the mysterious intimacy of every human creature." Again, as with Charlus and Jupien, the sounds of pain and of pleasure are hard to distinguish, one from the other. Listening from an adjoining room without being able to see, Marcel observes that the sounds of pleasure are not so different from the sounds of surgery performed without anesthetic. Despite the strenuous exertions of the young laundry girls, Marcel is unable to recapture or to experience the inner

sensations of Albertine when she was making love with another woman.

After several months have passed since Albertine's death, Marcel realizes that his passions are fading, even though his curiosity is still keen. As the proof of Albertine's behavior accumulates, the pain he feels is diminishing; he is approaching indifference.

Finally, taking a page from Aimé's book, he makes love to Andrée, telling her that he wants to have sex with a woman who had had sex with Albertine.

Andrée said to me with a lurking smile: "Ah! yes, but you're a man. And so we can't do the same things as I used to do with Albertine." ... "Ah! we spent many happy hours together; she was so caressing, so passionate. But it wasn't only with me that she liked to enjoy herself. She had met a handsome young man at Mme Verdurin's called Morel. They came to an understanding at once. He undertook—having her permission to enjoy them himself, for he liked little novices, and as soon as he had set them on the path of evil would abandon them—he undertook to entice young fisher-girls in remote villages, or young laundry-girls, who would fall for a boy but might not have responded to a girl's advances. As soon as a girl was well under his control, he'd bring her to a safe place and hand her over to Albertine. For fear of losing Morel, who took part in it all too, the girl always obeyed, and yet she lost him all the same, because, as he was afraid of what might happen and also as once or twice was enough for him, he would run off leaving a false address. Once he had the nerve to bring one of these girls, with Albertine, to a brothel at Couliville, where four or five of the women had her together, or in turn. That was his passion, and Albertine's too." (3:612-13)

Andrée proceeds to tell him about sex under the trees with Albertine at the Buttes-Chaumont and in the Petit Trianon at Versailles. She tells him the truth about the incident with the syringas. She and Albertine both loved syringas but she made up the story about allergies in order to distract him from taking them upstairs, because she and Albertine had been making love in his bed when he returned home early. But with each revelation, what would once have destroyed him is leaving him indifferent.

As an afternoon stroller, seeing a misty crescent in the sky, thinks: "So that's the vast moon," I said to myself: "What, so that truth which I've sought for so long, which I've dreaded, is nothing more than these few

words uttered in the course of a conversation, words to which one cannot even give one's whole attention because one isn't alone!" Besides, it took me at a serious disadvantage, as I had exhausted myself with Andrée. (3:615)

The final realization of the death of his love and the oblivion of his feelings comes a few months later during a visit to Venice with his mother. One day he receives a telegram at the hotel, badly transcribed by the Italian staff, it is nevertheless legible:

"My dear friend, you think me dead, forgive me, I am quite alive, I long to see you, talk about marriage, when do you return? Affectionately. Albertine." (3:656)

He is surprised at the indifference with which this news filled him. He has become a new person: the person who had loved Albertine is dead.

I put [the telegram] back in my pocket, but made up my mind to behave as though I had never received it. I had finally ceased to love Albertine. So that this love, after departing so greatly from what I had anticipated on the basis of my love for Gilberte, after obliging me to make so long and painful a detour, had ended too, after having proved an exception to it, by succumbing, like my love for Gilberte, to the general law of oblivion. (3:659)

Return of Gilberte

After a long absence, Gilberte reappears in the novel. Following Swann's death, his widow, Odette, had married her longtime lover, Baron de Forcheville, and both she and Gilberte had taken his name. Having inherited a vast fortune from one of Swann's uncles, Gilberte—now Mlle de Forcheville—has finally become socially acceptable and is being received enthusiastically in all the best houses, including that of the Duchesse de Guermantes.

Some of Swann's former women-friends took a great interest in Gilberte. When the aristocracy learned of her latest inheritance, they began to remark how well brought up she was and what a charming wife she would make. (3:591)

Recovering from Albertine's death, Marcel goes walking one day through the Bois de Boulogne, where he sees three young ladies walking together, two dark-haired and one fair. As they are getting into their carriage, the fair-haired girl gives him a long, lingering look, which reignites his interest in the opposite sex. From a doorman he discovers that her name is Mlle d'Eporcheville, and he excitedly remembers that was the name of the well-bred young lady whom Robert had told him visited brothels with Mme Putbus's maid. He telegraphs Robert for confirmation and learns that he had been mistaken: the girl in the brothel was Mlle de l'Orgeville, not d'Eporcheville. However, his disappointment is soon banished by the excitement of finding that his article has finally been published in *Le Figaro*. He is ecstatic. His lifelong dream has been fulfilled: he is a published writer!

Needing to share his news immediately, he rushes into the Guermantes' drawing room to tell the duke and duchess, and there in the room is the fair-haired girl from the Bois de Boulogne. The duchess introduces her as Mlle de Forcheville; the doorman had earlier mispronounced her name. It is Gilberte.

Gilberte has carefully obliterated her Jewish background as carefully as she has reduced Swann's name to a simple "S" in her signature:

... by signing herself "G. S. Forcheville." The real hypocrisy in this signature was made manifest by the suppression not so much of the other letters of the name "Swann" as of those of the name "Gilberte." For by reducing the innocent Christian name to a simple "G," Mlle de Forcheville seemed to insinuate to her friends that the similar amputation applied to the name "Swann" was due equally to the necessity of abbreviation. Indeed she gave a special significance to the "S," extending it with a sort of long tail which ran across the "G," but which one felt to be transitory and destined to disappear like the tail which, still long in the monkey, has ceased to exist in man. (3:599-60)

However, she knows that Swann and the Guermantes had been close friends until his death. At one point Gilberte asks the duchess timidly,

"I believe you knew my father quite well." "Why, of course we did," said Mme de Guermantes in a melancholy tone which proved that she understood the daughter's grief and with a spurious intensity as though to conceal the fact that she was not quite sure whether she did remember the

father very clearly. “We knew him very well, I remember him *very well*.” (As indeed she might, seeing that he had come to see her almost every day for twenty-five years.) “I know quite well who he was, let me tell you,” she went on, as though she were seeking to explain to the daughter what sort of a man her father had been and to provide her with some information about him, “he was a great friend of my mother-in-law and he was also very attached to my brother-in-law Palamède.” “He used to come here too, in fact he used to come to luncheon here,” added M. de Guermantes with ostentatious modesty and a scrupulous regard for accuracy. “You remember, Oriane. What a fine man your father was! One felt that he must come of a very decent family. As a matter of fact, I once saw his father and mother long ago. What excellent people they were, he and they!”

One felt that if Swann and his parents had still been alive, the Duc de Guermantes would not have hesitated to recommend them for jobs as gardeners. (3: 592)

Marcel is as appalled by the cruel snobbery of Gilberte as much as by that of the Guermantes, and he despises her betrayal of her father.

As for Mlle de Forcheville, I could not help feeling saddened when I thought of her. She, Swann’s daughter, whom he would have so loved to see at the Guermantes’s, whom the latter had refused to give their great friend the pleasure of inviting—to think that she was now spontaneously sought after by them.... But when, to this daughter of his, he used from time to time to say, taking her in his arms and kissing her: “How comforting it is, my darling, to have a daughter like you; one day when I’m no longer here, if people still mention your poor papa, it will be only to you and because of you,” Swann, in thus pinning a timorous and anxious hope of survival on his daughter after his death, was as mistaken as an old banker who, having made his will in favor of a little dancer whom he is keeping and who has very nice manners, tells himself that though to her he is no more than a great friend, she will remain faithful to his memory ...

The illusions of paternal love are perhaps no less poignant than those of the other kind; many daughters regard their fathers only as the old men who leave their fortunes to them. Gilberte’s presence in a drawing-room, instead of being an occasion for people to speak of her father from time to time, was an obstacle in the way of their seizing the opportunities that might still have remained for them to do so, and that were becoming more and more

rare. Even in connection with the things [Swann] had said, the presents he had given, people acquired the habit of not mentioning him, and she who ought to have kept his memory young, if not perpetuated it, found herself hastening and completing the work of death and oblivion. (3:604-5)

Venice

The way in which Gilberte buried the memory of her father is similar to the way that Marcel is burying the memory of Albertine and moving on with his life, and it was this new freedom that allows him to accompany his mother to Venice. Apart from the unexpected telegram from Albertine, Venice is notable for two other incidents.

M. de Norpois and Mme de Villeparisis are staying at the same hotel as Marcel and his mother. Their old age shows cruelly in their faces, and Mme de Villeparisis has developed an unsightly skin rash. Also staying in the hotel is an old neighbor from Combray, Mme Sazerat. Upon hearing the name “Mme de Villeparisis,” Mme Sazerat becomes very agitated and asks Marcel to point her out, explaining,

“Because Mme de Villeparisis was, before her second marriage, the Duchess d’Havr , beautiful as an angel, wicked as a demon, who drove my father to distraction, ruined him and then abandoned him immediately. Well, she may have behaved to him like the lowest prostitute, she may have been the cause of our having had to live, my family and myself, in humble circumstances at Combray, but now that my father is dead, my consolation is to think that he loved the most beautiful woman of his generation, and as I’ve never set eyes on her, it will be a sort of solace in spite of everything.” (3:648)

While Marcel keeps trying to show Mme Sazerat the table where Mme de Villeparisis is sitting with Norpois, she is unable to follow his directions.

“Yes, there she is, at the second table.”

“Then we can’t be counting from the same point. At what I count as the second table there’s only an old gentleman and a little hunchbacked, red-faced, hideous woman.”

“That’s her!” (3:649)

As always in Proust, Time has the last word.

The other incident worth mentioning in Venice occurs on the final day of the visit, when Marcel and his mother are preparing to return to Paris.

I read in the register of guests expected at the hotel: “Mme Putbus and attendants.” At once, the thought of all the hours of carnal pleasure of which our departure would deprive me raised this desire, which existed in me in a chronic state, to the level of a feeling, and drowned it in a vague melancholy. (3:666)

Even when reduced to the vague term “attendant,” Mme Putbus’s maid retains the suggestive allure of forbidden pleasures till the very end.

With the visit to the Duchesse de Guermantes and the trip to Venice, Marcel—and the reader—are now emerging from the claustrophobic world of Albertine and back into the “real world” of society.

On the train back from Venice, Marcel and his mother read some letters that they had received before their departure from the hotel and saved to break the monotony of the journey. Marcel’s letter is from Gilberte in which she announces her engagement to Robert de Saint-Loup. It was she who had sent him a telegram at the hotel. The Italian staff had transcribed the wrong name. Albertine is not alive after all.

His mother’s letter contains news of an equally surprising engagement between Mme de Cambremer’s son and Jupien’s niece, whom Charlus had adopted and elevated to the title of Mlle d’Oloron. The two marriages provide an interesting study of the Faubourg Saint-Germain, which we have been neglecting.

Society Weddings

The engagement of Robert and Gilberte is fairly simple: blue-blooded aristocrat marries wealthy heiress, provenance immaterial. “Mlle de Forcheville possessing a hundred million francs, Mme de Marsantes [Robert’s mother] had decided that she would be an excellent match for her son.” After a discreet but vicious battle with the Princesse de Silistrie, who also had an unmarried son and

claimed that an engagement between Saint-Loup and the daughter of Odette and a Jew would mean the end of the Faubourg Saint-Germain, Mme de Marsantes “made a formal offer of marriage on Saint-Loup’s behalf, and the engagement was immediately announced.” One of the other rivals for Gilberte’s hand had been the Duc de Châtellerauld, but he finally settled on the Duc de Luxembourg’s daughter, who was only worth 20 million francs. The Duc de Châtellerauld was the young aristocrat who pretended to be an English tourist when he picked up a young man on the Champs-Élysées. In the Faubourg Saint-Germain, marriage was never about love, only about money and position.

The marriage between the Marquis de Cambremer and Mlle d’Oloron, however, was both more complex and more entertaining. It should be remembered that Mme de Cambremer’s brother was Legrandin, who first appeared outside the church at Combray. Despite all his left-wing rants against the aristocracy, Legrandin had always been a snob and had recently begun calling himself, with no justification, Legrandin de Méséglise. As his snobbism became more open, so too did his other vice, and he had gradually become a more active homosexual. Part of his lithe and energetic appearance was due to the exercise he got from hurling himself through the doorways of certain low haunts that he did not want people to see him enter. Trading on his sister’s successful marriage to the Marquis de Cambremer and his own shameless obsequiousness, he had wormed his way into the favor of the Princesse de Parme. The princess, as a friend of Charlus, had promised to find a husband for his adopted heir, Mlle d’Oloron (Jupien’s niece), and had asked Charlus if he knew of Legrandin and his nephew Léonor, Mme de Cambremer’s son.

Charlus was delighted at the suggested marriage to Legrandin’s nephew because he had fond memories of an intimate encounter with Legrandin on a train.

He smiled a vague smile. “It’s perhaps the same man,” he said to himself. When he learned that the prospective bridegroom was the son of Legrandin’s sister, he said: “Why, that would be really extraordinary! If he took after his uncle, it wouldn’t alarm me; after all, I’ve always said that they made the best husbands.” (3:681)

As it so happened, the boy, Léonor, did take after his uncle, preferring men to women, and his parents were relieved to see him married at all. Everybody knew that Mlle d’Oloron was Jupien’s niece and had started life as a seamstress, but they were all willing to ignore that fact, both because of the old and noble title

she now bore and because she was Charlus's financial heir. Ironically, even though the marriage would unite the Cambremer and Guermantes families, and even though she had dedicated her life to being accepted by the princess and the Duchesse de Guermantes, the only person who objected was Mme de Cambremer.

Being spiteful by nature, she reckoned the pleasure of humiliating her family above that of glorifying herself. And so, not being enamored of her son, and having rapidly taken a dislike to her future daughter-in-law, she declared that it was a calamity for a Cambremer to marry a person who had sprung from heaven knows where, and had such bad teeth. (3:679)

Despite her objections, the union proceeded and Mlle d'Oloron (Jupien's niece but now a Guermantes) was married to the homosexual son of the Marquise de Cambremer, née Legrandin. The Duc de Guermantes also gave his enthusiastic support to the wedding because it allowed him again to suggest that Mlle d'Oloron was really his brother Charlus's natural daughter. The duke went to great lengths to promote his brother's reputation as a virile womanizer and to suppress any unsavory rumors to the contrary. Emboldened by the support of Charlus and the duke, Legrandin was now calling himself the Comte de Méséglise, which is how he signed the marriage register close to the name of the Duc de Guermantes. Thus, by fraud, deceit, and avarice, the Guermantes way and the Méséglise way were "cheek by jowl" finally united.

The New Saint-Loup

But neither of the two marriages was to prove happy for the brides. Young Marie-Antoinette, already stricken with typhoid and barely able to crawl to the church, died a few weeks later. Gilberte's unhappiness took a different form.

Despite all her wealth, her social success, and her fashionable marriage, Gilberte does not find happiness any more than poor Marie-Antoinette. Her husband, Robert de Saint-Loup, is openly unfaithful: "Never stirring, at a party, from the side of some woman whom he afterwards accompanied home, leaving Mme de Saint-Loup to return as best she could." Increasingly she lived a quiet life alone, at Tansonville outside Combray in her father's old house where Marcel had first glimpsed her in *Swann's Way*. But Robert's real problem was deeper and more sinister.

As Charlus had suggested, when talking of Legrandin, the vices of the uncles may also be found in the nephews. Robert de Saint-Loup apparently shared the same tastes as his uncle Charlus. The mistresses that he so publicly flaunted were merely a cover for his real passions. Marcel's friend of so many years, in whose room he had spent a night at Doncières, was currently conducting an ardently sexual affair with Charlie Morel.

Marcel first learns of the affair from Jupien, still the baron's loyal servant.

“The boy [Morel] was free to do whatever he liked. But if there was one direction in which he ought never to have looked, that was in the direction of the Baron's nephew. All the more so as the Baron loved his nephew like his own son. He has tried to break up the marriage [to Gilberte Swann]—it's really shameful. And he must have gone about it with the most devilish cunning, for no one was ever more opposed to that sort of thing by nature than the Marquis de Saint-Loup.... No, however despicably—there's no other word for it—he deserted the Baron, that was his business. But to take up with the nephew! There are some things that just aren't done.” (3:695-96)

Strong words indeed from a man who, as we will see, ran a male S&M brothel in a Paris backstreet.

Aimé further confirms the story when Marcel starts to make inquiries, and suggests that Saint-Loup's tastes had been known for years.

“Why, of course, Monsieur,” he said to me, “it's common knowledge, I've known it for ever so long. The first year the Monsieur came to Balbec, M. le Marquis shut himself up with my lift-boy, on the pretext of developing some photographs of Monsieur's grandmother. The boy made a complaint, and we had the greatest difficulty in hushing the matter up. And besides, Monsieur, Monsieur remembers the day, no doubt, when he came to lunch at the restaurant with M. le Marquis de Saint-Loup and his mistress, whom M. le Marquis was using as a screen. Monsieur doubtless remembers that M. le Marquis left the room, pretending that he had lost his temper. Of course I don't suggest for a moment that Madame was in the right. She was leading him a regular dance. But as to that day, no one will ever make me believe that M. le Marquis's anger wasn't put on, and that he hadn't a good reason to get away from Monsieur and Madame.” (3:698-99)

Marcel pays a visit to Gilberte at Tansonville where he finds her leading a sad and lonely existence, wearing too much makeup, like an actress, in an effort to rekindle her husband's affections. Gilberte's mother, Odette, had initially opposed the marriage, thinking that with 100 million francs Gilberte should be able to get a prince. But she is now one of Robert's keenest supporters.

Having been a kept woman all her life, Odette no longer had anyone to protect her and buy her "little gifts." Gilberte kept tight control of her inheritance, controlling what Robert spent and, even more so, her mother. Robert, being in need of funds to spend on Morel, had persuaded his mother-in-law

... to smooth down any little difficulty that might arise between Gilberte and himself, to obtain his wife's consent to his going on a trip with Morel. Odette, having applied herself thereto, was at once rewarded with a magnificent ruby. To pay for this, it was necessary for Gilberte to be more generous to her husband. Odette urged her in this direction with all the more fervor in that it was she herself who would benefit from her daughter's generosity. Thus, thanks to Robert, she was enabled, on the threshold of her fifties (some said her sixties), to dazzle every table at which she dined, every party at which she appeared, with an unparalleled splendor without needing to have, as in the past, a "friend" who now would no longer have coughed up, or even fallen for her. And so she had entered, permanently it seemed, into the period of final chastity, and yet she had never been so elegant. (3:702)

Marcel is devastated by all he learns about his oldest and closest friend, Robert:

Personally I found it absolutely immaterial from a moral point of view whether one took one's pleasure with a man or with a woman, and only too natural and human that one should take it where one could find it. If, therefore, Robert had not been married, his liaison with Charlie ought not to have caused me pain. And yet I realized that the pain I felt would have been as acute if Robert had been a bachelor. In anyone else, his conduct would have left me indifferent. But I wept when I reflected that I had once had so great an affection for a different Saint-Loup, an affection which, I sensed all too clearly from the cold and evasive manner which he now adopted, he no longer felt for me, since men, now that they were capable of arousing his desires, could no longer inspire his friendship. (3:704)

The volume ends on a somber and pessimistic note. The Duc de Guermantes had been dismissive in his review of Marcel's article in *Figaro*, and his friend Bloch did not even mention it. Marcel accepts that he can never become a writer. Not only disillusioned with the hypocrisy and snobbishness of society and the emptiness of love, Marcel must finally admit that even friendship has no meaning.

To learn this of anyone else would not have affected me, of anyone in the world save Robert. The doubt that Aimé's words had left in my mind tarnished all our friendship at Balbec and Doncières, and although I did not believe in friendship, or that I had ever felt any real friendship for Robert, when I thought about those stories of the lift-boy and of the restaurant in which I had had lunch with Saint-Loup and Rachel, I was obliged to make an effort to restrain my tears. (3:705-6)

Time Regained

This final volume continues where the previous one ended: with Marcel's visit to M. and Mme de Saint-Loup (Robert and Gilberte) at Swann's old house at Tansonville, outside Combray. The time line is far more fragmented than in the previous six volumes, and Marcel, who is still a young man at the beginning of this volume, realizes that he is an old man by the end. The visit to Tansonville is followed by a break of several years while the narrator stays in a sanatorium for health reasons. The story picks up again with a visit to Paris during the war years. Another stay in the sanatorium is followed by a second visit to Paris toward the end of the war. The final section takes place after the defeat of Germany when Marcel returns to Paris following an absence of several years and attends a musical reception at the home of the Prince and Princesse de Guermantes.

The somber tone of disillusion and world-weariness that pervaded *The Fugitive* continues into this final volume, and Marcel's sense of failure and futility is relieved only in the concluding pages. Even the cherished sights of his childhood in Combray depress him. "I was distressed to see how little I relived my early years. I found the Vivonne narrow and ugly alongside the towpath." The loss of the sense of wonder that the walks along the Vivonne once inspired reinforce his conviction that he will never become a writer, that his imagination has faded and he has nothing to say.

Combray Revisited

Although Marcel is paying a visit to the newlywed couple at home, Robert is usually away in Paris and seldom present at the house. Marcel therefore spends most of his time with Gilberte, reliving the scenes when they were both children in Combray. Robert's absence is excused with transparent lies on his part and anxious resignation on hers.

[Robert] came several times to Tansonville while I was there and I found him very different from the man I had known. His [homosexual] life had not coarsened him or slowed him down, as had happened with M. de Charlus.... Gradually, just as M. de Charlus had grown heavier, Robert ... had become slimmer and taken to moving more rapidly, a contrary effect of an identical vice. This swiftness of movement had, moreover, various

psychological causes, the fear of being seen, the wish to conceal that fear, the feverishness which is generated by self-dissatisfaction and boredom. He was in the habit of visiting certain low haunts into which, as he did not wish to be seen going in or coming out, he would hurl himself in such a way as to present the smallest possible target to the unfriendly glances of possible passers-by....

Becoming—at any rate during this tiresome phase—much harder in his manner, towards his friends, towards for example myself, he now exhibited scarcely any traces of sensibility. (3:717-18)

While Robert pursues a life of debauchery in Paris and conducts a love affair with Charlie Morel, Gilberte waits at home in quiet desperation for his next visit. Dressed in garish makeup, hoping to rekindle his desires, she would anxiously await Robert's promised arrival from Paris.

The thought that the time her husband's train was approaching and she did not know whether he would really come or whether he would send one of those telegrams of which M. de Guermantes had wittily fixed the formula: "Cannot come, lie to follow," turned her cheeks pale beneath the violet sweat of her grease paint and drew dark rings round her eyes. (3:721)

On one of their many walks in the countryside around Combray, Gilberte surprises Marcel by saying:

"If you were not too hungry and if it was not so late, by taking that road to the left and then turning to the right, in less than a quarter of an hour we should be at Guermantes." It was as though she had said to me: "Turn to the left, then bear right, and you will touch the intangible, you will reach the inaccessibly remote tracts of which one never knows anything on this earth save the direction, save ... the 'way.'" One of my other surprises was that of seeing the "source of the Vivonne," which I imagined as something as extraterrestrial as the Gates of Hell, and which was merely a sort of rectangular basin in which bubbles rose to the surface. And the third occasion was when Gilberte said to me: "If you like, we might after all go out one afternoon and then we can go to Guermantes, taking the road by Méséglise, which is the nicest way," a sentence which upset all the ideas of my childhood by informing me that the two "ways" were not as irreconcilable as I had supposed. (3:710-11)

She also surprises him by revealing that she had been in love with him as a small child and the indelicate gesture at their first meeting, beside the hawthorn bushes, was a sign of her juvenile lust. He asks why she did not return his love later, when they used to play together in the Champs-Élysées. “Yes, but there you were too fond of me. I felt you were prying into everything I did.”

Wartime Paris

This visit to Tansonville is followed by a break of many “long years which I spent far from Paris receiving treatment in a sanatorium.” When he returns to the capital during the middle of the war, in 1916, Marcel finds a society in which everything has changed and the social order has been turned upside down.

The socially unacceptable Mme Verdurin and the socially insignificant Mme Bontemps are now acknowledged as “the Queens of this war-time Paris.” Mme Verdurin’s social success is hardly surprising, given her history of relentless striving and her genuine ability to anticipate the next artistic fashion. But her current success is also due to her relationship with Mme Bontemps, Albertine’s aunt and wife to the secretary of the minister of public works.

Mme Bontemps’ social ascendancy is due entirely to her husband’s sudden elevation to the war cabinet, where he is known as a “right-till-the-ender.” Arguing that Germany should be broken up into small and powerless states and the kaiser stood against a wall and shot, M. Bontemps represents the jingoistic extreme of French public opinion. His wife, a small-minded provincial housewife, suddenly finds herself living in Paris with access to the seat of power and thus is courted by fashionable society.

For the first three days in her new position, Mme Bontemps is bewildered by all the strange titles and conventions of high society. “But by the fourth day she had begun to be firmly installed in the Faubourg Saint-Germain” though with a few traces of her provincial background, like eggshells behind her ears, still showing. After a fortnight she has shaken these off, and before the end of the first month she is firmly in command.

... not a duchess would have gone to bed without having inquired of Mme Bontemps or Mme Verdurin, at least by telephone, what there had been in the evening communiqué, what had been deliberately left out, how the Greek situation was developing, what offensive was being prepared, in a

word all the news that the public would know only on the following day or later but of which the two ladies staged the equivalent of a dressmaker's private view. (3:750)

Of course, the two ladies' indiscretions are all duly noted by the city's many German spies and reported back to Berlin.

But many large hotels were at this period peopled with spies, who duly noted the news announced over the telephone by Bontemps with an indiscretion which might have had serious consequences but for a fortunate lack of accuracy in his reports, which invariably were contradicted by events. (3:755)

Mme Verdurin's social life has also undergone a sea change, and she suffers less and less from boredom.

Another noticeable change was that, as more and more smart people made advances to Mme Verdurin, inversely the number of those whom she dubbed "bores" diminished. By a sort of magical transformation, every bore who had come to call on her and asked to be invited to her parties immediately became a charming and intelligent person. In short, at the end of a year, the number of bores had dwindled to such an extent that "the fear and awfulness of being bored," which had filled so large a place in the conversation and played so great a role in the life of Mme Verdurin, had almost entirely disappeared.... And the terror of being bored would doubtless, for want of bores, have entirely abandoned Mme Verdurin had she not, in some slight degree, replaced the vanishing bores by others recruited from the ranks of the former faithful. (3:750-51)

The final key to the Verdurins' social success was that the source of their wealth, unlike that of the Guermantes', was industry, not landed property. Consequently, in the booming wartime economy, their income and wealth simply increases and they are able to entertain in luxury. "Almost every day of the week, all the most interesting men of every kind, and all the smartest women in Paris" flock to avail themselves of the luxuries like heat and electricity, which the Verdurins offer. Proust contrasts the extravagant luxury of wartime Paris with the misery of the troops.

When the time came for dinner, the restaurants were full; and if,

passing in the street, I saw a wretched soldier on leave, escaped for six days from the constant danger of death and about to return to the trenches, halt his gaze for a moment upon the illuminated windows ... it was with a philosophical shake of the head, without hatred, that on the eve of setting out again for the war, the soldier would say to himself, as he saw the shirkers jostling one another in their efforts to secure a table: "You'd never know there was a war on here." (3:756)

News of the War

Back in his sanatorium, Marcel's only source of news is in letters from his friends. Although the Germans had not reached Paris, they had taken over Combray, and Gilberte now has German troops billeted on her at Tansonville. Méséglise has become the site of a battle that lasts for eight months and, according to Gilberte, will become as glorious as Austerlitz or Valmy in the annals of French history. The little bridge over the Vivonne has been destroyed by the Germans, and for a year and a half, the French hold one part of Combray and the Germans hold the other. Swann's way and the Guermantes way have been replaced by the French way and the German way.

Robert sends a "delightful" letter from the front and sounds as though he has become his old self again, generous and optimistic. He is filled with admiration for his fellow soldiers.

"My dear boy," he wrote, "... but if you could see everybody here, particularly the men of the humbler classes, working men and small shopkeepers, who did not suspect what heroism they concealed within them and might have died in their beds without suspecting it—if you could see them running under fire to help a comrade or carry off a wounded officer and then, when they have been hit themselves, smiling a few moments before they die because the medical officer has told them that the trench has been recaptured from the Germans, I assure you, my dear boy, it gives you a magnificent idea of the French people." (3:775)

Marcel is to see Robert one more time, on his next visit to Paris, when Saint-Loup has a brief leave from the front. They spend an evening together discussing old times, and all the warmth and joy of their friendship is fully and finally restored. Robert leaves Paris the following day to rejoin his regiment and is

killed two days later, bravely covering the retreat of his men.

Hotel Jupien

After leaving Robert that evening, Marcel starts to walk home across Paris, but due to his ill health, he decides he needs rest and something to drink. Because of the war, there are no streetlights, and most of the shops and bars in the dark city are closed. The only place open is a seedy-looking hotel in a side street. Marcel books a room and orders a drink to be sent up. While waiting for the room to be prepared and for the manager to return from an errand, Marcel sits in the lobby and listens to the conversations of the young men sitting around. Most of them are rough workingmen, and he gathers that many are soldiers on leave. The conversation varies between the banal and the bizarre. At one point somebody complains:

“I’m amazed the boss isn’t back yet, damn it, at this hour of the night I don’t know where he’s going to find any chains.”

“Anyhow, the chap’s already tied up.” “Tied up?” “Well, he is and he isn’t. Tie me up like that and I’d soon untie myself.” “But the padlock’s closed.” “Of course it’s closed, but it’s not impossible to open it. The trouble is the chains aren’t long enough. Don’t you try to tell me, I was beating the stuffing out of him all last night until my hands were covered with blood.” “Are you doing the beating tonight?” “No, it’s not me, it’s Maurice. But it’ll be me on Sunday, the boss promised me.” (3:840)

After the manager returns, “carrying several yards of heavy iron chains—enough to secure quite a number of convicts,” Marcel is shown to his room, where he drinks his cassis but is unable to rest because his curiosity is now so aroused. Hearing what sounds like a groan farther down the corridor, Marcel decides to investigate and puts his ear to the door of a room.

“I beseech you, mercy, have pity, untie me, don’t beat me so hard,” said a voice. “I kiss your feet, I abase myself, I promise not to offend again. Have pity on me.” “No, you filthy brute,” replied another voice, “and if you yell and drag yourself about on your knees like that, you’ll be tied to the bed, no mercy for you,” and I heard the noise of the crack of a whip, which I guessed to be reinforced with nails, for it was followed by cries of pain. At this moment I noticed that there was a small oval window opening from

the room on to the corridor and that the curtain had not been drawn across it; stealthily in the darkness I crept as far as the window and there in the room, chained to a bed like Prometheus to his rock, receiving the blows that Maurice rained upon him with a whip which was in fact studded with nails, I saw, with blood already flowing from him and covered with bruises which proved that the chastisement was not taking place for the first time—I saw before me M. de Charlus. (3:843)

The beating is interrupted by the sudden entry of Jupien, who sends Maurice back downstairs while he speaks to the baron. Charlus is not happy with the way Maurice is treating him. “I did not want to speak in front of that boy, who is very nice and does his best. But I don’t find him sufficiently brutal. He has a charming face, but when he calls me a filthy brute he might be repeating a lesson.” Jupien hastens to reassure the baron that Maurice is a genuine ruffian and had been involved in the murder of a concierge in La Villette. But the baron wants a change and Jupien recommends “the killer of oxen, the man of the slaughter-house who is so like this boy; he happened to be passing, would you care to try him?” The baron would be charmed, and the man from the slaughterhouse takes over the special treatment.

In fact, the man from the slaughterhouse is really a jeweler’s assistant, and in real life Maurice worked in a hotel. The bane of Jupien’s life was finding young men depraved and vicious enough for the baron’s taste. It was not easy. The baron had bought the hotel for Jupien to run as a male brothel with the clear understanding that Jupien was to provide an endless supply of brutal thugs. Doing his best, Jupien makes the most of the young men he is able to procure:

“He’s a milkman but he’s also one of the most dangerous thugs in Belleville” (and it was with a superbly salacious note in his voice that Jupien uttered the word “thug”). And as if this recommendation were not sufficient, he would try to add one or two further “citations.” “He has had several convictions for theft and burglary, he was in Fresnes [an infamous prison] for assaulting” (the same salacious note in his voice) “and practically murdering people in the street, and he’s been in a punishment battalion in Africa. He killed his sergeant.” (3:845)

Belleville is a hilltop, working-class area in the east end of Paris that has always been the source of social unrest and revolt. The Commune, which devastated Paris during the year of Proust’s birth, had its roots in Belleville, and

even in the twenty-first century it is a center for jihad; young women and tourists enter at their peril. Jupien had recommended the young men to the baron by swearing that they are all pimps from Belleville and would sell their own sisters for a few francs. The trouble is that the baron, and other clients who want to believe these young men are pimps and murderers, are outraged if they learn they are just honest liars trying to earn a few sous by exaggerating their criminal activities. But although Jupien coaches them endlessly to appear more vicious, the best he can get from them is “I’ll tell you something, Baron, but you won’t believe me. When I was a boy I looked through the keyhole and saw my parents having sex. Isn’t that decadent and disgusting?” The baron, seeking to plumb the depths of depravity, is driven to “despair and exasperation by this factitious attempt at perversity which only revealed stupidity and innocence.”

Jupien makes things worse by the inconsistencies in his stories. For example, he told the baron that Maurice had murdered a concierge in Belleville, but forgot to inform Maurice. Later in the evening, when the baron comes downstairs to say good night and pay for his services, he gives Maurice an extra tip:

“You never told me that you had knifed an old hag of a concierge in Belleville.” And M. de Charlus shrieked with ecstatic laughter and brought his face close to that of Maurice. “Oh! M. le Baron,” said the gigolo, who had not been warned, “how can you believe such a thing? ... Me touch a fellow-creature? A Boche, yes, because that’s war, but a woman, and an old woman at that!” This declaration of virtuous principles had the effect of a douche of cold water upon the Baron, who brusquely moved away from Maurice, having first handed him the money, but with the disgusted air of somebody who has been cheated, who pays because he does not want to make a fuss but is far from pleased. (3:855)

The bad impression made upon the baron is accentuated by the manner in which the recipient thanks him, with the words “I shall send this to the old folks and keep a bit for my brothers at the front as well.”

Too late “the young man realized his mistake and tried to repair it by saying that he loathed the sight of a cop and by daringly inquiring of the Baron: ‘How about a date’—but it was too late. The charm was dispelled ... It was in vain that the young man described in detail all the ‘filthy things’ he did with his wife; M. de Charlus merely reflected that these ‘filthy things’ amounted to very little. And in this he was not simply being insincere. For nothing is more limited than vice. In that sense one can really use a common expression and say that one is always

turning in the same vicious circle.” M. de Charlus is finally escorted downstairs by Jupien:

... to whom he did not cease to complain of the young man’s virtuousness. From the air of annoyance of Jupien, whose duty it was to have trained the young man in advance it was clear that the fictitious murderer would presently get a terrific dressing down. “The truth is exactly the opposite of what you told me,” added the Baron so that Jupien might profit by the lesson for another time. “He seems most good natured; he expresses sentiments of respect for his family.” “Still, he’s on bad terms with his father” Jupien objected. “It’s true they live together but they work in different bars.” Obviously this was not much of a crime compared with murder, but Jupien had been caught unprepared with an answer. The Baron said no more, for, if he wanted others to prepare his pleasures for him, he wanted to give himself the illusion that they were unprepared. “He’s a real crook, he said all that to mislead you, you’re too gullible,” Jupien went on, in an attempt to exculpate himself which succeeded only in wounding the vanity of M. de Charlus. (3:857-58)

After the baron leaves, Marcel emerges from his hiding place and talks to Jupien, who attempts to justify his new profession.

“I do not want you to misjudge me,” he said to me. “This house does not bring me in as much profit as you might think. I am obliged to let rooms to respectable people.... Here, contrary to the doctrine of the Carmelites, it is thanks to vice that virtue is able to live. No, if I took this house ... it was purely and simply in order to render a service to the Baron and amuse his old age.” (3:859)

“Besides, I may as well admit it to you,” Jupien continued, “that I have very few scruples about making money in this way. The actual thing that is done here is—I can no longer conceal the fact from you—something that I like, it is what I have a taste for myself.” (3:861)

Referring to the diplomats, government ministers, and the abbot that Marcel had seen visiting the brothel during the course of the evening, Jupien proceeds to compare his establishment with the salons of the Faubourg Saint-Germain.

“Do not imagine that this trade of mine brings me into contact only with the dregs of society. No doubt the director of an establishment of this

kind, like a great courtesan, receives only men, but he receives men who are conspicuous in every walk of life and who are generally, on their own level, among the most intelligent, the most sensitive, the most agreeable of their profession. In no time at all, I assure you, this house could be transformed into an information bureau or a school of wit.” Nevertheless, I was still under the impression of the blows which I had seen inflicted on M. de Charlus. (3:861)

Paris after the War

There followed a break of several years. “The new sanatorium to which I then retired did not cure me any more than the first one, and a long time passed before I left it.” Marcel had lost contact with all his friends, his health had declined, and he had resigned himself to never becoming a writer. Returning to Paris by train, he finds himself briefly stuck in the middle of the countryside while rail-workers adjust one of the carriage wheels with hammers. Although surrounded by the beauty of nature, Marcel observes a new lack of sensitivity in himself compared to previous occasions—such as when he had seen the line of trees, driving with his grandmother near Balbec.

The train had stopped, I remember, in open country. The sun shone, flooding one half of each of their trunks with light, upon a line of trees which followed the course of the railway. “Trees,” I thought, “you no longer have anything to say to me. My heart has grown cold and no longer hears you. I am in the midst of nature. Well, it is with indifference, with boredom that my eyes register the line which separates the luminous from the shadowy side of your trunks. If ever I thought of myself as a poet, I know now that I am not one. Perhaps, in the new, the so desiccated part of my life which is about to begin, human beings may yet inspire in me what nature can no longer say. But the years in which I might have been able to sing *her* praise will never return.” (3:886)

When he returns to his parents’ home in Paris, Marcel finds an invitation to an afternoon musical reception at the new home of the Prince de Guermantes. Since he would never become a writer, he decides he might as well throw himself into the social whirl instead.

Having left his old home in the Faubourg Saint-Germain, the prince now lives

in a splendid new palace on the Avenue des Bois (since renamed Avenue Foch). Marcel asks the cab to let him off on the Champs-Élysées so that he can travel the remaining distance to the party on foot.

Charlus as Lear

It is here that Marcel is to have his final meeting with Baron de Charlus, who is sitting in another cab. It proves to be the first in a series of confrontations that Marcel would have with old age and the ravages of time.

A man with staring eyes and hunched figure was placed rather than seated in the back, and was making, to keep himself upright, the efforts that might have been made by a child who has been told to be good. But his straw hat failed to conceal an unruly forest of hair which was entirely white, and a white beard, like those which snow forms on the statues of river-gods in public gardens, flowed from his chin. It was—side by side with Jupien, who was unremitting in his attentions to him—M. de Charlus, now convalescent after an attack of apoplexy ... so that upon the old fallen prince, this latest illness had conferred the Shakespearian majesty of a King Lear.... [A]t the moment which I am describing, there passed in a victoria, no doubt also on her way to the reception of the Prince de Guermantes, Mme de Saint-Euverte, whom formerly the Baron had not considered elegant enough for him.... And immediately, with infinite laboriousness but with all the concentration of a sick man determined to show that he is capable of all the movements which are still difficult for him, M. de Charlus lifted his hat, bowed, and greeted Mme de Saint-Euverte as respectfully as if she had been the Queen of France or as if he had been a small child coming timidly in obedience to his mother's command to say: "How do you do?" to a grown-up person. For a child, but without a child's pride, was what he had once more become.... And more than any chorus of Sophocles on the humbled pride of Oedipus, more than death itself or any funeral oration on the subject of death, the humble greeting, full of effort to please, which the Baron addressed to Mme de Saint-Euverte proclaimed the fragile and perishable nature of love of earthly greatness and all human pride. M. de Charlus, who until this moment would never have consented to dine with Mme de Saint-Euverte, now bowed to the ground in her honor. To receive the homage of M. de Charlus had been, for her, the highest ambition of snobbery, just as, for the Baron, the central principle of snobbery had been to be rude to her. (3:891-92)

The baron descends from his cab to talk with Marcel, and at first Marcel has great trouble understanding his rapid but inaudible speech.

There were, however, two M. de Charluses, not to mention any others. Of the two, one, the intellectual one, passed his time in complaining that he suffered from progressive aphasia, that he constantly pronounced one word, one letter by mistake for another. But as soon as he actually made such a mistake, the other M. de Charlus, the subconscious one, who was as desirous of admiration as the first was of pity and out of vanity did things that the first would have despised, immediately, like a conductor whose orchestra has blundered, checked the phrase which he had started and with infinite ingenuity made the end of his sentence follow coherently from the word which he had in fact uttered by mistake for another but which he thus appeared to have chosen....

... And the traces of his recent attack caused one to hear at the back of his words a noise like that of pebbles dragged by the sea. Continuing to speak to me about the past, no doubt to prove to me that he had not lost his memory, he evoked it now—in a funereal fashion but without sadness—by reciting an endless list of all the people belonging to his family or his world who were no longer alive, less, it seemed, with any emotion of grief that they were dead than with satisfaction at having survived them. He appeared indeed, as he recalled their extinction, to enjoy a clearer perception of his own return towards health and it was with an almost triumphal sternness that he repeated, in a monotonous tone, stammering slightly and with a dull sepulchral resonance: “Hannibal de Bréauté, dead! Antoine de Mouchy, dead! Charles Swann, dead! Adalbert de Montmorency, dead! Boson de Tallyrand, dead! Sosthène de Doudeauville, dead!” And every time he uttered it, the word “dead” seemed to fall upon his departed friends like a spadeful of earth each heavier than the last, thrown by a grave-digger grimly determined to immure them more closely within the tomb. (3:893-94)

Leaving the baron to rest on a bench, Marcel and Jupien continue strolling as they discuss the baron’s health and catch up with old news. But soon, Jupien has to hurry back: ““Oh, my God,” called Jupien, ‘I had good reason not to want to go far away. There he is starting a conversation with a gardener’s boy. Good-day, sir, it’s better I should go, I can’t leave my invalid alone a moment; he’s nothing

but a great baby.’” This attempted seduction of a lowly gardener is to be Marcel’s last glimpse of the once proud and powerful Baron de Charlus.

In the courtyard outside the Prince de Guermantes’ and again soon afterward in the prince’s library, Marcel has a number of epiphanies that give him powerful insights into his past life and finally reveal to him the subject of the book that he was born to write. But before discussing this, I would like to jump ahead to the prince’s reception, where Marcel encounters most of the major characters, gathered together in one of the novel’s most splendid set pieces.

Reception at the Prince and Princesse de Guermantes’

The description of the party at the Prince de Guermantes’ has three major themes: the effects of old age on individuals, some of it funny and some of it cruel; the turn of Fortune’s Wheel and the effect of Time on the social order; and the interconnectedness of relationships and friendships over the course of a lifetime.

Those of us of a certain age will recognize the shock that Marcel felt when he entered the main salon and saw his fellow guests for the first time after the passage of many years. At first he thought it was a fancy-dress ball.

For a few seconds, I did not understand why it was that I had difficulty in recognizing the master of the house and the guests and why everyone in the room appeared to have put on a disguise—in most cases a powdered wig.... I do not know what young Fezensac had put on his face, but, while others had whitened either half their beard or merely their moustache, he had not bothered to use a dye like the rest but had found some means of covering his features with wrinkles and making his eyebrows sprout with bristles; and all this did not suit him in the least, it had the effect of making his face look hardened, bronzed, rigid and solemn, and aged him to such an extent that one would no longer have said he was a young man at all. (3:960)

Gradually, Marcel realizes that these strange, white-haired, wrinkly people are all his old friends and contemporaries and it is not fancy dress or makeup that has changed them but the passage of time.

Some men walk with a limp, and Marcel is aware that this was the result not of a motor accident but of a first stroke: they had already, as the saying goes, one

foot in the grave. There were women too whose graves were open waiting to receive them: half paralyzed, they could not quite disentangle their dress from the tomb in which it had got stuck, so that they were unable to stand up straight and instead remained bent toward the ground with their heads lowered, in a curve that seemed an apt symbol of their own positions on the trajectory from life to death, with the final vertical plunge not far away.

The Duchesse de Guermantes, hidden under all her hair dyes and makeup, was in many ways unchanged. But she had grown coarser and lost her famous wit. In the uncertainty of the new postwar social order, she emulated actresses like Rachel and had acquired their vulgarity—losing in the process the magical charm of her Guermantes heritage.

“Ah! How wonderful to see you,” she said to me, “you, my oldest friend!” And though the vanity of the sometime young man from Combray who had never for a moment thought that he might become one of her friends, really participating in the real mysterious life that went on in the houses of the Guermantes, with the same title to her friendship as ... Swann or all those others who were now dead, might well have been flattered by these words, more than anything I was saddened by them. “Her oldest friend!” I said to myself. “Surely she exaggerates. One of the oldest perhaps, but can I really be ...?” (3:967)

The next painful insight for Marcel is the realization that he too has grown old and that in the eyes of the young people at the party he himself is now “an old gentleman.” At one point, he deliberately refers to himself in conversation as “an old man like myself,” in the hope of being contradicted. He is not contradicted and he sees no glimmer of protest in his listeners’ faces.

And now I began to understand what old age was—old age, which perhaps of all the realities is the one of which we preserve for longest in our life a purely abstract conception, looking at calendars, dating our letters, seeing our friends marry and then in their turn the children of our friends, and yet, either from fear or from sloth, not understanding what all this means ... until the day when a grandson of a woman we once knew, a young man whom instinctively we treat as a contemporary of ours, smiles as though we were making fun of him because to him it seems that we are old enough to be his grandfather. (3:973–74)

There are many humorous meetings at the party when Marcel completely fails to recognize the aged features of his friends whom he still pictured as being young. The opposite effect is also true, and because Marcel had known Bloch since his earliest youth, he still recognizes his young friend in the features of the old man standing before him. It is only after close examination that Marcel recognizes those signs that are indeed characteristics of men who are old: “Then I realized that, in fact, he was indeed old and that life simply makes its old men out of adolescents who have managed to survive the years.”

There were also men who appeared untouched by time, even with the white hair:

... but they were still the same babyish faces, with the naïve enthusiasm of an eighteen-year-old. They were not old men; they were very young men in an advanced stage of withering. The marks of life were not deeply scored here, and death, when it came, would find it as easy to restore to these features their youthfulness as it is to clean a portrait which only a little surface dirt prevents from shining with its original brilliance. These men made me think that we are victims of an illusion when, hearing talk of a celebrated old man, we instantly make up our minds that he is kind and just and gentle; for I felt that forty years earlier, these elderly men had been ruthless young men and that there was no reason to suppose that they had not preserved their youthful arrogance and their vanity, their duplicity and their guile. (3:979)

Among the women, Mme de Forcheville—Odette de Crécy (Swann’s widow)—alone seems unchanged. In all the splendor of her costume, she still reminds Marcel of when she promenaded along the Allée des Acacias and he was a young man more than thirty years earlier.

And just because she had not changed she seemed scarcely to be alive. She looked like a rose that has been sterilized... I complimented her on her youthfulness. “How nice of you, *my dear*,” she said, “thank you,” and, as it was difficult for her to express a sentiment, even the most sincere, in a manner which was not rendered artificial by her anxiety to be what she supposed was smart, she repeated several times: “Thank you so much, thank you so much.” I meanwhile, who had once walked miles to see her pass in the Bois, who the first time that I had visited her house had listened to the sound of her voice as it fell from her lips as though it were some priceless treasure, now found the minutes that I was obliged to pass in her

company interminable simply because I did not know what on earth to say to her. (3:993)

Marcel meets another of the great courtesans, the Princesse de Nassau, who, like Odette, was “preserved, one might almost say embalmed, by a thousand cosmetics adorably blended so as to compose for her a face that was the color of lilac.” The princess had a vague recollection of having shared a carriage with Marcel at some time in the distant past and so, being unsure whether anything sexual had occurred between them and not wishing to hurt his feelings, just squeezed his hand and looked meaningfully into his eyes:

But she was uncertain what had passed between us in the carriage, so she did not linger long over the furtive pressure of my hand and said not a word. She merely looked at me in the manner which I have described, the manner which signified: “How long it is!” and in which one caught a momentary glimpse of her husbands and the men who had kept her and two wars, while her stellar eyes, like an astronomical clock cut in a block of opal, marked successively all those solemn hours of a so distant past which she rediscovered every time she wanted to bid you a casual good-bye which was always also an apology. And then, having left me, she started to trot towards the door, partly so that her departure should not inconvenience people, partly to show me that if she had not stopped to talk it was because she was in a hurry, partly also to recapture the seconds which she had lost in pressing my hand.... I even thought, when she got near the door, that she was going to break into a gallop. And indeed, she was galloping towards her grave. (3:1028)

Social change

It is not only people’s physical appearances that have changed but also their positions in society—and even their social histories.

Survivors of the older generation assured me that society had completely changed and now opened its doors to people who in their day would never have been received, and this comment was both true and untrue. On the one hand it was untrue, because those who made it failed to take into account the curve of time which caused the society of the present to see these newly received people at their point of arrival, whilst they, the

older generation remembered them at their point of departure. And this was nothing new, for in the same way, when they themselves had first entered society, there were people in it who had just arrived and whose lowly origins others remembered. In society as it exists today a single generation suffices for the change which formerly over a period of centuries transformed a middle-class name like Colbert into an aristocratic one. (3:1002–1003)

The prime example, of course, is the Princesse de Guermantes. As Marcel explains to the still gauche Bloch:

Mme Verdurin, shortly after the death of her husband, had married the aged and impoverished Duc de Duras, who had made her a cousin of the [recently widowed] Prince de Guermantes and had died after two years of marriage. He had served as a useful transition for Mme Verdurin, who now, by a third marriage, had become Princess de Guermantes and occupied in the Faubourg Saint-Germain a lofty position which would have caused much astonishment at Combray where the ladies of the rue de l’Oiseau, Mme Goupil’s daughter and Mme Sazerat’s step-daughter, had during these last years, before she married for the third time, spoken with a sneer of “The Duchesse de Duras” as though this were a role which had been allotted to Mme Verdurin in a play. (3:998)

Just as people new to society would never have imagined that the new Princesse de Guermantes had not always been a prominent member of the Faubourg Saint-Germain, so too would they never have imagined that the famous writers Bloch or Charlie Morel had not always been leading luminaries of smart society. “I was perhaps the only person present who knew that [Morel] had once been kept by Saint-Loup and at the same time by a friend of Saint-Loup.... Ministers with a shady past and women who had started life as prostitutes were now held to be paragons of virtue.”

Even Rachel, whom Marcel had first been offered in a brothel for twenty francs many years before, is now a celebrated actress and the guest of honor at the princess’s party. On the other hand, the Duchesse de Guermantes, who had reigned over the heights of Paris society for so long, is regarded as some interloper who had never quite belonged to the best society, a sort of defrocked priestess of the Faubourg Saint-Germain. The duchess now sought Rachel’s company when once it had been the other way around. People always accept a

name at its current value, so these drawing-room transformations merely reinforced Marcel's sadness for the destructive effects of Lost Time.

Someone having inquired of a young man of the best possible family whether Gilberte's mother had not formally been the subject of scandal, the young nobleman replied that it was true that in the earlier part of her life she had been married to an adventurer of the name of Swann, but that subsequently she had married one of the most prominent men in society, the Comte de Forcheville. (3:1001)

Again, with this casual reference to Swann, one of the heroes of the novel, we are shown how all the accomplishments and the meaning of an individual's life can be so cruelly and irrevocably destroyed by the passage of time.

The subject of Time is again introduced during a long conversation with Gilberte, now a stout lady whom Marcel at first fails to recognize. In discussing her husband Robert's theories of warfare, she reminds Marcel that some of the newspaper reports of the recent British campaign in Mesopotamia were almost identical to Xenophon's *Anabasis*, some of the oldest recorded writing in human history. The military techniques used by the British at the start of the twentieth century were exactly the same as those used by the Chaldeans at the dawn of history. Nothing changes. Marcel agrees, and observes that the British base for embarkation, Basra, was the same port used centuries before by Sinbad the sailor. Proust would have been amused to read news reports about the U.S. and British invasion of Iraq in 2003 and to see that the place-names quoted by Gilberte and Marcel in their discussion are yet again being quoted in the twenty-first-century newspaper reports of the two Gulf wars. (3:1030).

Gilberte goes in search of her daughter, Mlle de Saint-Loup, whom she wishes to introduce to Marcel, and it is this meeting, uneventful in itself, that finally weaves together all the various threads of the novel.

Marcel's Epiphanies

As mentioned earlier, before entering the party, Marcel had experienced a series of powerful epiphanies in rapid succession, flooding him with happiness and the spontaneous, if involuntary, memory of other, similar moments in his life. The effect of all these experiences was to snap him out of his mood of bleak resignation and to reignite his determination to be a writer.

The first occurred in the courtyard outside the Prince de Guermantes' mansion when he stepped on an uneven paving stone.

And at the moment when, recovering my balance, I put my foot on a stone which was slightly lower than its neighbors, all my discouragement vanished and in its place was that same happiness which at various epochs of my life had been given to me by the sight of trees which I had thought that I recognized in the course of a drive near Balbec, by the sight of the twin steeples of Martinville, by the flavor of a madeleine dipped in tea, and by all those other sensations of which I have spoken and of which the last works of Vinteuil had seemed to me to combine the quintessential character. Just as at the moment when I had tasted the madeleine, all anxiety about the future, all intellectual doubts had disappeared, so now those that a few seconds ago had assailed me on the subject of the reality of my literary gifts, the reality even of literature, were removed as if by magic. I had followed no new train of reasoning, discovered no decisive argument, but the difficulties which had seemed insoluble a moment ago had lost all importance. The happiness which I had just felt was unquestionably the same as that which I had felt when I tasted the madeleine soaked in tea. But if on that occasion I had put off the task of searching for the profounder causes of my emotion, this time I was determined not to resign myself to a failure to understand them. (3: 898–99)

Much to the amusement of the footmen and chauffeurs gathered around the front door of the mansion, Marcel deliberately stumbles about in the courtyard, trying to re-create the experience of stepping on the uneven paving stones.

Every time that I merely repeated this physical movement, I achieved nothing; but if I succeeded, forgetting the Guermantes party, in recapturing what I had felt when I first placed my feet on the ground in this way, again the dazzling and indistinct vision fluttered near me as if to say: "Seize me as I pass if you can, and try to solve the riddle of happiness which I set you." And almost at once I recognized the vision: it was Venice. (3:899)

He suddenly recognizes a similar sensation he had experienced on stepping upon two uneven paving stones in St. Mark's when he had visited Venice with his mother. All the memories and physical sensations of that day come flooding back, just as the memories of Combray had earlier been provoked by the taste of the tea and madeleine at the start of the novel.

Pleased that he has identified and recaptured the memory but puzzled why the experience had filled him with such happiness, Marcel enters the mansion of the Prince de Guermantes. Because a musical recital has already begun, he is asked to wait in the library until it is finished. While Marcel sits in the library and reflects upon the experience with the uneven paving stones, he experiences a second epiphany when the sound of a spoon on a plate startles him out of his thoughts. Again he is overwhelmed with powerful emotions, but this time he immediately recognizes the source. The sound of a servant accidentally striking a spoon against a plate recalls the sound of a railway worker striking a hammer against the wheel of a train when it had stopped in the countryside a few days earlier. He remembers, this time with delight, the image of sunshine on the row of trees beside the track. That was the moment when he felt that all feelings were dead inside him and that he would never become a writer. Now, however, his sense of the wonder and beauty of nature has been regained. The sound of the spoon and the involuntary memory it provoked was restoring his faith in himself as an artist.

Looking through the bookshelves in the Prince's library, Marcel finds a copy of George Sand's novel *François le Champi* and immediately memories of his childhood bedroom at Combray, where his mother read him the book, come flooding back.

A few moments later, still sitting in the prince's library drinking a glass of orangeade, Marcel wipes his mouth with a starched napkin and immediately the prince's library melts away and he sees the beachfront at Balbec. The feel of the starched napkin is the same as the stiff texture of the hotel's starched towel so many years before, and the similarity of the physical sensation has transported him outside of time. Suddenly he has the sensation that he is holding his towel and standing at the window of his room in the Grand Hotel, next door to his grandmother's room, on the first day of his arrival in Balbec.

Marcel worries that the musical recital might soon end and that he will have to enter the drawing room before he has unraveled the mystery.

I forced myself to try as quickly as possible to discern the essence of the identical pleasures which I had just experienced three times within the space of a few minutes, and having done so to extract the lesson which they might be made to yield.... I understood clearly that what the sensation of the uneven paving stones, the stiffness of the napkin, the taste of the madeleine had reawakened in me had no connection with what I frequently tried to recall to myself of Venice, Balbec, Combray, with the help of an

undifferentiated memory; and I understood that the reason why life may be judged to be trivial although at certain moments it seems to us so beautiful is that we form our judgments, ordinarily, on the evidence not of life itself but of those quite different images which preserve nothing of life—and therefore we judge it disparagingly. (3:902)

Marcel slowly realizes that the precious moments of our past cannot be recaptured through the logical reconstruction of events using the brain; it is the smells, colors, and tastes of past experiences that can carry us back and bridge the gap between past happiness and the present moment. The taste of the tea and madeleine, the smell of the hawthorns in bloom, *François le Champi* in the prince's library, the sound of a simple spoon, or the subtle themes of Vinteuil's sonata—all served to free him from the prison of time and linked him to precious moments of lost happiness and love.

... the slightest word we have said, the most insignificant action that we have performed at any one epoch of our life was surrounded by, and colored by the reflection of, things which logically had no connection with it and which later have been separated from it by our intellect which could make nothing of them for its own rational purposes, things, however, in the midst of which—Here the pink reflection of the evening upon the flower-covered wall of a country restaurant, a feeling of hunger, the desire for women, the pleasure of luxury; there the blue volutes of the morning sea and, enveloped in them, phrases of music half emerging like the shoulders of water-nymphs—the simplest act or gesture remains immured as within a thousand sealed vessels, each one of them filled with things of a color, a scent, a temperature that are absolutely different one from another. [But when our memory bridges the years with the smell or the taste from one of these vessels] ... it causes us suddenly to breathe a new air, an air which is new precisely because we have breathed it in the past, that purer air which the poets have vainly tried to situate in paradise and which could induce so profound a sensation of renewal only if it had been breathed before, since the true paradises are the paradises we have lost. (3:902–03)

The conscious effort of our brain can only remember logical events. It can reconstruct places and actions that have been stored in the memory, but it cannot re-create the sensations and feelings. We can remember where we were sitting during a certain event, we can put a date to it, and we can even recall the words

that were spoken. If it was important, we might even remember what we were wearing or even what music was being played. But the background song of birds, the smell of flowers in bloom, and the reflection of sunlight off a stone wall are not stored in our recollection because they are not considered important. They remain, nonetheless, buried in our memory and they can be released by the chance encounter with an unbidden sound, smell, or taste. And with them, all the powerful sensations that we felt at that previous time come flooding back to engulf us.

With the accumulation of these insights, Marcel determines that the new purpose of his life is to recapture through his art these moments of paradise that have been lost.

The truth surely was that the being within me which had enjoyed these impressions had enjoyed them because they had in them something that was common to a day long past and to the present, because in some way they were extra-temporal, and this being made its appearance only when, through one of these identifications of the present with the past, it was likely to find itself in the one and only medium in which it could exist and enjoy the essence of things, that is to say: outside time. This explained why it was that my anxiety on the subject of my death had ceased at the moment when I had unconsciously recognized the taste of the little madeleine, since the being which at that moment I had been was an extra-temporal being and therefore un-alarmed by the vicissitudes of the future. This being had only come to me, only manifested itself outside of activity and immediate enjoyment, on those rare occasions when the miracle of an analogy had made me escape from the present. And only this being had the power to perform that task which had always defeated the efforts of my memory and my intellect, the power to make me rediscover days that were long past, the Time that was Lost. (3:904)

Surrounded by all the books in the prince's library and exhilarated by the series of revelations that had begun with the feel of the uneven paving stones outside in the courtyard, Marcel felt again, after many years, that his "appetite for life was immense," and he finally understood that the purpose of his life had been to gather all the materials for his great work of art.

And then a new light, less dazzling, no doubt, than the other illumination which had made me perceive that the work of art was the sole means of rediscovering Lost Time, shone suddenly within me. And I

understood that all the materials for a work of literature were simply my past life; I understood that they had come to me, in frivolous pleasures, in indolence, in tenderness, in unhappiness, and that I had stored them up without divining the purpose for which they were destined or even their continued existence, any more than a seed does when it forms within itself a reserve of all the nutritious substances from which it will feed a plant. Like the seed, I should be able to die once the plant had developed and I began to perceive that I had lived for the sake of the plant without knowing it, without ever realizing that my life needed to come into contact with those books which I had wanted to write and for which, when in the past I had sat down at my table to begin, I had been unable to find a subject. (3:935–36)

Filled with a fresh inspiration and determination to be a writer, Marcel enters the party and starts to observe how time has affected old friends and changed the social landscape. But despite his new determination to start writing, and the realization that he contained within himself, in the memories of his past experiences, everything he needed in order to write—he still had no subject.

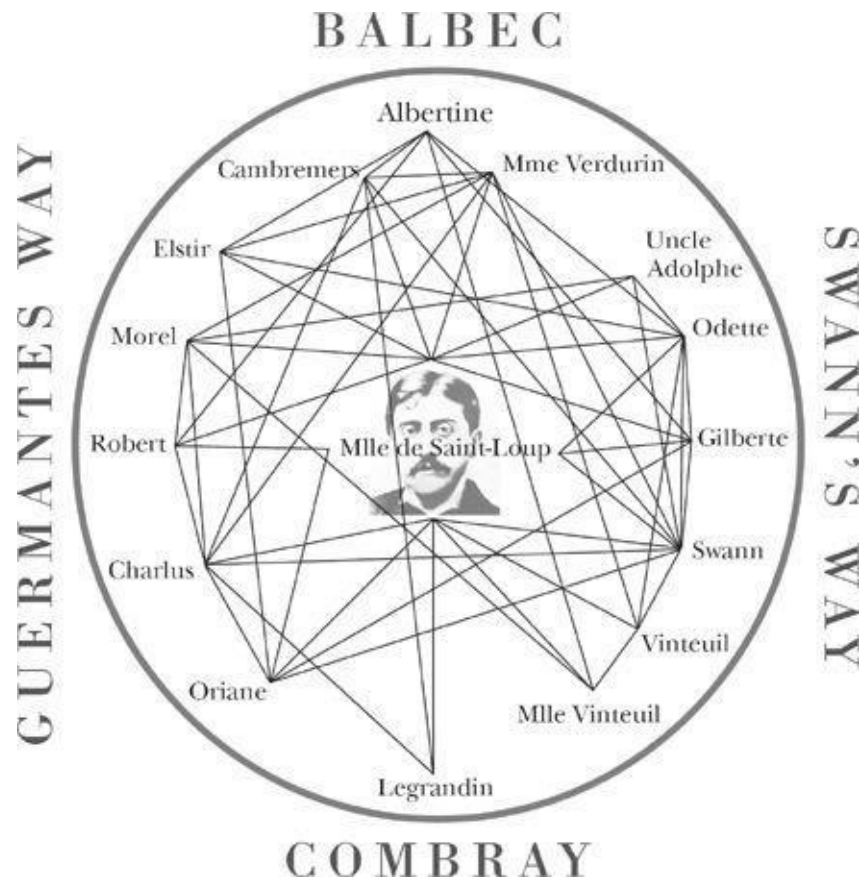
The Threads of Mlle de Saint-Loup

It is the meeting with Gilberte and Robert's daughter, the sixteen-year-old Mlle de Saint-Loup, which finally reveals the subject for his life's work. The daughter of Robert (from *The Guermantes Way*) and Gilberte (from *Swann's Way*) not only reconciles the two "ways" but also provides the "capstone" that holds together the whole complex architecture of the "cathedral" that Proust has so meticulously constructed throughout these seven volumes.

Was she not—are not, indeed, the majority of human beings?—like one of those star-shaped cross roads in a forest where roads converge that have come, in the forest as in our lives, from the most diverse quarters? Numerous for me were the roads which lead to Mlle de Saint-Loup and which radiated around her. Firstly the two great "ways" themselves, where on my many walks I had dreamed so many dreams, both led to her: through her father, Robert de Saint-Loup the Guermantes way; through Gilberte, her mother, the Méséglise way which was also "Swann's way." One of them took me, by way of this girl's mother [Gilberte] and the Champs-Élysées, to Swann, to my evenings at Combray, to Méséglise itself; the other, by way of her father [Robert], to those afternoons at Balbec where even now I saw

him again near the sun-bright sea. And then between these two high roads a network of transversals was set up. Balbec, for example, the real Balbec where I had met Saint-Loup, was a place that I had longed to go to very largely because of what Swann had told me about the churches in its neighborhood ... and yet Robert de Saint-Loup was the nephew of the Duchesse de Guermantes, and through him I arrived at Combray again, at the Guermantes way. And there were many other points in my life to which I was led by starting from Mlle de Saint-Loup, to the lady in pink [Odette], for instance, who was her grandmother and whom I had seen in the house of my great-uncle [Adolphe]. And here there was a new transversal, for this great-uncle's man-servant, who had opened the door to me that day and who later, by the gift of a photograph, had enabled me to identify the lady in pink, was the father of the young man [Charlie Morel] with whom not only M. de Charlus but also Mlle de Saint-Loup's father had been in love, the young man on whose account he had made her mother unhappy. And was it not Swann, the grandfather of Mlle de Saint-Loup, who had first spoken to me of the music of Vinteuil, just as it was Gilberte who had first spoken to me of Albertine? Yet it was in speaking of this same music of Vinteuil to Albertine that I discovered the identity of her great friend [Vinteuil's lesbian daughter] and it was with this discovery that that part of our lives had commenced which had led her to her death and caused me such terrible sufferings. And it was also Mlle de Saint-Loup's father who had gone off to try and bring Albertine back. And indeed my whole social life, both in the drawing rooms of the Swanns and the Guermantes in Paris and also that very different life which I had led with the Verdurins in the country, was in some sense a prolongation of the two ways of Combray, a prolongation which brought into line with one way or the other places as far apart as the Champs-Élysées and the beautiful terrace of La Raspelière.... A life of Saint-Loup painted by me would have as its background the various scenes of my own life, would be related to every part of that life, even those to which it was apparently most foreign, such as my grandmother and Albertine. And the Verdurins, though they might be diametrically opposed to these other characters, were yet linked to Odette through her past and to Robert de Saint-Loup through Charlie—and in the Verdurins' house too what a role, what an all-important role had not the music of Vinteuil played! And then Swann had been in love with Legrandin's sister [Mme de Cambremer], and Legrandin had known M. de Charlus, whose ward [Jupien's niece] Legrandin's nephew, young Cambremer, had married. Certainly, if he was thinking purely of the human heart, the poet was right

when he spoke of the “mysterious threads” which are broken by life. But the truth, even more, is that life is perpetually weaving fresh threads which link one individual and one event to another, and that these threads are crossed and recrossed, doubled and redoubled to thicken the web, so that between any slightest point of our past and all the others a rich network of memories gives us an almost infinite variety of communicating paths to choose from.



At every moment in our lives we are surrounded by things and people which once were endowed with a rich emotional significance that they no longer possess. But let us cease to make use of them in an unconscious way, let us try to recall what they once were in our eyes, and how often do we not find that a thing later transformed into, as it were, mere raw material for our industrial use was once alive, and alive for us with a personal life of its own. All around me on the walls were paintings by Elstir, that Elstir who first introduced me to Albertine. And it was in the house of Mme Verdurin that I was about to be presented to Mlle de Saint-Loup ... in the house of that very Mme Verdurin [now Princess de Guermantes] whom I had so

often visited with Albertine—and how enchanting they seemed in my memory, all those journeys that we had made together in the little train on the way to Douville and la Raspelière—and who had also schemed first to promote and then to break not only my own love for Albertine but, long before it, that of the grandfather and the grandmother of this same Mlle de Saint-Loup. And to complete the process by which all my various pasts were fused into a single mass Mme Verdurin, like Gilberte, had married a Guermantes. (3:1084-87)

Marcel's Book

The seemingly random but interconnected threads of all the people that he has known and all the experiences he has observed are now brought together in the person of Mlle de Saint-Loup to reveal the meaning of Marcel's life and the subject of the great book that he was born, and indeed has lived, to write.

But to return to my own case, I thought more modestly of my book and it would be inaccurate even to say that I thought of those who would read it as “my” readers. For it seemed to me that they would not be “my” readers but the readers of their own selves, my book being merely a sort of magnifying glass like those which the optician in Combray used to offer his customers—it would be my book, but with its help I would furnish them with the means of reading what lay inside themselves. So that I should not ask them to praise me or to censure me, but simply to tell me whether “it really is like that,” I should ask them whether the words that they read within themselves are the same as those which I have written. (3:1089)

And so, as Marcel returns home from the Prince de Guermantes' party to begin writing his novel, the reader puts down the final volume and, after a suitable pause, picks up the first volume, ready to rejoin the narrator in a second reading of his search for lost time. In the same way, I hope that readers who finish this brief synopsis of *In Search of Lost Time* will pick up a copy of *Swann's Way* and start reading the full version of the novel for themselves.

PART TWO

Who's Who in Proust

List of Main Characters

The following pages list more than fifty of the major characters alphabetically for quick reference. This section is followed by a longer and more detailed description of what happens to each individual during the course of the novel.

Titles

The title “Prince” in France, unlike in England, is not restricted to the royal family but signifies merely the son and heir of a duke. The Duc de Guermantes was therefore the Prince des Laumes before he inherited his title on the death of his father, the duke. It should also be noted that the duke of *This* and the duchess of *That* are just as often referred to as Monsieur, or M., *This* and Madame, or Mme, *That*. Thus, the Duchesse de Guermantes is often referred to as Mme de Guermantes. Even during the seventeenth century, Mme de Sévigné (Marquise de Sévigné), writing under Louis XIV’s Ancien Regime, used Monsieur and Madame rather than the formal titles of nobility when writing her letters. Proust’s novel takes place and was written during the Third Republic when such titles no longer had any official meaning. Officially, there were no princes and princesses nor dukes and duchesses; there were only citizens. Nevertheless, human nature being what it is, especially when prodded by persons such as Baron de Charlus, the old titles could never be ignored or forgotten.

Adolphe: *See Marcel’s uncle Adolphe.*

Aimé: Headwaiter at Balbec and also at a restaurant in Paris

Albertine Simonet: Marcel’s mistress and niece of Mme Bontemps

Amédée: *See Marcel’s grandfather.*

Andrée: Friend of Albertine and oldest of the little band of girls at Balbec

Basin: *See Guermantes Duc de.*

Bathilde: *See Marcel’s grandmother.*

Bergotte: Famous writer and friend of the Swanns

Berma: Famous actress

Bloch, Albert: Marcel’s oldest friend from school

Bontemps, Mme: Albertine’s aunt, friend of Odette and Mme Verdurin

Brichot: Member of the Verdurins' little clan

Cambremer, Marquis de: Brother-in-law of Legrandin; Norman country squire

Cambremer, Renée, Marquise de: Legrandin's rude, arrogant, and ill-bred sister

Charlus, Palamède, Baron de: Charlus is the Duc de Guermantes' younger brother and Robert de Saint-Loup's uncle; other titles include Prince des Laumes, Duc de Brabant, Squire of Montargis, Prince of Oleron, of Carency, Viareggio, and of the Dunes.

Châtellerault, Due de: A Guermantes but of unspecified prominence; enjoys a gay encounter in the Champs-Élysées

Cottard, Dr.: Longtime member of the Verdurins' little clan

Crécy, Pierre de Verjus, Comte de: First husband of Odette de Crécy

Elstir: Famous painter and originally a member of the Verdurins' little clan

Forcheville, Baron de: Vulgarly arrogant lover and, eventually, third husband of Odette de Crécy

Françoise: Aunt Léonie's and eventually Marcel's family cook

Guermantes, Basin, Due de: Cousin of the Prince de Guermantes and brother of Charlus; previously Prince des Laumes before inheriting the dukedom

Guermantes, Gilbert, Prince de: Cousin of the Duc and Duchesse de Guermantes

Guermantes, Marie-Gilbert, Princesse de: Born the Duchess of Bavaria, married to Gilbert, Prince de Guermantes

Guermantes, Oriane, Duchesse de: Originally Mlle de

Guermantes and then Princesse des Laumes; married to her cousin Basin, the Duc de Guermantes; niece of Mme de Villeparisis; aunt of Robert de Saint-Loup; close friend of Charles Swann

Jupien: Tailor, factotum, and eventually brothel keeper

Jupien's niece, Marie-Antoinette: Seamstress in Jupien's tailor shop; becomes Charlus's heir as Mlle d'Oloron; fiancée to Charlie Morel, married to Léonor de Cambremer

Laumes, Prince and Princesse des: *See Guermantes, Due and Duchesse de.*

Léa: Actress and notorious lesbian

Legrandin: Combray neighbor; engineer, man of letters, snob, and sexual invert

Léonie: *See Marcel's aunt Léonie.*

Marcel's mother: "Mamma"

Marcel's father: Permanent secretary at the ministry

Marcel's grandmother, Bathilde: The only morally flawless person in the whole novel

Marcel's grandfather, Amédée: Friend of Swann's father

Marcel's aunt Léonie: Pious hypochondriac; owner of the family home in Combray

Marcel's uncle Adolphe: Has disreputable past; never appears directly in the book

Marsantes, Marie-Aynard, Comtesse de: Widow of Aynard, the Comte de Marsantes; mother of Robert de Saint-Loup and sister to Charlus and Basin

Morel, Charlie: Violinist, writer, bisexual rent-boy for Charlus

and many others

Nassau, Paulette, Princesse de: Well born but of dubious morals

Norpois, Marquis de: Ex-ambassador, friend of Marcel's father, lover of Mme de Villeparisis, and pompous stuffed shirt

Octave: Friend of Albertine and the band of girls in Balbec

Odette: *See Swann, Mine (Odette de Crécy).*

Oriane: *See Guermantes, Oriane, Duchesse de.*

Parma, Princesse de: Symbol of social excellence

Palamède: *See Charlus, Palamède, Baron de.*

Putbus, Mme (maid of): Symbol of easy virtue, carnal delights, and lesbian threats

Rachel: Whore, avant-garde actress, mistress of Saint-Loup

Saint-Euverte, Marquise de: Society hostess

Saint-Loup-en-Bray, Robert, Marquis de: Son of the Comte and Comtesse de Marsantes, nephew of Baron de Charlus and the Duc and Duchesse de Guermantes, and great-nephew of Mme de Villeparisis; close friend of Marcel

Saint-Loup, Mile de: Daughter of Robert and Gilberte

Sazerat, Mme: A neighbor in reduced circumstances living in Combray

Stermaria, Mile: Cold and aloof symbol of repressed aristocratic lust from Brittany

Swann, Charles: Connoisseur and well-connected art collector; father of Gilberte, husband of Odette, old friend of Marcel's family

Swann, Gilberte: Later Mlle de Forcheville and finally Marquise de Saint-Loup

Swann, Mme (Odette de Crécy): Wife of Swann, mother of Gilberte, mistress of many, including de Forcheville

Vaugoubert, Marquise de: Diplomat and indiscreet closet queen

Verdurin, Gustave (Auguste): Wealthy husband of Mme Verdurin

Verdurin, Mme: Bohemian hostess and patron of the arts; mistress of the little clan

Villeparisis, Madeleine, Marquise de: Daughter of Cyrus, Comte de Bouillon, aunt to the Duc as well as the Duchesse de Guermantes, great-aunt of Robert de Saint-Loup, mistress of M. de Norpois; previously Duchesse d'Havre by first marriage

Vinteuil: Retired piano teacher and famous composer

Vinteuil, Mlle: Lesbian daughter of the retired piano teacher in Combray

Guide to Main Characters

Aimé



Aimé

Headwaiter at Balbec and also at a restaurant in Paris. Based on Olivier Dabescat, the real-life maître d’hôtel at the Ritz, Aimé first appears in *Within a Budding Grove*. Obsequious and all-knowing, Aimé represents the quintessential French waiter. The guests at the Grand Hotel in Balbec enjoyed calling him by his first name as a way of demonstrating that they were well known and “quite at home” in his establishment. Being naturally “amenable and good natured,” Aimé is proud and happy to preside over an establishment frequented by the social elite and pleased to share all the gossip with his regular clients. Even the Baron de Charlus made a point of referring to Aimé by name—though his motives (as always) were somewhat peculiar.

During Balbec’s off-season, Aimé works as the headwaiter at a restaurant in Paris frequented by young noblemen such as Robert de Saint-Loup. Aimé’s good looks unfortunately attract the lascivious attentions of Robert’s mistress, Rachel. According to Aimé many years later, Robert’s uncontrolled jealousy was simply a front for a homosexual assignation. But Aimé could have been mistaken, and his stories can never be taken at face value.

Appreciative of a good tip, Aimé is always able and willing to perform discreet favors for his special friends. He makes sure that the boyfriend of the wealthy financier is not sent to work in the hotel’s wine cellars, but is promoted to the position of underwaiter, serving tables in the dining room, so that M. Nissim Bernard can gaze upon his paramour while he eats his lunch. Unlike many of the younger waiters, Aimé takes his work seriously, and so he never repulses the advances made to him by a strange lady or gentleman, even if it

means staying all night—“For business must come first.” However, he does not, for whatever reason, respond to the oblique overtures made by Baron de Charlus, who invites him to an “evening of gaiety in the card room to dispel his gloom.” Possibly he had simply misunderstood Charlus’s sexual intent.

Never an important character in the development of the plot, Aimé, like many of Proust’s minor characters, is nonetheless important for providing continuity and joining together different strands of the story. Whenever there is a scene in a restaurant or hotel, Aimé will be there, already acquainted with the different characters and familiar with the different relationships. Just as he provides information to his different guests at the Grand Hotel in Balbec, so too does he provide information to the novel’s narrator and reader alike. Whether the information is to be trusted is another matter altogether.

In *The Fugitive*, Marcel employs Aimé as a sort of private investigator to make inquiries concerning Albertine’s lesbian adventures. His written reports to Marcel, gravely describing his in-depth research, are among the most hilarious delights of the novel.

Albertine Simonet

Marcel's mistress and niece of Mme Bontemps. Albertine is one of the most central but also perhaps the most enigmatic of the many characters in *In Search of Lost Time*; for we see her only through the narrator's eyes and her own lies. It is for that reason, perhaps, that Jacqueline Rose wrote the novel *Albertine* (Vintage, 2001) to fill in the gaps that Proust leaves us. She appears in more pages and yet we know less about her than we do about any other character.

Long before she first appears in the novel, Albertine is mentioned by Gilberte as an old school friend who is "dreadfully fast." By the end of the novel there are several hints that Gilberte had in fact known Albertine better than she admitted and that they had possibly enjoyed a lesbian affair together.

Albertine does not appear until *Within a Budding Grove*, when she is one of the little band of girls who unforgettably appear strolling along the seafront at Balbec. Though Marcel falls in love with all the girls in the little band, one stands out with her brilliant, laughing eyes and plump, matt cheeks, wearing a black polo cap and pushing a bicycle. He learns that she is the "Simonet girl" from a respected local family that proudly spells their name with a single "n"—perhaps to distinguish themselves from another Simonnet family who had done badly in business, or worse!

Introduced to her by Elstir, Marcel gradually meets all her girlfriends and spends the rest of that first summer by the seaside in their company. Emboldened by certain signs from Albertine, Marcel attempts to kiss her one night in the hotel but is soundly rebuffed. However, Albertine is discreet and they remain friends.

Some years later, Albertine visits Marcel at his parents' home in Paris, and Françoise catches them amorously tickling each other in bed. Françoise's dislike and distrust of Albertine remains a constant theme throughout the novel. Marcel and Albertine's relationship during this period is partly sexual but hard to define. Although Marcel did not, for example, invite her to the party at the Princesse de Guermantes', he had arranged for her to pay him a visit after the party, shortly before midnight. He explained that he was not in love with her but "was yielding to a purely sensual desire."

During a second visit to Balbec, Marcel's physical desire for Albertine is rekindled. The description of their relationship is always from Marcel's

perspective, and the reader has no better insight into Albertine's inner feelings or private life than does the narrator. She is always an object, either of desire or of jealousy. Neither Marcel nor the reader knows where Albertine goes when she is not with him, but there are increasing undertones of lesbian liaisons.

As in the earlier relationship between Swann and Odette, Marcel becomes increasingly consumed with Albertine's "secret life." Increasingly he questions her, and increasingly he catches her lies as she evades his questions. Beneath the veneer of Balbec's provincial respectability, at least in the eyes of the narrator, there appears to be quite a lively lesbian social life of which Albertine is possibly a part. In addition to the little band of Albertine's girlfriends, like Andrée, there are Bloch's sister and cousin, who make out in public. There is also the lesbian actress Léa and various other attractive young women in whom Albertine displays an interest, if only to watch them surreptitiously in the mirror.

Marcel and Albertine make a mysterious couple. Although he reveals all his inner musings and agonies to the reader, it is still unclear whether Marcel is driven by love, lust, jealousy, or just a prurient obsession with Albertine's lesbian tastes. As for Albertine, she remains an enigma: flirtatious with his friends, amorous with Marcel after a bottle of cider, but mysterious and evasive about her female contacts. His jealousy is driving him insane, and Marcel decides to break with her: "The idea of marrying Albertine appeared to me to be madness."

It is at this moment that he discovers Albertine is an old and intimate friend of Vinteuil's daughter, whom Marcel had seen in a lesbian embrace when he was a young boy in Combray. With horror, he learns that Mlle Vinteuil is coming to Balbec for a musical engagement. Marcel decides that the only way to save Albertine from her vices is to take her home to Paris, immediately, even if he is obliged to marry her. In any event, he does not marry her but he moves her into his parents' home, where she becomes part of the household, almost like a pet.

Though she is described as being pretty and plump when he first meets her, it is not clear if she retains her looks or if other people find her attractive. Charlus finds her pretty, but his taste in women is questionable. Saint-Loup, however, is apparently shocked when he finally sees Albertine's photograph, and his face seems to express surprise that Marcel should be so obsessed with somebody so unattractive. There is a suggestion toward the end that she "had put on weight," and after she has left him, Marcel's memories of her at Balbec do not evoke a great beauty: "... she had not yet 'thickened' out, but as a result of too much exercise, she had lost weight; thin, made plainer by an ugly hat which left visible

only the tip of an ugly nose and, at a side view, pale cheeks like white slugs” (3:448). Unlike the Duchesse de Guermantes, who is described in great physical detail, Proust gives the reader very few clues about Albertine’s appearance.

Because the obsessive jealousy of the narrator continues for hundreds of pages, and he finds the most outrageous lesbian interpretation in every seemingly innocent act, the reader tends to sympathize with Albertine and understand why she feels like a captive. The relationship between Marcel and Albertine is one of the most tortured in literature. Most readers greet Françoise’s sudden announcement that “Mademoiselle Albertine has gone” with delight as they learn that Albertine has finally run away and left him. After finally tracking her down, Marcel promises her a yacht and a Rolls-Royce if she will only return to him.

Albertine never does return: she is killed in a riding accident, and the narrator spends the final half of *The Fugitive* learning to forget her. But his obsessions do not die and he continues delving into her secrets and questioning friends about her sexual proclivities. Apparently all his most fevered imaginings were well founded. Albertine had been devoted to every form of depravity from an early age. She even had an arrangement with the odious Morel to seduce young fisher-girls and farmers’ daughters for group sex in brothels. But as more and more of her closely guarded secrets are revealed, the passage of time dulls the pain until, eventually, Marcel feels nothing but indifference.

At the end of the novel, when Marcel has decided he is finally going to write his great work of art, he backhandedly immortalizes Albertine as his inspiration. He admits that it is the memory of Albertine walking along the Normandy seafront that inspired his writing—partly because she would not have been able to understand him: “Had she been capable of understanding my pages, she would, for that very reason, not have inspired them.”

The character of Albertine did not exist in the original three-volume plan for the novel. Her character was created during the war when Proust wrote an additional four volumes. At the time Proust was recovering from the death in 1914 of his chauffeur and lover, Alfred Agostinelli. Alfred and Proust had conducted a passionate but suffocating love affair since their first meeting on the Normandy coast, with Alfred increasingly complaining of being a captive and needing to get away. Finally, he abandoned Proust and escaped to the country. Like Albertine, he did not return but was killed in an accident.

Andrée

Friend of Albertine. Andrée is the oldest of the little band of girls whom Marcel sees strolling along the esplanade at Balbec in *Within a Budding Grove*, and it is she who so terrifies the old banker by leaping over his head. Andrée comes from a wealthy family, and it is at her house that Albertine stays when she visits Balbec for the holidays.

Marcel sometimes thinks that he is in love with her and at other times he pretends to be in love with her to make Albertine jealous. Marcel uses her as a chaperone for Albertine when they are living together in Paris, but he gradually becomes convinced that the two are having a lesbian affair. Despite her early denials, Andrée finally confesses her Sapphic tastes and describes various amorous adventures with Albertine. Despite her lesbian past, Andrée eventually marries Octave, a wealthy young man from Balbec, and remains a close and faithful friend to Marcel until the end.

Bergotte

Famous novelist. Marcel is first introduced to the works of Bergotte by his friend Bloch while still a young boy in Combray. He quickly reads everything that Bergotte has written and becomes his most devoted fan. Just the fact that Swann's daughter was a close friend of Bergotte was enough to make Marcel fall in love with her. As an adolescent, Marcel spends much of his time attempting to gain admission to the Swanns' household so that he might meet his hero in person. That his father's friend M. de Norpois is contemptuous of Bergotte's work—calling him a flutist and a deliquescent mandarin—makes Marcel even more determined than ever to meet him.

Finally and quite unexpectedly, Marcel is introduced to Bergotte among the luncheon guests at the Swanns' house. As usual, the reality proves a disappointment, and Marcel is horrified to see that Bergotte is an uncouth, thickset, and myopic little man with a red nose curled like a snail shell and a goatee beard. Marcel is unable to reconcile the wonderful books and ideas with the squat and ugly reality of the physical, flesh-and-blood author.

In addition to being scorned by Norpois, Bergotte is also criticized by Legrandin as writing "gamy stuff for the jaded palates of refined voluptuaries." Anyone who is disliked by both Norpois and Legrandin cannot be all bad. Despite Mme Verdurin's attempts to make him join her little clan, Bergotte remained loyal to the Swanns', and he became the nucleus around whom Odette was able to crystallize her own salon.

By the time of his death, Bergotte had become a celebrity, popular with the general public. Since their first meeting at the Swanns', Bergotte remained good friends with Marcel, and he was one of the regular visitors to Marcel's grandmother when she was dying and he himself increasingly ill. The description of Bergotte's death in *The Captive* while visiting an art exhibition to inspect Vermeer's painting *View of Delft*, is one of the most famous passages in the whole novel and in some respects can be seen as a premonition of Proust's own death.

Although Bergotte's written works are referred to throughout the seven volumes of the novel, we are never given any direct quotes or outlines of his plots. In some ways we know less about his actual books than we do of the music of Vinteuil or the paintings of Elstir. Norpois and Legrandin suggested

that his writings were decadent, fin de siècle symbolism—perhaps in the style of Joris-Karl Huysmans’s famous novel *A Rebourse*. Certainly he was a stylist, using words and images in a harmonious manner, and Marcel speaks of his books in terms more evocative of a poet’s work than that of a novelist. If Huysmans was indeed one of the models for Bergotte, it is worth noting that the hero of Huysmans’s *A Rebourse* was based on Proust’s friend Count Robert de Montesquiou, who was also to provide one of the models for Charlus.

Although a compilation of several writers, including Proust himself, Bergotte was most closely based on Anatole France. France was already a distinguished author when he befriended the eighteen-year-old Proust at the salon of Mme Armand de Caillavet. Not only did Anatole France have a red nose “curled like a snail shell” and a goatee beard, but the hero of his tetralogy, *L’Histoire contemporaine*, was named Bergotte. France wrote a preface to Proust’s first book, *Les plaisirs et les jours*, in 1896 and he also worked with him on the “Petition des Intellectuals” in defense of Zola during the Dreyfus Affair. Although the fictional Bergotte was the star of Mme Swann’s salon, Anatole France at one point is referred to as a real-life star of her competitor’s, Mme Verdurin.

Berma

Famous actress. In the novel, Berma is the leading actress of the day, most celebrated for her role in *Phédre* by Racine. Racine's plays, written in the golden age of Louis XIV, represented French classical drama at its best—just like Shakespeare in England. From an early age, Marcel's dream of going to the opera in Paris and seeing Berma perform *Phédre* had been thwarted by his father. Part of the father's reasons had to do with Marcel's poor health and "too much excitement," but part of it was a bourgeois disapproval of the theater and all the vices it represented. M. de Norpois finally persuades Marcel's father to let him go see Berma perform, and, true to form, Marcel is immediately disappointed by the reality of her performance.

Berma does not appear in person until the final pages of the novel, but she is a presence throughout and is discussed admiringly by all the main characters. Obviously based on the famous contemporary actress Sarah Bernhardt, Berma also includes an element of another famous tragic actress. Though she died a few years before Proust was born, this other actress was still famous for her portrayal of *Phédre*. Her name was Rachel, and in the novel, Berma's young rival is also called Rachel (Saint-Loup's mistress).

Berma only appears in person as an old lady in poor health but one who, despite her pain, continues on tour to support her daughter and son-in-law. Her position as the leading actress in Paris has been usurped by the younger Rachel, who, unlike the classically trained and genuinely talented Berma, is just a cheap prostitute with many pretensions but no talent.

Berma had organized a tea party to honor her daughter and son-in-law, but they made excuses and sneaked away to see Rachel perform at the grand party at the *Princesse de Guermantes*. A few days later, Rachel maliciously lets Berma know that the daughter had abandoned her mother to watch her rival perform. Berma dies of a broken heart, "the victim of a domestic plot woven around her, repeating in her own person the fate that she so many times suffered in the final act of a play."

Bloch, Albert

Marcel's oldest friend from school. Bloch is first introduced in *Swann's Way* when he recommends the works of Bergotte, even though he has not actually read them himself. Slightly older than Marcel, worldly-wise, and given to speaking in exaggerated Homeric cadences, he is greatly admired by Marcel but not by his family. When Marcel's grandfather asks Bloch if it has been raining, he replies that he lives so resolutely in the world of the intellect that his senses no longer bother to tell him such trifles as whether it is raining. Another time, he upsets the whole household when he arrives an hour and a half late for lunch, covered with mud from head to foot. Refusing to apologize, he again justifies himself as existing beyond Time and says he is more comfortable with the Chinese opium pipe or the Malayan kris than with such bourgeois implements as the clock or umbrella.

Many years later, at a smart party, Bloch clumsily knocks over a valuable glass vase containing a spray of apple blossoms, spilling water and shattering the glass on the carpet. Instead of apologizing to his hostess, he tells her not to worry as he isn't wet. Even as an older and successful writer, Bloch's habit of getting wet continues throughout the novel. At a restaurant, for example, where he is being very loud and ostentatious, his wild gestures overturn two carafes of water on his companions.

Marcel's initial admiration for Bloch vanishes as the novel develops, and Proust has been accused of anti-Semitism for his portrayal of Bloch and all his family as thick-skinned, ill-bred, pushy, and vulgar. In many ways, Bloch can be seen as Proust's doppelgänger or dark alter ego. Proust was ambivalent about his own Jewish background and was also accused of being pushy and vulgar in his unabashed social climbing. Marcel even compares Bloch to his younger self when first entering society. Just as Marcel used to copy Bloch's manner of speaking, so later in the novel does Bloch copy Marcel's.

Bloch uses Marcel as his entrée into smart society, but he is constantly making social gaffes and revealing his lack of breeding. One evening at Mme de Villeparisis's, Bloch is introduced to an old lady without catching her name. Thinking her to be of no consequence, he only bothers to respond to her garrulous conversation with nods and grunts. Finally, when somebody else is introduced to the old lady, Bloch discovers that he has been talking to a historic beauty, the Baronne Alphonse de Rothschild. The shock of discovering that he

has been rude to someone so rich and famous affects Bloch like a combined brainstorm and heart attack. He cries out, "If only I'd known" to her face and then is so embarrassed by what he's said that he is unable to sleep for a whole week. Proust dryly observes that none of this is of any great importance except to prove that sometimes in this life, sudden stress can actually cause people to say what they mean.

While Marcel is walking with Mme Swann in the Bois de Boulogne one day, they are both greeted by Bloch, who hurries past without stopping. Mme Swann is extremely vague about how she happens to know Bloch and refers to him by another name. Bloch himself refers to the meeting several years later, in Balbec. He tells Marcel that though he does not know the lady's name, he'd enjoyed fairly wild and energetic sex with her on a suburban Paris train several times on a single journey.

Perhaps the worst sin that Bloch commits is to ignore Marcel's article in *Le Figaro*. Finally getting an article published in *Le Figaro* is Marcel's greatest accomplishment throughout the whole novel, and he desperately seeks compliments from all his friends. Far from complimenting Marcel on getting published, Bloch never even acknowledges reading the article until some years later, after he himself has had something published by the same newspaper.

In later life Bloch suppresses his Jewish background by writing under the name Jacques du Rozier and dressing with an English chic. The once curly hair is now brushed flat, parted in the middle, and covered with brilliantine. He speaks with a languid drawl and hides his true nature behind a formidable monocle, from which he surveys the world as though from behind the glass partition of a limousine.

This rivalry between the two writers continues until the final volume, and Marcel is convinced that Bloch tries to steal all his best ideas. Whenever Marcel describes anything he is working on, Bloch says that curiously enough he had written something very similar himself and offers to show him one day. From this Marcel infers that Bloch intends to sit down and write it as soon as he returns home.

Bloch's last appearance is at the Prince de Guermantes' party, where he is recognized as a well-known man of letters and welcomed into the best society. The vulgar outsider is now accepted even by the Duchesse de Guermantes, who treats him as though she had held him on her knee when he was a baby.

Mme Bontemps

Albertine's aunt. Mme Bontemps (Mrs. Goodtime or Fair-weather in English) remains a minor character throughout the novel but one with major connections. She is introduced in *Within a Budding Grove* as one of Odette de Cr cy's vulgar sycophants who visits the Swanns' Paris home for afternoon tea. She is married to a minor government official with a shady reputation, and is aunt and guardian to the somewhat disreputable Albertine.

Despite all of Mme Bontemps' encouragement, Marcel does not marry Albertine, although she raises no objection when Albertine moves in with him. When Marcel meets Albertine again after a few years' separation, he recognizes that she has been strongly influenced by the slang and expressions of her aunt, Mme Bontemps. She even hastens the end of the relationship by inadvertently exposing some of Albertine's lies, and, finally, she is the person who tells Marcel, by telegram, of Albertine's death.

It is because she is so firmly established in the reader's mind as a provincial nobody that her elevation to social prominence in wartime Paris (due to her husband's position in the emergency cabinet) comes as such a surprise. With Mme Verdurin, she spends the war years vulgarly gossiping about her husband's government secrets with an indiscretion that delights the German intelligence service. Fortunately for the French soldiers at the front, M. Bontemps' reports are invariably inaccurate, and so no damage is done and no lives were lost.

Brichot

Member of the Verdurins' little clan. Brichot is a professor at the Sorbonne whom the Verdurins had met at a “watering-place somewhere” and who had remained one of “the faithful” ever since. He is pedantic, boring, and endlessly self-conscious, although, unfortunately, not self-aware. Informed that young noblemen in Paris place their silk top hats on the floor when paying a social visit, Brichot does the same in the country with his trilby. Brichot remains a pompously irrelevant and sterile figure of fun throughout the novel, but he is useful as a symbol of consistency for the little clan. He carries within him the traditions and memories of “the faithful.” It is Brichot who explains to Marcel the significance of the different homes that the Verdurins have inhabited, and it is around Brichot that the wonderful description of “the Verdurins” drawing room’ evolves in *The Captive*.

One of the reasons that Brichot had remained faithfully focused on the little clan for so many years is that there had been no sexual distractions. Any signs of amorous intent on Brichot’s part had been quickly nipped in the bud by the mistress, Mme Verdurin. At one stage Brichot became enamored of Mme Cambremer and accepted several invitations to lunch with her, until Mme Verdurin decided to “put a stop to these proceedings” (2:1128). Even when, in the privacy of his obscure Paris apartment, he had conducted a liaison with his laundress, Mme Verdurin had somehow got wind of the affair and had quickly “thrown the wretched woman out!” (2:897-8)

Brichot serves his only significant function during the downfall of Charlus, when his role is to distract the baron. Brichot encourages the baron to light his cigar, “kick-back,” and tell stories about the good old days while the Verdurins work on Morel in an adjoining room.

During the war, finding himself excluded from the Verdurins’ increasingly fashionable drawing room, Brichot turns to journalism, where his pedantic ramblings prove very successful and he is regarded in the popular press as a pundit. Mme Verdurin is characteristically furious with his growing fame and organizes a campaign against him so that eventually all of the Faubourg Saint-Germain treats him as a figure of fun—a fate of which Brichot remains blissfully unaware.

Cambremer, Marquis de

Brother-in-law of Legrandin; self-important and unattractive country squire of low intelligence. The Marquis de Cambremer was a Norman country gentleman whose family home, Féterne, was near Balbec. The family name is first mentioned in “Combray” in connection with Marcel’s snobbish neighbor, Legrandin, whose sister is married to the marquis. Marcel’s father is curious to meet the sister because he plans to send Marcel to Balbec for his health. The snobbish Legrandin never makes the introduction because Marcel’s family is not sufficiently important.

The name is mentioned again in “Swann in Love” when Swann and the Duchesse de Guermantes make scatological jokes about the name (see below), which they agree means “shit,” whichever way you look at it.

Proust has great fun with Cambremer and misses no opportunity to portray him as a haughty fool who likes to quote the *Fables of La Fontaine* to prove that he is well read. Unfortunately, he has only read two fables and so keeps repeating the same ones. Proust has even more fun with his appearance, particularly his nose, which, he explains, is not ugly; it is, if anything, too handsome, too bold, too proud of its own importance. Arched, polished, gleaming, brand-new, it is amply prepared to make up for the spiritual inadequacy of the eyes.

Having so remorselessly established his stupidity, Proust uses Cambremer to represent the anti-Dreyfus cause with various remarks that reflect the bigotry and chauvinist blindness of the nationalist movement. Though he does not play an important role in the novel, his function as the embodiment of determined ignorance persists till the end. He finally appears at the Prince de Guermantes’ party when old age has transformed his red applelike cheeks into “enormous red pouches,” as a result of which he is unable to properly open his mouth or his eyes. No further mention is made, however, of the famous nose.

The Joke about Cambremer (the Name)

In the first conversation that we overhear between Swann and Oriane, the Duchesse de Guermantes, they joke about the name Cambremer (1:371-2). Rather an obscure joke, it refers to the word “shit” in three ways:

“It ends just in time but it ends badly”: Oriane refers to “mer,” which are the first three letters of the French word “merde,” meaning shit; “It begins no better”: Swann refers to “caca” (a more vulgar term for shit); and “Le mot de Cambronne” is a French euphemism for “merde,” which is what General Cambronne is reputed to have shouted at the English when asked to surrender at Waterloo. Cambremer is similar to Cambronne.

Although jokes are not funny if they need to be explained, this one is worth pursuing because it quickly establishes the close relationship between Oriane and Swann and their mutual understanding of each other’s thoughts. It also demonstrates their combination of wit, discretion, and earthiness. It further has the effect, occurring so early in the novel, of always deflating the Cambremers’ self-importance whenever they appear.

The joke is continued much later in the novel when Charlus is giving his boyfriend Morel some lessons on the French nobility—emphasizing that the Guermantes family is at the top of the social tree: “As for all the little people who call themselves Marquis de Cambre *merde* or de Vatefairefiche [Goplaywithyourself], there is no difference between them and the humblest private in your regiment. Whether you go and do wee-wee at the Countess Caca’s or caca at the Baroness Weewee’s, it’s exactly the same, you will have compromised your reputation and have used a fetid rag instead of toilet paper. Which is unsavory” (2:1126).

Cambremer, Renée, Marquise de

Legrandin's rude, arrogant, and ill-bred sister. Legrandin's sister lived in Combray before her socially elevating marriage to the marquis. Though Legrandin thinks his sister has married into the very heights of society, and Balbec's local gentry compete to be invited to her parties, in Paris the Cambremers are regarded as nobodies. At a musical recital at the home of Mme de Saint-Euverte, the Duchesse de Guermantes tells Swann she has no idea who Mme Cambremer can be and dismisses her as a country cousin.

To demonstrate her sound musical education, Mme de Cambremer moves her head back and forth in time to the music like a metronome with such force that her diamond earrings catch in her bodice so that she constantly has to rearrange herself but without losing a beat. At the same party she makes a fool of herself by rushing to save a candle that she thinks is dangerously vibrating upon the piano during a recital, but in trying to save it, she crashes into the pianist. It was at this party that Swann, on the rebound from Odette, moves his attentions to Mme de Cambremer—despite the jokes concerning her name. Part of her appeal to Swann might even have been that she was not regarded as part of “good society,” for he was typically attracted by pretentious vulgarity.

However, back home in Balbec, the Cambremers are held in high esteem by the local bourgeoisie and by the guests at the Grand Hotel. Mme de Cambremer hosts weekly garden parties that are considered the very essence of local sophistication. Those guests at the hotel who had not been invited to the parties always made a point of hiring a carriage on Sunday morning for a drive in the country so that, if asked, they could explain that they were otherwise occupied and unable to attend her party.

Each summer, the Cambremers rent out one of their properties, La Raspelière, to the Verdurins, who invite them to dinner and to meet the little clan. The Verdurins invite the Cambremers in the hope of lowering the rent for the following season, while Mme Cambremer only accepts their invitation in the hope of raising it.

In addition to being arrogant and rude, Mme de Cambremer affects a snobbish taste for modern art and the avant-garde—though her taste is entirely dictated by fashion and the opinions of others. Once, after she has been especially dismissive of Poussin's paintings, Marcel tells her that Degas has the greatest

admiration for Poussin, and Mme Cambremer immediately reverses her position (2:841).

Though Mme de Cambremer and Mme Verdurin share a showy and pretentious obsession with art, Mme Verdurin does at least have genuine taste, which the other does not. Marcel comments that just as some people can exercise and diet without losing weight, Mme Cambremer can study art, music, and philosophy all year long and still remain a small-minded provincial.

Thinking that by marrying into the aristocracy she would enter a world of sophisticated culture, Legrandin's sister discovers that her husband and his family are as philistine as they are ignorant, and she treats her mother-in-law with open derision. Unlike her brother, who hides his social ambitions behind a mask of contempt for the aristocracy, Mme Cambremer is relentless in her determined social ascent. From her humble beginnings in Combray to the provincial nobility in Balbec, her eyes remain always fixed on the aristocratic salons of Paris.

Mme Cambremer's ultimate goal is to become part of the Faubourg Saint-Germain. Like Prince von Faffenheim (see Norpois), she places her social ambitions even higher than her own mortality. Her ultimate dream is to be accepted by the Duchesse and the Princesse de Guermantes, and she calculates that she might achieve this ambition within the next five years. Unfortunately, having contracted an incurable disease, she worries that she might die before this could happen.

Despite her snobbery, Mme de Cambremer has mixed feelings when her homosexual son marries the Baron de Charlus's adopted daughter, Mlle d'Oloron. By a long and circuitous route, Mme de Cambremer, born Mlle Legrandin from Combray, had finally fulfilled her lifelong ambition and "pitched her tent" among the Guermantes' clan. But her pleasure is poisoned by the knowledge that her daughter-in-law is really just a lowly seamstress and the niece of Jupien the tailor. In the end, her spiteful nature outweighs her snobbery, and she objects to the marriage simply in order to humiliate her family.

Charlus, Palamède, Baron de

Younger brother of the Duc de Guermantes; Prince des Laumes, Duke of Brabant, Squire of Montargis, Prince d'Oloron, of Carency, Viareggio, and of the Dunes (nicknamed Mémé by the family). From the time he is introduced early in *Swann's Way* until his final appearance in *Time Regained*, Palamède de Charlus remains one of the most complex and important characters in the novel. Even his title is complicated, as his nephew, Robert de Saint-Loup, explains:

“He bears the title of Baron de Charlus. Strictly, when my great-uncle died, my uncle Palamède ought to have taken the title of Prince des Laumes, which was that of his brother before he became Duc de Guermantes—in that family they change their names as often as their shirts. But my uncle has peculiar ideas about all that sort of thing. And as he feels that people are rather apt to overdo the Italian Prince and Grandee of Spain business nowadays, and although he had half-a-dozen princely titles to choose from, he has remained Baron de Charlus, as a protest, and with an apparent simplicity which really covers a good deal of pride. ‘In these days,’ he says, ‘everybody is a prince; one really must have something that will distinguish one; I shall call myself Prince when I wish to travel incognito.’ According to him there is no older title than the Charlus barony; to prove to you that it is earlier than the Montmorency title, though they used to claim, quite wrongly, to be the premier barons of France when they were only premier in the Ile-de-France, where their fief was, my uncle will hold forth to you for hours on end and enjoy doing so, because, although he’s a most intelligent man, really gifted, he regards that sort of thing as quite a live topic of conversation.” (1:811)

Like his cousin Oriane, he was raised and educated by their mutual aunt, Mme de Villeparisis, and his well-educated, cultured, and refined sensibilities are constantly juxtaposed with the coarseness of his behavior.

First introduced as Mme Swann’s reputed lover, he is later revealed to be one of Swann’s closest friends. In *Within a Budding Grove*, his nephew Robert speaks admiringly of him as a man-about-town with a collection of beautiful mistresses. Entering society, Marcel soon learns there is no more sought-after ladies man nor more arrogant aristocrat than Baron de Charlus. Not only arrogant, Charlus is cruel and takes great delight in exercising his powers as the

recognized arbiter of good taste with the ability to dismiss whomsoever he chooses from polite society. But there is always something strange and disquieting in the way he behaves, the way he looks, and the way he speaks.

Very tall but rather stout, he immediately strikes an imposing figure with his fierce stare and black mustache that he twists operatically. His monocle raises his eyebrows in an arch of amused contempt while his loud but shrill voice dominates whatever social group he has deigned to honor with his presence. When not covered with an elegant silk top hat, his hair is cropped close on top in the Prussian style, while at the sides he allows a pair of waved “pigeon’s wings” to grow quite long. Though dressed conservatively in dark suits, there remains the impression that he is deliberately repressing a more colorful nature within.

The suit he was wearing was darker even than the other; and no doubt true elegance lies nearer to simplicity than false; but there was something more: from close at hand one felt that if color was almost entirely absent from these garments it was not because he who had banished it from them was indifferent to it but rather because for some reason he forbade himself the enjoyment of it. And the sobriety which they displayed seemed to be of the kind that comes from obedience to a rule of diet rather than from a lack of appetite. A dark green thread harmonized, in the stuff of his trousers, with the stripe on his socks, with a refinement which betrayed the vivacity of a taste that was everywhere else subdued, to which this single concession had been made out of tolerance, while a spot of red on his tie was imperceptible, like a liberty which one dares not take. (1:809)

This subdued style of dress is merely one aspect of Charlus’s reserved and self-conscious personality. Behind the respectable façade of this most disciplined and masculine aristocrat one senses another, more colorful and vivacious nature struggling to restrain itself.

M. de Charlus not only revealed a refinement of feeling such as men rarely show; his voice itself, like certain contralto voices in which the middle register has not been sufficiently cultivated, so that when they sing it sounds like an alternating duet between a young man and a woman, mounted, when he expressed these delicate sentiments, to its higher notes, took on an unexpected sweetness and seemed to embody choirs of betrothed maidens, of sisters, pouring out their fond feelings. But the bevy of young girls whom M. de Charlus in his horror of every kind of effeminacy would have been so distressed to learn that he gave the

impression of sheltering thus within his voice did not confine themselves to the interpretation, the modulation of sentimental ditties. Often while M. de Charlus was talking one could hear their laughter, the shrill, fresh laughter of school-girls or coquettes quizzing their companions with all the archness and malice of clever tongues and pretty wits....

At that moment, noticing that the embroidered handkerchief which he had in his pocket was exhibiting its colored border, he thrust it sharply down out of sight with the scandalized air of a prudish but far from innocent lady concealing attractions which, by an excess of scrupulosity, she regards as indecent. (1:820-21)

His true nature emerges in *Cities of the Plain*, which begins with a delightful courtship dance between Charlus and Jupien the tailor. Marcel realizes that Charlus is an enthusiastic but closeted homosexual with a taste for the lower classes, especially footmen. On one occasion, during a complex assignation with a bus conductor, Charlus wanted to increase his sexual pleasure by offering to pay double if the conductor would pretend not to see old ladies waiting for the bus so that they would be obliged to walk home on foot.

Proust portrays Charlus as a woman trapped in the body of a man—even resembling his mother’s facial features. His life was one long struggle to disguise and repress his own feminine nature, which is why Proust preferred to use the expression “invert” rather than “homosexual.” Charlus refers to himself as a “tante,” which means both aunt and “queen” and which, though no doubt an old French slang word, was first publicly used by Balzac to mean “the third sex.” Like Marcel’s mother and grandmother, Charlus is devoted to the letters of Mme de Sévigné and even presents Marcel with a specially bound copy of them. Marcel’s grandmother was delighted to find in Charlus “a delicacy, a sensibility that was quite feminine.”

Unable to satisfy his physical desires with men of his own social class, Charlus alternates between friendship and rage, and the novel is filled with his furious verbal outbursts. Failing to seduce Marcel, he turns his attentions to Charlie Morel, with whom he falls self-destructively in love. Just as the Verdurins had once used Odette to entice and humiliate Swann, so now do they use the odious Morel to humiliate and punish Charlus for not treating them with sufficient respect. Inflamed by his love for Morel, Charlus grows more flamboyant and increasingly reckless in his behavior. Following his terribly humiliating and public disgrace at the Verdurins’, he becomes socially isolated

and indulges his taste for rough young men whom he pays to whip him. The arrogant young aristocrat has become a bloated and disgraced “big baby.” There is redemption of sorts in his final, white-haired appearance in *Time Regained* when he acquires the tragic dignity of King Lear in his old age.

The character is famously, but only partly, based on Proust’s friend Count Robert de Montesquiou, the symbolist poet and well-known boulevardier who traced his noble lineage back to the Merovingians. A few years older than Proust, it was Montesquiou who introduced him to all the upper levels of the Faubourg Saint-Germain and who, in later years, felt betrayed by Proust’s portrayal of him as Charlus.

Châtellerault, Duc de

A Guermantes but of unspecified provenance; a nephew of Mme de Villeparisis; young, secretly gay aristocrat. Part of Proust's genius was to seed his novel with the names of the minor characters so that by the time they appear we feel that we know them. Le Duc de Châtellerault is a good example. He first appears at a party given by his aunt Mme Villeparisis when he is one of the first characters to demonstrate the latest fashion among young blades of placing his top hat on the floor. Though we are told nothing of his parentage, Marcel observes the Guermantes family resemblance: tall and slim with golden hair and an aquiline profile that reminds him of the duchess. There are fleeting glimpses of him being rude to Bloch and having ambiguous relations with footmen at various parties, but nothing that distinguishes his character until the ball at the Princesse de Guermantes'. When handing over his card to have his name formally announced, the duke recognizes the princess's usher as the young man with whom he'd had anonymous sex a few days previously.

He reappears later in the novel when Gilberte Swann becomes one of the richest heiresses in France. The mothers of all the young unmarried nobles compete to present their sons in the most favorable light and, for awhile, it looks as though the Châtelleraults might win. Mme de Marsantes, however, proves the better negotiator, and it is Robert de Saint-Loup who marries Gilberte's fortune and not le Duc de Châtellerault. His final appearance is as a little old gentleman with a silver mustache.

Cottard, Dr.

Longtime member of the Verdurins' little clan. Cottard first appears in *Swann's Way* as a bumbling doctor and a member of the Verdurins' circle. He was so socially ill at ease that he was never sure if people were joking or serious, so he affected a permanent but provisional smile in case they were being facetious. If they turned out to be serious, he could always pretend to be smiling at a private joke.

From the first descriptions of him at the Verdurins' in *Swann's Way*, Cottard is established as a stupid and self-conscious oaf given to bad puns and social gaffes. However, people such as Marcel's father do not know this and respect him as an eminent man of medicine. To cover up his shyness and sense of inadequacy, Cottard had trained himself to treat the world outside the Verdurins' salon with a glacial air. With his patients and professional colleagues, he was deliberately cold and silent and never failed to say the most disagreeable things. Consequently, he was greatly respected in society, and Marcel's family called for him to treat the grandmother's final illness.

Like Brichot, Cottard's main role in the story is as a member of the little clan, of which he is one of the longest serving and most obsequious of members. During the war, a shortage of everything compelled the citizens of Paris to stand in long lines even for bread, and the manufacture of croissants was banned by government edict. However, the toadying Dr. Cottard managed to prescribe a daily ration of fresh croissants for Mme Verdurin's morning attacks of migraine.

Crécy, Pierre de Verjus, Comte de

Odette's first husband. Except to provide Odette with a name and a history, the Comte de Crécy has very little role to play. Odette had married him when she was very young and relentlessly squandered all of his family fortune. Even though he is destitute, he still retains his taste for the finer things in life: good food, fine wine, and the best cigars. Marcel befriends him when he is staying at Balbec, and because of his refinement and excellent conversation often invites him for dinner. He is well regarded in the neighborhood as coming from one of the noblest families, and although impoverished and badly dressed, he maintains the dignity of a true gentleman. The family castle, though in ruins, still carries the family crest. He is so refined that Marcel decides against telling him that he knows of a whore who used to call herself de Crécy

It is years later that Charlus explains to Marcel that Odette de Crécy was in fact the Comte's wife and that it was she who drained him of his last farthing. Without an allowance paid by Swann, the poor man would not have been able to eat, let alone enjoy the pleasure of a fine cigar.

Elstir

Famous painter. If Bergotte is a rich composite of famous writers, Elstir is an even greater compilation of famous painters. Paris at the turn of the century had more great painters than at any other time in its history; the impressionists were at the peak of their success and the cubists were beginning to make themselves known—certainly among avant-garde patrons like Mme Verdurin.

Elstir first appears in *Swann's Way* as yet another simpering and pretentious member of Mme Verdurin's little clan. He is known as "Master Biche" the painter, but we are aware of him only because he is spiteful to Swann and is a reputed lover of Odette. It is not until Marcel and Saint-Loup meet him, years later, at Rivebelle near Balbec that he acquires the individuality of a significant character.

Proust seems to prepare the reader for the reintroduction of Biche as Elstir, the great painter, through several pages of extremely visual passages describing the views from the windows of the hotel at Balbec. With charming metaphors of the meal awaiting him, Marcel describes the sunsets over the sea while preparing to go to Rivebelle for dinner.

... a band of red sky above the sea, compact and clear-cut as a layer of aspic over meat, then, a little later, over a sea already cold and steel-blue like a gray mullet, a sky of the same pink as the salmon that we should presently be ordering at Rivebelle, reawakened my pleasure in dressing to go out to dinner. (1:861)

This is followed by several long paragraphs comparing different views from the hotel windows with different styles of painting, including impressionists and a *Harmony in Grey and Pink* in the Whistler manner, "the favorite signature of the Chelsea master." Whistler was a favorite of Proust and an obvious source at least for the name Elstir, if not also for many of his artistic mannerisms.

After the waiter points out "the famous painter Elstir" seated near them at the restaurant in Rivebelle, Marcel and Saint-Loup introduce themselves and are invited to visit the artist's studio. Just as Marcel had previously described seascapes and sunsets in terms of painting, so he now describes the canvases of Elstir, stacked around the studio, in terms of nature. After being initially disappointed with the philistine ugliness of Elstir's house, Marcel is enthralled

with the painter's studio, which he describes as the laboratory of a sort of new creation of the world in which Elstir re-creates nature and the world from within, almost like God.

Marcel is delighted not only with the wonderful paintings but also with Elstir's conversation and ideas. Through the character of Elstir, Proust is able to discuss his own passion for art, which makes this novel one of the most profoundly visual works in Western literature; Proust refers to more than one hundred individual painters throughout the novel. Elstir shares with Marcel his ideas about painting and even changes Marcel's previously unfavorable opinion of Balbec's church. Marcel's fascination with Elstir is only interrupted when he discovers that the painter is a close friend of Albertine and her little band of girls.

Elstir quickly has a profound effect on Marcel's way of "looking" at the world around him and seeing the poetry of "still life" in everyday objects.

I would now happily remain at table while it was being cleared, and ... it was no longer solely towards the sea that I would turn my eyes. Since I had seen such things depicted in water colors by Elstir, I sought to find again in reality, I cherished as though for their poetic beauty, the broken gestures of the knives still lying across one another, the swollen convexity of a discarded napkin into which the sun introduced a patch of yellow velvet, the half empty glass which thus showed to greater advantage the noble sweep of its curved sides and, in the heart of its translucent crystal, clear as frozen daylight, some dregs of wine, dark but glittering with reflected lights, the displacement of solid objects, the transmutation of liquids by the effect of light and shade, the shifting colors of the plums which passed from green to blue and from blue to golden yellow in the half plundered dish, the chairs, like a group of old ladies, that came twice daily to take their places round the white cloth spread on the table as on an altar at which were celebrated the rites of the palate, and where in the hollows of the oyster-shells a few drops of lustral water had remained as in tiny holy water stroups of stone; I tried to find beauty there where I had never imagined before that it could exist, in the most ordinary things, in the profundities of "still life." (1:929)

As his relationship with Elstir develops, Marcel wonders if this man of genius could also be the ridiculous, perverted painter who had at one time been adopted by the Verdurins. Elstir confirms, without embarrassment, that he had indeed

been M. Biche in earlier days. He explains that we should never regret the follies of our youth, for it is experience, both good and bad, that makes us who we are. He explains that wisdom in life is not automatically acquired but must be painfully earned by looking back at our youthful indiscretions: proof that we have really lived.

In addition to learning from him and enjoying his company, Marcel also uses Elstir as a means to achieve certain of his goals. It is through Elstir that he is finally able to make the acquaintance of the little band of girls and gain an introduction to Albertine. He also uses Elstir, indirectly, as a way of breaking into high society. The Guermantes family owns a considerable collection of Elstir's paintings, and Marcel uses his desire to examine the paintings as an excuse to finally meet the duchess.

The Guermantes had originally collected the Elstirs on the recommendation of Charles Swann, but since the duchess was not especially fond of them, she sold or gave away many. It was only years later, when his paintings had become famous and valuable, that she started hanging them in the main rooms of her house instead of storing them in the attic.

One obvious inspiration for Elstir was Monet, with his paintings of Rouen Cathedral and the Normandy coast. Proust had viewed his series of fifteen haystacks in 1891 and his study of trees in 1892, and had visited the exhibition of his paintings of Rouen Cathedral in 1895. Whistler is another major influence and, as indicated earlier, is probably the source of the name Elstir. The venerable but reclusive Degas could have been the model for Elstir's style of living in relative isolation. In addition to these painters, the descriptions of various works by Elstir quite obviously refer also to works by Manet, Gustave Moreau, and, especially, Turner.

Though Proust had met most of the great painters named above (with the exception of Degas, who detested homosexuals), the three painters to whom he was closest were far less famous, but it is their theories of art that were actually expressed by Elstir. Jacques Emile Blanche painted Proust's most famous portrait (see page 372) and would have taught Proust a lot about contemporary painters. Paul Helleu did portraits of many of Proust's friends as well as seascapes and, like Elstir, agreed that the great charm of a yacht and yachting clothes is that they reflect the simplicity of the sea.

Proust's third painter friend was Édouard Vuillard, who, like Elstir, lived in seclusion on the Normandy coast. In a letter to Reynaldo Hahn from Cabourg,

Proust describes Vuillard, saying, “a chap like Giotto, don’t you think, or even a chap like Titian, don’t you think, knew just as much as Monet.” Proust was to use the same manner of speech when Elstir was describing the “chap” who had carved the gargoyles of the church porch at Balbec. Of all the four fictional artists in the novel—Bergotte, Berma, Vinteuil, and Elstir—Elstir is the most fully developed as a person and the most sympathetically portrayed.

Paintings, and thus the importance of Elstir’s character, play a very important role in the novel: many of the characters and many of the settings are described in terms of paintings by famous, as well as obscure, painters. Swann, for example, is always referring to the resemblance of other characters to a painting by one of the old masters.

Examples of all these references, as well as samples of works by all the painters listed above, are wonderfully examined in Eric Karpeles’s *Paintings in Proust*, which is listed in “Suggestions for Further Reading.”

Forcheville, Baron de

Lover and eventually third husband of Odette de Crécy. Forcheville is introduced as a guest at the Verdurins', where he is contrasted, unfavorably, with Swann. The two had known each other for many years and served together in the same regiment.

Swann struggles to maintain his self-respect and integrity without antagonizing "the Mistress," while Forcheville deliberately charms her with his guileless vulgarity. Despite his Jewish background, Swann is accepted at the very highest levels of aristocratic society, while Forcheville, despite his aristocratic name, lacks any real social connections. Swann lives on the aristocratic Ile Saint-Louis and frequents the exclusive salons of the Faubourg Saint-Germain while Forcheville lives in the loud and vulgar area of the grand boulevards surrounded by bars and restaurants. While Swann's great wealth permits him to enjoy a comfortable independence, de Forcheville struggles from day to day and needs the generous patronage of the Verdurins or the inheritance of Swann's widow just to survive.

When Forcheville crudely expresses an appreciation of Swann's then-mistress, Odette, the Verdurins recognize a way to separate Odette from Swann. They make sure that Forcheville and Odette are always invited together to their luncheons in the Bois de Boulogne and on their excursions and cruises, from which Swann is always excluded. Swann's jealousy increases as he sees Odette writing letters and spending more of her time with Forcheville than with him.

The implied relationship between Odette and Forcheville continues throughout the novel and so it comes as no surprise that Odette marries him after Swann's death. By becoming Mme de Forcheville, she switches from a Jewish name to one of the French aristocracy. Forcheville only married her after making a long round of country houses and ascertaining that his family would acknowledge his wife. The family raised some difficulties at first, but yielded to the material advantage of no longer having to provide for the expenses of a needy relative who was about to pass from comparative penury to opulence.

As a character he is unusually one-sided for Proust. He has no redeeming characteristics and serves only as a vulgar foil to the discerning sensitivities of Swann. It is all the more painful, therefore, that Gilberte should take Forcheville's name and reject her father's. Forcheville, having bequeathed his

family name to Odette and Gilberte, has no further role to play in the novel and so dies, unnoticed and unlamented. Ironically, according to François Mauriac, who was present in Proust's death chamber, the last word that Proust wrote before he died was "Forcheville."

Françoise

The family cook. Françoise is one of the great characters of fiction, larger than life and terrible to behold. She combines peasant ignorance and guile with an astute understanding and innocence. She has a big heart and it is to Françoise that Marcel always turns for comfort. But she is also cruel and ruthless, as evidenced by her treatment of the poor scullery maid whom she disliked. Learning that the scullery maid was allergic to asparagus, Françoise served it with every meal so that the poor girl would spend all day in the kitchen peeling it.

Françoise enters the novel as Aunt Léonie's cook, and after Aunt Léonie dies, she is inherited by Marcel's family and moves to Paris with them. Unlike in every other respect, both the Duchesse de Guermantes and Françoise represent the Gallic soul. Both of them, in their idiomatic manner of speaking and in their core values, are tied to the very soil and soul of France. Françoise knows almost everything that is happening, and what she does not know she makes up—just as when she does not know a word, she makes one up. She is manipulative, cunning, stubborn, and totally loyal.

Her relationship with the family is symbiotic, with a mutual dependence. In return for her services, the family had to permit Françoise her little quirks, whether loitering in the street, feeding the servants their midday meal first, or taking a holiday each Sunday to visit her niece. *The Guermantes Way* opens with a hilarious description of the family impatiently awaiting their midday meal in the dining room while Françoise and the servants bring theirs to a leisurely conclusion downstairs in the kitchen.

When they first arrive at the hotel in Balbec, Françoise rings for service at the least excuse, whatever the time: "Well, we're paying enough for it, aren't we?" But after a few weeks, when she has become friends with all the servants in the hotel, she prevents Marcel and his grandmother from ordering anything, however reasonable, in case it "would interrupt the servant's dinner." Such was the power of Françoise's personality that Marcel and his grandmother could no longer have any hot water because Françoise had become a friend of the person who heated it.

Though she does not play an important role in the story after the family leaves Combray, she is always in the background as a formidable presence. She is often

waiting just outside the door, ready to burst in at the most inopportune moment. Like a Greek chorus, she emerges when needed to comment on the action and to pass judgment on the players.

By living so closely with the family, she had acquired, through fear, prudence, alertness, and cunning, that instinctive and almost divinatory knowledge of them all that the sailor has of the sea, the victim has of the hunter, and if not the doctor, often, at any rate, the patient has of his disease. Marcel describes how he once left a letter in which he had criticized Françoise on his messy writing desk. When he returned to his room, the desk had been tidied and the incriminating letter placed prominently and separately on top of the neatly arranged papers. She was so expert at such subtle forms of communication that her victim would know that she already knew everything when she finally made her appearance.

In her relationship with the family, as with her attitude to society in general, Françoise remained a mass of contradictions. She took great pride in the family's wealth and would boast to her friends about it. It was not that she equated wealth with virtue or valued wealth without virtue; it was just that she could not imagine virtue without wealth.

Guermantes, the family

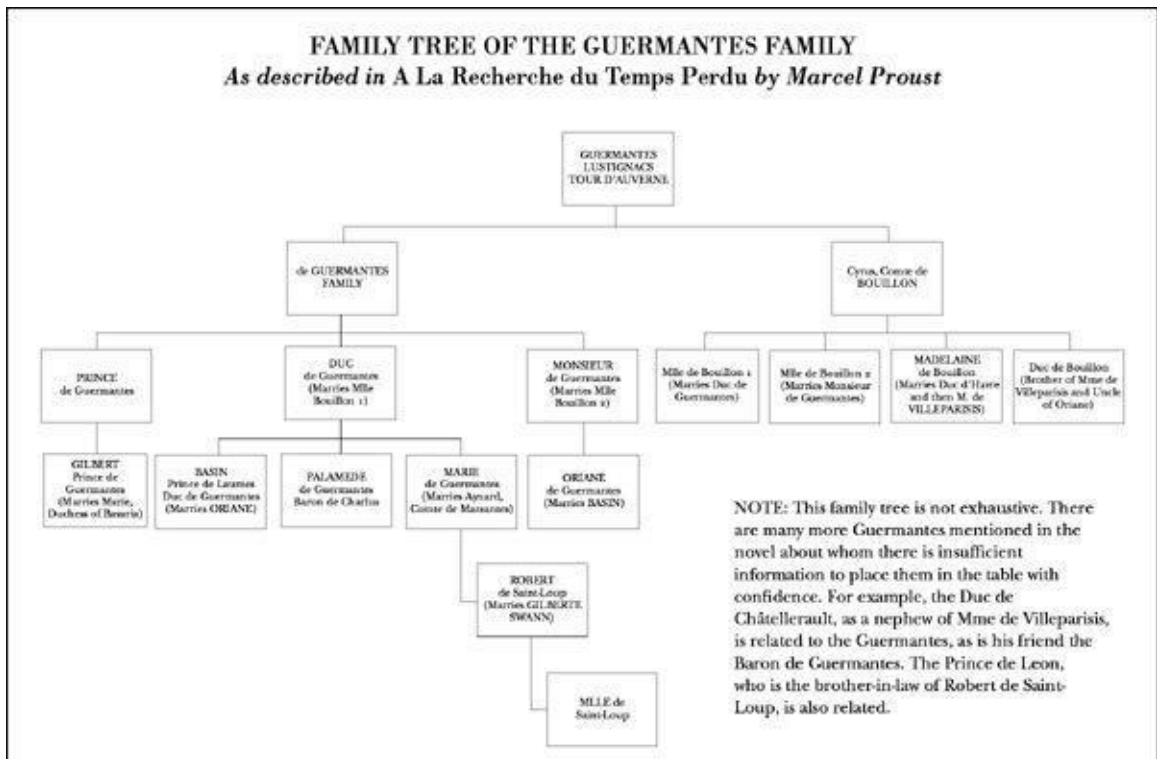
The Guermantes family traced their lineage back to the Merovingian dynasty and the first kings of France. The family represents the direct descendants of Geneviève de Brabant and Gilbert the Bad, who feature in many medieval legends and whose story was portrayed on the magic lantern in Marcel's bedroom. Geneviève was falsely accused of adultery by the court chamberlain Golo and banished to the forest, where she lived in a cave and raised her son, protected by a roe. The romantic associations of Geneviève de Brabant were thus deeply etched in the imagination of the young Marcel. The associations of Geneviève with the Guermantes were further reinforced when he saw her image in the gargoyles and stained-glass windows of the church in Combray. Even his grandmother mentions that the Guermantes are descended from the counts of Brabant whose ancient tombstones make everybody trip in the local church at Combray. The family mock her, however, when she goes on to suggest that the Guermantes are related to one of her old school friends, Mme de Villeparisis.

The Guermantes are also directly descended from the Lusignans, lords of Poitou and the oldest French nobility. Their ruined castle south of Combray is today still the largest in France. Because of the Crusades, the Lusignans became kings of much of the Middle East, including Jerusalem and Cyprus. The Duc de Guermantes is immensely proud of his Lusignan heritage, but his wife does not want to hear about it. One possible explanation is that the family was reputedly founded by the fairy spirit Mélusine, half serpent and half woman, with whom the duchess is often compared. (It must be emphasized that while the Lusignans and the Capets are real historical dynasties, the Guermantes are entirely fictional.)

The Guermantes family is thus not only older than the Capetian family, which ruled France from 987 to 1793, but it even predates the rule of Charlemagne. Long before the cathedrals of Notre Dame or Chartres dominated the skyline of medieval France, the Guermantes family had the power of life and death over their subjects. They represent the oldest nobility, the purest blood, and the deepest roots of France.

As is always the case with old families, the relationships between individual members are complex. Proust provides incomplete and sometimes contradictory information, but the following is an attempt to explain the relationships among

the family members who play such a pivotal role in his novel.



All of the Guermantes in Proust’s novel were the result of the union of the Guermantes family with the equally ancient de Bouillons, who were part of the princely Tour d’Auvergne dynasty. In the generation prior to the start of the novel, the de Bouillon family had three daughters, of whom one appears in the book as Mme de Villeparisis, born Mlle de Bouillon. In the same generation, the Guermantes had at least three children: the Prince de Guermantes, the Duc de Guermantes, and a third brother we’ll call M. de Guermantes.

The eldest Guermantes son, the prince, had at least one son, Gilbert, who became Prince de Guermantes in his turn and married Marie-Gilbert who had been born the Duchess of Bavaria. These are the Prince and Princesse de Guermantes of the novel who, as far as can be told, produced no heirs. The second Guermantes son, the duke, married one of the three de Bouillon daughters and had two sons, Basin and Palamède, and a daughter, Marie. These three children were cousins of Gilbert, Prince de Guermantes. The third de Guermantes son married the second de Bouillon daughter and had a daughter, Oriane. Oriane is thus a cousin of Basin, Palamède, and Marie as well as of Gilbert.

For whatever reason, Palamède de Charlus and his cousin Oriane were both raised by their mutual aunt, the third de Bouillon daughter, who eventually became, through her second husband, Mme de Villeparisis. Not only were the two fathers of all four children brothers, but also both mothers were sisters.

As eldest son, Basin had inherited most of the family wealth just as he would eventually inherit the dukedom. His cousin Oriane, as the eighteenth Oriane de Guermantes in a direct line from Geneviève de Brabant, had the purest blood in France but, unfortunately, little money, and it was arranged, for the purity of the blood, for Oriane should marry her cousin Basin and eventually become Duchesse de Guermantes. This loveless and semi-incestuous marriage, in which both partners shared the same grandparents, was to produce no heirs. So, ironically, the union of Basin and Oriane, intended to protect the bloodline, finally destroyed it.

The second son, Palamède, Baron de Charlus, never remarried after his wife died at an early age and, as an increasingly flamboyant homosexual, was disinclined to produce heirs to continue the family name.

Their sister, Marie, married Aynard, the Marquis de Marsantes, who was killed during the Franco-Prussian War in 1871. Their son, Robert de Saint-Loup-en-Bray, became best friends with Marcel and eventually married Gilberte Swann, the (initially) illegitimate daughter of a Jew and a whore. Unfortunately, he was killed on the western front before producing a male heir. His daughter, Mlle de Saint-Loup, was thus the only family member to carry Guermantes blood into the twentieth century. That her blood was mixed and not pure can be seen as grounds for despair, or for hope, depending on the reader's inclination. Proust, as always, remains ambivalent.

The story of *In Search of Lost Time* thus describes the final generation of the Guermantes dynasty. With no children to carry on the name, the ancient dynasty, with roots as old as France herself, would die. The Guermantes can be seen to act as a metaphor for many of the other themes of the novel.

Guermantes, Basin, Duc de

Cousin of the Prince de Guermantes and brother of Palamède de Charlus; previously Prince des Laumes before inheriting the dukedom. The Duc de Guermantes is a large, powerful, and self-assured aristocrat whose loud and hectoring commands echo throughout the novel. Even in Paris he behaves as if he owns the place. His groom would parade his newly purchased horses before him in the narrow streets while the duke towered on the pavement in his vivid clothes with a cigar clenched between his teeth. Finally, when satisfied with his purchase, he would jump into the box of his carriage and then set off to collect his latest mistress in the Champs-Élysées.

Basin is a serial womanizer and bon vivant. His mistresses were all more or less alike, for the duke had a taste for tall women. All were statuesque and loose-limbed, of a type halfway between the Venus de Milo and the Winged Victory; often fair, rarely dark, sometimes auburn. Once he had tired of one, the duke would add her to his collection of ex-mistresses whom his wife was expected to entertain and who would add to the beauty of their dinner table. While his wife took great pains to maintain her slim figure, the duke made a point of favoring more voluptuous women.

Even his loyal nephew, Robert de Saint-Loup, admits that the duke is a dreadful husband who never ceases to be unfaithful to his wife, to insult her, bully her, and keep her short of money. Like many other couples in the novel, Basin controls his wife through the power of his wealth. When the duchess tells him in front of guests that she plans to display a certain photograph in her room, he says that's fine since he will therefore never see it. He did not care that his guests now knew he no longer slept with her.

Basin is what the English call a "Hooray Henry"—a loud and hearty buffoon. Marcel is very proud to show the duke the article he had published in *Le Figaro*, but the duke's reaction is typically bluff and insensitive. All he could do was to congratulate Marcel for keeping himself busy, as he did not like useless people, who are always self-important or fidgety. The duke, of course, never does anything himself except ride his horse in the park and seduce pretty young women. In any event, the duke is suspicious of writers and is always worried that they will put him or his wife into one of their awful books. On the whole, the duke prefers to stick with dead authors, feeling it is much safer. The duke's favorite living writer is the man who wrote the funeral notices at the *Gaulois*

newspaper.

The duke's fundamental selfishness and superficiality are revealed when Swann tells him that the doctors have confirmed that he has only a month or two to live. Basin simply ignores Swann's news and is more concerned about making his wife change her shoes in time for a dinner party. In a similar scene, Basin is dashing off to a fancy-dress ball when he is told that a close relative has just died and attending the ball would create a scandal. Rather than miss the party, Basin pretends to have misunderstood: "He's dead! No, no, they're exaggerating, they're exaggerating!"

During one of the most painful scenes in the whole novel, when Marcel's grandmother is writhing in her death agony, the duke arrives to offer his condolences. Arrogantly assuming that a visit from the Duc de Guermantes is far more important than the death of a loved one, he insists on being formally introduced to all the family members.

Originally hostile to Swann's marriage, the duke nevertheless ends the novel having a wildly passionate affair with Swann's widow, Odette. Married to his cousin Oriane to maintain the purity of the Guermantes name, the union produces no children and the duke is the last of his line. By the end of the book, tormented by his mistress Odette, the duke has become a ruin, like a rock in a tempest or an antique marble bust eaten away and hopelessly damaged by time.

Guermantes, Gilbert, Prince de

Cousin of the Duc and Duchesse de Guermantes. As the head of the Guermantes family, the prince represents one of the oldest families in the French aristocracy. To be invited to his house is the supreme mark of social success. There are a number of large social gatherings described throughout the seven volumes of *In Search of Lost Time*, each one slightly higher on the social scale. The final party, with which the novel ends, is at the house of the prince and his new princess. Throughout the book he is presented as a virulently anti-Semitic, feudal reactionary, obsessed with rank and bloodlines. He is so anti-Semitic that he allowed a wing of his castle to burn to the ground rather than ask the Jewish Baron de Rothschild, his nearest neighbor, for assistance. On another occasion, during his army career, he suffered a debilitating toothache for a week because the only available dentist was Jewish.

His cousins, Basin and Oriane, make fun of him for his old-fashioned ways, and Marcel finds him stiff and haughty. As always, Proust is able to surprise the reader, and at one point, when everyone thinks that the prince is escorting Swann out of his house for being a Jew, he is actually taking him aside to discuss his growing support for Dreyfus. In explaining to Swann his change of heart and his decision to take an opposing view from the rest of his caste, the prince is shown to be a courageous and scrupulous man of conscience.

Georges Feydeau was a contemporary of Proust during the Belle Époque. Like the cancan, his immortally famous and immorally farcical plays were extremely popular in the Paris theaters of this period and appealed to Proust's complex and bawdy sense of humor. The intricately plotted misadventures of the Prince de Guermantes with Charlie Morel could well have come straight from the pages of a Feydeau farce.

The prince unexpectedly appears in Balbec, where he is renting a summerhouse for a few days. Meeting Morel, without knowing that he is his cousin's boyfriend, the prince offers him fifty francs to spend the night with him in a brothel. Charlus gets wind of the affair and, without realizing that Morel's would-be lover is his cousin the prince, he takes his servant Jupien to the brothel to catch Morel in the act. The prince discovers that there are two men in the brothel waiting to spy on him and, terrified that they are the police, he slips out the back door. But because his desire for Morel is still unsatisfied, he invites him for a clandestine rendezvous at his rented house.

Whenever he traveled out of Paris, the prince always took a few family keepsakes so that he might feel more at home wherever he stayed. Arriving at the prince's house to consummate their affair, Morel is shown into the sitting room and told to wait. Wanting to look his best, he goes to the mirror to check his hair and is surprised to see a collection of family photographs, similar to others he has seen in Charlus's house—including a photograph of Charlus himself, who seemed to be transfixing him with a strange, unblinking stare. Convinced that the whole thing is a trap organized by the Baron de Charlus, Morel rushes from the house, never to return. Stubborn in his suspicions, Morel never outgrows them, and even in Paris, the sight of the Prince de Guermantes is enough to make him take to his heels.

What is most striking about these incidents, apart from the delightfully farcical descriptions of the chaos in the brothel, is the nonchalant way in which the otherwise respectably married Prince de Guermantes offers an unknown young man fifty francs for sex, and the casual way in which Proust presents it. There had been an oblique reference to the prince earlier in the book when Charlus persuades a footman to procure for him some rough young men, but otherwise there is absolutely no suggestion that the prince is homosexual. There is almost the suggestion that if a man like the prince is so comfortable with these vices, then perhaps beneath their married veneer so, too, are all men.

After the death of his wife, the prince marries a society widow from the new and wealthy bourgeoisie. His new wife persuades the prince to abandon his old palace in the Faubourg Saint-Germain and to build a new and more ostentatious "hotel" on the Avenue de Bois on the western fringe of Paris. The novel ends at a party given at the Prince de Guermantes' new home and the new Princesse de Guermantes is revealed to be our old friend Mme Verdurin.

Guermantes, Marie-Gilbert, Princesse de

Wife of the Prince de Guermantes. Born the Duchess of Bavaria, Marie-Gilbert comes from a family as noble as her husband's. From the time we first meet her in her box at the opera, we are aware of her beauty and elegance and her position at the pinnacle of Parisian society. Very conventional and rather bland, she is constantly outshone by her more brilliant cousin Oriane. All the same, she is gracious and kind to Marcel, whom she impresses with the banality of her conversation.

Prior to one of her parties she was in the habit of reminding her guests that they were invited, and it was important they attend because she absolutely wanted to talk to them. At the party, however, she would have nothing to talk to them about and would vaguely wave them off in the direction of the garden to find the prince. Sometimes she would not even speak, believing that the beauty of her eyes, like incomparable jewels, was quite sufficient.

Like her husband she becomes an unexpected sympathizer of Dreyfus and has secret masses said on his behalf. Her naive innocence is revealed by her secret passion for her cousin Charlus, the homosexual. Unlike her successor as princess, Mme Verdurin, Marie-Gilbert represents the true nobility of the Faubourg Saint-Germain.

Guermantes, Oriane, Duchesse de

Born Mlle de Guermantes; married to her cousin Basin, Prince des Laumes and later the Duc de Guermantes; niece of Mme de Villeparisis and aunt of Robert de Saint-Loup. Like her friend Swann and her cousin Charlus, Oriane is one of the major characters in the novel around whom all the others revolve. She is perhaps Proust's most enigmatic and haunting creation. She is described in far more detail than any other character, and there are constant and detailed references to her physical looks and her clothes. Each time she appears, she is dressed in a different gown, all of which accentuate her tall, slim figure; blond hair; and penetrating blue eyes. Proust was very deliberate in naming her Oriane, with its connotations of "golden" in French.

Born in 1842, she is about thirty years older than Marcel. Her father was one of the younger Guermantes brothers, and so she did not inherit a large fortune. However, as the eighteenth Oriane de Guermantes in direct descent from Geneviève de Brabant, she is described as having the oldest and purest blood in France. We know little of her parents, and she and her cousin Palamède de Charlus were raised by her mother's sister, Mlle de Bouillon (later Mme de Villeparisis). In order to maintain the purity of the family's bloodline—and to increase her financial security—the family arranged for her to marry her cousin, Basin, the Prince des Laumes, who later, after his father's death, becomes the Duc de Guermantes. Such close interbreeding permits them to sign their names "Guermantes-Guermantes."

The Guermantes' ancestral home is close to Combray, and they are feudal overlords of the Commune. Marcel dreams about the duchess when he walks the Guermantes way as a young boy, and throughout the novel she retains those mythical qualities that he ascribed to her as a child. Proust certainly takes pains to enhance her mythic qualities. In addition to Geneviève de Brabant, there are various allusions to the Lady of the Lake, the Egyptian god Horus, the Sphinx, and Mélusine, a mermaidlike spirit of fresh waters and sacred springs who appears in many ancient Celtic legends. Mélusine is also the reputed founder of the Lusignan dynasty from whom the Guermantes, according to the duke, claim direct descent. Marcel observes that the Lusignan family "was fated to become extinct on the day when the fairy Mélusine should disappear" (2:5)

Though outranked socially by her cousin-in-law, the Princesse de Guermantes, Oriane is queen of the Faubourg Saint-Germain because of her elegance and her

wit. She is universally agreed to be the best-dressed woman in France. Oriane, “who had scarcely a penny to her name, created more stir with her clothes than all the Courvoisiers put together” (2:464). When he first sees her in the church at Combray, Marcel is disappointed that she looks like other mortal women, but the disappointment soon turns to adoration. For the first half of the novel we mostly see Oriane from a distance as Marcel hopelessly gathers every scrap of information he can find. He reads about her in newspapers, he tries to get her photograph from her nephew Robert, and he stalks her around the streets of Paris. We see Oriane through Marcel’s eyes as the ultimately chic and sophisticated lady of fashion and a hopelessly unattainable aristocratic dream. She is the Jacqueline Onassis of the Belle Époque.

Her salon in the Faubourg Saint-Germain is the most exclusive in Paris, if not in Europe. While Mme Verdurin rules her salon with a rod of iron, Oriane reigns over hers with wit, elegance, and intelligence. Like her cousin Palamède de Charlus, Oriane was raised by her aunt, Mme de Villeparisis, and both children received an excellent education. Charlus was always proud to display his culture and his knowledge but Oriane always hid her light under a bushel. Despite her aristocratic affectation of being simple and understated, Oriane was well read in the classics and could exhibit a deep knowledge, if not appreciation, of all the arts from music to painting. As part of her affectation, when entertaining a famous writer or painter, Oriane would never discuss books or paintings but would always steer the conversation towards something banal like the weather or what they were having for dinner. In much the same way that, as Mme de Villeparisis had explained to Marcel when he first met her at Balbec, all the famous authors and poets invited to her parents’ home were judged not on the quality of their work but on their ability to be entertaining while at dinner. Another consequence of their upbringing is that both Oriane and Charlus share their aunt’s unconventional attitudes and like to shock and express nonconformist opinions.

When we begin to see the real Oriane in *The Guermantes Way*, we learn that much of her wit and glamour is a form of self-protection against the reality of an unhappy arranged marriage. Her husband, Basin, is consistently unfaithful to her and maintains a stable of mistresses whom she is forced to endure and even to entertain at her dinner table after he has tired of them. Although he is proud of her wit and her social standing, Basin has never been in love with Oriane and never ceases to tease and criticize her, while she in her turn misses no opportunity to provoke him. The marriage and their relationship degenerate through the course of the novel and there are many references to a possible

separation or divorce. Oriane's obsession with the fecundity of her favorite flower, the orchid, reflects the sterility of her own incestuous marriage, and she and Basin produce no heirs. At one point Basin admits in front of their guests that he never even visits her bedroom. It is interesting to note that in a conversation with a young admirer of the novel, Jacques Truelle, Proust observed, "You're entirely wrong if you think the Duchesse de Guermantes was a good-natured woman. She was capable of being absent-mindedly kind, but..."

Much of the cruelty underlying her famous wit, and the petty meanness she displays toward her servants, can be seen as a repressed and frustrated anger against her coarse and brutal husband. However, despite the rumors of "immoral relations" with the Princesse de Parme or the accusations of Charlus, there is never any hint that Oriane is anything but faithful to her marriage vows. Charlus's accusation is merely a repetition of Golo's betrayal of Oriane's ancestor, Geneviève de Brabant. Possibly she was in love with Swann, but if so, this was hidden behind loyalty to her husband and the superficiality and sterility of her social life. All the same, the sophistication and wit are genuine, and she remains one of the most entertaining and fascinating characters in the novel.

Although her husband remains impervious to her charms, everybody else adores her. Whenever she enters a room she is surrounded by men who dote on her every word. Women are either consumed by jealousy or try to imitate her looks, her clothes, her superior attitudes, or even her drawling and somewhat bored manner of speech. Representing the height of fashion in her Fortuny gowns, Oriane effortlessly combines elegance with simplicity to stunning effect.

Willowy and slender, she is always described as being physically attractive but never as being specifically beautiful. With her rounded cheeks, tapered eyebrows, arched neck, and delicate skin, she also has the distinctive nose of the Guermantes, like a falcon's beak. In addition to the many comparisons with birds within the novel, Proust's friend, the Duc de Guiche, once described a conversation in which Proust said, "The Duchesse de Guermantes was rather like a tough old hen that I once mistook for a bird of paradise ... By making her a powerful vulture I do at least keep people from taking her for a magpie." Above all, her most distinctive features are the amused detachment of her penetrating blue eyes and the mystical pedigree of her name.

Her name, accompanied as it was by her title, added to her physical person the duchy which cast its aura round about her and brought the shadowy, sun-splashed coolness of the woods of Guermantes into this drawing-room, to surround the pouf on which she was sitting.... I came to

know many of the Duchess's distinctive features notably ... her eyes, which captured as in a picture the blue sky of a French country afternoon broadly expansive, bathed in light even when no sun shone; and a voice which one would have thought, from its first hoarse sounds, to be almost plebeian, in which there lingered, as over the steps of the church at Combray or the pastry-cook's in the square, the rich and lazy gold of a country sun. (2:209-10)

Unlikely as it seems, Oriane shares many characteristics with Françoise, Marcel's peasant cook. Both are products of the French countryside with roots that go back generations. They both demonstrate a directness of speech, a common earthiness, and a shared delight in recognizing and destroying all social pretensions. They also share a streak of cruelty toward servants. Françoise made the poor scullery maid peel asparagus all day despite her allergies. Oriane sadistically made her footman run a needless errand so that he would miss his long-planned rendezvous with his sweetheart. On another occasion she forced him to stay home one evening, for no other reason than that he looked pleased to be going out.

Oriane herself is going out to dinner when her oldest and closest friend, Swann, tells her that he has, at most, a month or two to live. Living in such an artificial world of privilege, the duchess finds it difficult to deal with real emotions such as the impending death of a friend. Torn between the conflicting duties of preparing to dress for dinner and showing compassion for a man who is about to die, she chooses the former because that is the easier choice. On the other hand, she is sensitive enough to recognize that her dinner party might appear less important to Swann than the idea of his own death.

After being an impossibly remote figure of desire throughout the first half of the novel, Oriane becomes one of Marcel's familiars to whom he turns for advice about clothing and presents for his mistress. She remains a close friend of Swann but is adamant about refusing to meet his wife or daughter before he dies. She argues that dying is not an acceptable basis for social introductions, for if it were, there would be no more entertaining.

By the final volume, *Time Regained*, however, as Mme Verdurin and Odette de Crécy rise in society and their soirees become increasingly fashionable, Oriane and the whole social set she represents have become outmoded and passé. The social descent of Oriane is first hinted at in *The Guermantes Way* when she and the duke are leaving the prince's reception. As the duchess, in her

royal red dress and rubies (with the famous matching red shoes), descends the grand staircase, the disreputable Princesse d'Orvilliers is ascending, dressed in virginal white with diamonds reflecting her blue eyes. This mirror-image encounter on the staircase symbolizes the past and the future in subtle collision.

Eventually Oriane is described as “a sort of defrocked priestess of the Faubourg Saint-Germain.” By the end of the novel, this once proud and impossibly remote aristocrat greets Marcel as “you, my oldest friend.” Unfortunately, by this time, with her beauty gone, her husband besotted with Odette, and her wit faded, Oriane is no longer the woman who has charmed and fascinated us throughout the length of the novel. Perhaps the cruelest dismissal comes from Gilberte, who says of Oriane: “I don't think one is doing her an injustice, do you, if one says that she scarcely belongs to the aristocracy of the mind” (3:1034).

Possibly, beneath all her superficiality, she had always been in love with Swann, an unrequited love that ended in bitterness toward his daughter, whom she refers to as “a bitch.” Desperate to be once again in fashion, the duchess cultivates the company of actresses like Rachel, whom she once would never have acknowledged. By the end of the novel, newcomers, who did not know her, describe her as old and stupid. Time has not been kind to the duchess, and it requires Proust's work of art to restore the glory of her memory.

Inspiration for the Duchesse de Guermantes

It is not only an insult to the imagination of a great writer to limit his fictional characters to their real-life models, it also diminishes the reader's own enjoyment and appreciation of the writer's work. Charlus, Mme de Guermantes, and Mme Verdurin are all unique and powerful manifestations of Proust's creative genius and require no further material to make them live and breathe in our imagination.

Nevertheless, it is still interesting to speculate which of the writer's friends and acquaintances inspired some of these larger-than-life portraits. The Duchesse de Guermantes, for example, was inspired by, among others, three very prominent society women of Proust's acquaintance.

Comtesse Élisabeth Greffulhe (born Princess Marie Anatole Louise Élisabeth de Riquet de Caraman-Chimay) was recognized as the leading beauty of the Belle Époque and the most exclusive hostess in Paris. At her soirees heads, ambassadors, archdukes, and archbishops, and she epitomized the world that Proust yearned so desperately to be part of. He interrogated all her friends about her clothing in order to describe in minute detail the Fortuny gowns worn by the Duchesse de Guermantes and later to be copied by Albertine.



Comtesse Élizabéth de Greffulhe (PHOTOGRAPH BY PAUL NADAR)

She invited Proust to her soirees only as a favor to her cousin, Robert de Montesquiou, but she herself detested him. She later explained that “his sticky flattery was not to my taste” and, despite all his attempts to ingratiate himself, she always maintained an aloof distance.

Just as Proust’s narrator was obsessed with acquiring a photograph of the duchess from her nephew, Robert de Saint-Loup, so Proust himself endlessly (and equally unsuccessfully) pestered his friend Robert de Montesquiou for a photograph of his cousin. “The secret of her beauty”—he wrote to Robert—“lies in its brilliance, and especially in the enigmatic quality of her eyes. I have never seen so lovely a woman.”

Comtesse Greffulhe’s exalted position in society, her famed beauty, and her wonderful clothes were the inspiration for both the Duchesse de Guermantes and the Princesse de Guermantes, to whom Proust gave the countess’s famously beautiful and enigmatic eyes.



Laura de Sade, Comtesse de Cheigné (PORTRAIT BY FEDERICO DE MADRAZO Y DE OCHOA)

Another well-known and exclusive society hostess who provided inspiration was *Laura de Sade, Comtesse de Cheigné*, who had fascinated Proust since he

was a young man. Descended from the infamous Marquis de Sade, she was also possibly descended from her namesake, Laura de Noves, the fourteenth-century beauty who so notably inspired Petrarch's sonnets. Such a heritage could not but appeal to the romantic in Proust and, as a young man, he would shadow her on her morning walks just as the narrator so annoyingly stalked the Duchesse de Guermantes. As with the duchess and Marcel, the Comtesse de Cheigné found Proust's attentions irritating and tedious. She found Proust to be a bore and never read his novel but did maintain a wavering though wary friendship throughout their lives.

The Comtesse de Cheigné provided many of the physical qualities of the Duchess, from her long and romantic lineage to her birdlike features. Like the Duchess, she had a hoarse voice and an arched nose like the beak of a mythical and exotic bird, and Proust even admitted that his description of the Duchess' eyes were based on those of Mme de Cheigné. He wrote to her that in describing the Duchesse de Guermantes, there are parts in which "a glance, a pose, something magical... are yours."

The third major inspiration for the Duchesse de Guermantes was his close friend *Geneviève Bizet-Straus*, mother of his school friend Jacques Bizet. The widow of the composer of *Carmen*, she later married a wealthy member of the Rothschild family and established one of the most fashionable salons in Paris. Not as socially prominent or exclusive as the Greffulhe or the Cheigné salons, Mme Straus's salon was well known as one of the most liberal and artistic meeting places in the city and at one point became the unofficial headquarters of the Dreyfusards.

Like the Comtesse Greffulhe and the Comtesse de Cheigné, Mme Straus also wore haute-couture gowns designed by Fortuny but, unlike the Comtesse Greffulhe and the Comtesse de Cheigné, Mme Straus remained always a close friend throughout Proust's life; their voluminous correspondence reveals an extremely warm relationship. It was Mme Straus who gave him the five notebooks in which he started working on his great novel and it was to Mme Straus that he first announced that he had completed *Swann's Way*.



Geneviève Bizet-Straus (PHOTOGRAPH BY PAUL NADAR)

According to André Maurois, Mme Straus was “deliciously feminine” and her mind “was a mixture of common sense and a sort of flickering and surprised gaiety which made it possible for her to say the most impossible things with an air of complete innocence. Her mockery was unforced and kindly, her logic quite unpredictable ...” Above all, she was renowned for her formidable wit, and it is this quality that Proust so memorably gave to the duchess.

Comtesse Greffulhe inspired the beauty and exalted social position, Comtesse de Chevigné inspired the birdlike features and the noble lineage, while Mme Straus inspired the duchess’ famous wit. But while any of us can assemble eggs, flour, butter, and sugar, it requires a master chef from Maxim’s de Paris to blend them into the perfect soufflé, just as it required the genius of Proust to create the timeless magic of the Duchesse de Guermantes.

Jupien

Tailor, factotum, and eventually brothel keeper. Jupien is a retired tailor who keeps a waistcoat shop in the courtyard of the Hôtel Guermantes and who has an obscure government post as a minor functionary. Jupien and his niece, Marie-Antoinette, who is a seamstress in the shop, quickly become close friends with Françoise. Marcel also grows to admire him and, though Jupien is self-taught, finds him well read and educated with a literary turn of speech. Even Marcel's grandmother is very impressed with Jupien's elocution and command of the language.

After the spectacular courtship dance in the courtyard with Baron de Charlus outside Jupien's shop and its violent but satisfactory conclusion indoors, Jupien becomes Charlus's secretary and general factotum. His responsibilities include procuring rough young men of the working class to satisfy the baron's insatiable sexual appetites. In return for Jupien's various services, Charlus adopts Jupien's niece, giving her the aristocratic title of Mlle d'Oloron and eventually marrying her off to the homosexual son of the Marquise de Cambremer.

Eventually the baron provides Jupien with the money to open a male brothel so that there will be an endless supply of young men—the rougher the better. Jupien's problem is finding young men who are sufficiently vicious for the baron's taste. He promises Charlus that the young men he provides are all thugs, swearing that they are pimps from Belleville who would sell their sisters for a few francs. In reality, most of the young men are respectable shop assistants who generously use the money to support their families. (Jupien is partly based on Albert Le Cuziat, a rather unsavory friend of Proust who ran a male brothel on rue de l'Arcade.)

When Marcel visits the brothel, Jupien justifies his new profession. He explains that he does it to please Charlus in his old age, while admitting that his own sexual tastes are also satisfied. However, the "hotel" does not generate much money and Jupien is sometimes "obliged to rent rooms to respectable people."

Jupien remains a faithful servant to Charlus throughout the novel and never forgives Charlie Morel for his betrayal of the baron by seducing his nephew. He procures young men for him, acts as his servant, and eventually looks after him with tenderness in his declining years. Despite all his vices, Jupien remains an

honest and sympathetic character to the end.

Jupien's Niece, Marie-Antoinette

Seamstress in Jupien's tailor shop in the courtyard of the Hôtel de Guermantes. Marie-Antoinette works for her uncle Jupien (who is possibly her father) in his tailor shop, repairing garments and making dresses. Apparently there had been some unsavory incident when she was a young girl that Charlus knows about but that is never described. From the time she first meets Charlie Morel, she falls in love with him, even though he treats her abominably. With the encouragement of Charlus, Morel asks Jupien for his niece's hand in marriage, and for much of the novel they remain engaged. Partly to maintain control of Morel and partly as a favor to Jupien, Charlus introduces her to members of the aristocracy. Her dressmaking skills, business sense, and charming manners soon make her a very fashionable and successful dressmaker, and before long she is invited to dinner in the best houses. Morel's treatment of her, however, becomes more brutal, and finally he breaks off the engagement.

Eventually, to atone for Morel's cruel behavior, Charlus adopts Marie-Antoinette and makes her his heir. She is given the title Mlle d'Oloron and is married off to Léonor, the homosexual son of the Marquise de Cambremer. Suffering from typhoid during the wedding, she dies a few days later.

Léa

Actress and infamous lesbian. Like Mme Putbus's maid and Mlle de Stermaria, Léa never appears in person as a character in the novel, but she is constantly a presence in the background. Marcel finally makes the break with Gilberte because he sees her walking on the Champs-Élysées with an unknown young man. Many years later he discovers that the young man was Léa in drag.

Whenever issues of a lesbian nature are discussed, Léa's name is always brought up. She is mentioned in connection with Bloch's Sapphic sister in Balbec, with Vinteuil's daughter, and finally with Albertine, who admits to watching her undress in her backstage room at the Trocadéro. Marcel finally gets Albertine to admit that she and Léa had shared a three-week vacation together.

The closest we get to hearing Léa's voice is in a letter she wrote to Charlie Morel that was intercepted by Charlus. Proust wrote that the indelicacy of the letter prevented him from reproducing it, but it contained phrases such as "Go on with you, naughty girl!" and "Of course you're one of us, you pretty sweetheart." It constantly referred to Morel in the feminine gender, which thoroughly confused Charlus.

Legrandin

Engineer, man of letters, snob, and sexual invert. Legrandin was a neighbor from Combray who worked in Paris during the week and could only visit his country house on weekends. Marcel's family would often meet him on their walks through Combray and at the church on Sunday. Tall and handsome of bearing as he was, the family never ceased to regard Legrandin as an example of a gentleman who enjoyed life in the noblest and most delicate manner.

Although he described himself as a republican who hated the aristocracy and blamed the Revolution for not having guillotined them all, he was nonetheless very proud that his sister had married the Marquis de Cambremer. Although he often criticized snobbery, he is haughty and arrogant to his inferiors and fawning and obsequious to his superiors. Despite his grotesque winks of friendship to Marcel, he snubbed Marcel's family on several occasions when he was in the company of the local gentry. He did not want the people who lived in large country houses to know that he numbered among his friends middle-class people, the sons of solicitors and stockbrokers.

The encounter in *Swann's Way* between Legrandin and Marcel's father, in which the father asks point-blank for specific information about Balbec and Legrandin masterfully evades any direct response, is a sustained example of Proust's comic genius (1:141-45).

In later life Marcel meets him in Paris and learns that Legrandin has become a man of letters but still pretends to retain his scorn of the nobility and mocks Marcel for consorting with them. He not only makes fun of Marcel's aristocratic friends but also of Bergotte and his decadent way of writing. Legrandin is discomfited to be seen by Marcel a few days later at Mme de Villeparisis's, where he's caught bowing and flattering with an obsequiousness that embarrasses everybody.

Despite his supposed hatred of the nobility, Legrandin starts calling himself Legrand de Méséglise and surreptitiously cultivates relations with the aristocracy. Though there were hints about Legrandin's sexual deviancy early in the novel, it does not become obvious until he refers to a possibly amorous encounter on a train with Charlus. It is because of the homosexuality, which Charlus immediately recognizes in Legrandin, that Charlus agrees to his adopted daughter, Jupien's niece, marrying Legrandin's nephew, Léonor de Cambremer.

Charlus recognizes that the nephew, like the uncle, is homosexual and argues that homosexuals make the best husbands. With the tacit support of Charlus and the Duc de Guermantes, Legrandin eventually assumes the sham title Comte de Méséglise and is able to sign the wedding register next to the Duc de Guermantes.

While Charlus puts on weight as he pampers his perverse sexual appetites, Legrandin, though he enjoys indulging in the same vices, appears to have become slimmer and brisker. Proust explains that because he was fearful of being observed frequenting low haunts and places of ill repute, Legrandin develops a speed of movement that allows him to hurl himself through the door without being seen. (Proust used exactly the same metaphor to describe Robert de Saint-Loup [3:717] and would probably have removed one of the allusions had he lived long enough to complete the final edit.)

As he grows older, both the hypocritical snob and the closeted homosexual emerge from the shadows of Legrandin's pretended gentleman. Of the two vices that had long struggled for mastery in him, the less natural, snobbishness, eventually gave way to the more "natural" vice of homosexuality. I am indebted to my friend Sharon Girard of the New York Proust Society for the following close study. She ably demonstrates that these two vices were already visibly struggling within Legrandin, even in the early, innocent days back in Combray

One Sunday morning outside the village church following Mass, Legrandin is observed being introduced to two of the local gentry and their ladies. Meeting and being seen in public with such socially prominent people filled Legrandin's face with all the energetic joy of the snob, and his obsequious tribute to the lady on the porch includes a bow, which is less a bow and more an undulation of his fleshy rump. Witnessing this performance gives Marcel the suspicion that there might exist another Legrandin, "altogether different from the one we knew," lurking underneath the visible exterior.

We saw earlier that as a young boy Marcel had already recognized, despite his professed republicanism and love of churches, that there was a hidden side to Legrandin: "In a word, he was a snob." However, there is a second, more shadowy persona that lurks behind the family's gentleman neighbor. The young narrator certainly sensed disquiet, even though he was still too young to recognize it. But we, the readers, are certainly aware of something when we read that Legrandin has a "carnal fluency." When we read that his "undulating, fleshy rump is being lashed into a tempest," we are reading a sign of sexual perversion. Further, there seems to be a connection of homosexuality (the rump in a tempest)

to sadism (the lashing of it). This inversion and sadism is not something that can, usually, be recognized the first time around even if we vaguely sense something. However, reading *In Search of Lost Time* for the second time, one can “feel” on the church porch, subcutaneously, Legrandin’s sexually perverse persona.

Alas! We had definitely to alter our opinion of M. Legrandin. On one of the Sundays following our meeting with him ... we saw Legrandin on the sun baked threshold of the porch ... being introduced, by the husband of the lady we had seen him with on the previous occasion, to the wife of another large landed proprietor of the district. Legrandin’s face wore an expression of extraordinary zeal and animation; he made a deep bow, with a subsidiary backward movement which brought his shoulders sharply up into a position behind their starting-point, a gesture in which he must have been trained by the husband of his sister, Mme de Cambremer. *This rapid straightening-up caused a sort of tense muscular wave to ripple over Legrandin’s rump, which I had not supposed to be so fleshy; I cannot say why, but this undulation of pure matter, this wholly carnal fluency devoid of spiritual significance, this wave lashed into a tempest by an obsequious alacrity of the basest sort, awoke my mind suddenly to the possibility of a Legrandin altogether different from the one we knew.* (1:135-36) [Sharon’s italics]

As Sharon observes, this passage might not have much significance on a first reading, but on a second reading, when we know that Legrandin has sex with strange men on trains and hurls himself into low haunts with alacrity, it takes on a new and magnificently humorous meaning.

Marcel

The narrator and hero of the novel. The first-person narrator of *In Search of Lost Time* is never referred to by name but there are a couple of coy allusions to the fictional narrator and the author being the same person: “Then she [Albertine] would find her tongue and say: ‘My——’ or ‘My darling——’ followed by my Christian name, which, if we give the narrator the same name as the author of this book, would be ‘My Marcel’ or ‘My darling Marcel’” (3:69). Later in the volume, Albertine writes a note from the Trocadéro in which she calls him “My darling dear Marcel” (3:153). On another occasion, during a party at the Princesse de Guermantes’, he interrupts the flow of the action briefly for a strange dialogue with the reader, in which the reader says, “Allow me dear author, to waste another moment of your time by telling you that it is a pity that, young as you were (or as your hero was, if he be not yourself) ...” (2:675). Rather than referring to “the narrator,” I have chosen to name the hero of the novel “Marcel.”

Although written in the first person, as Roger Shattuck explains in his excellent book, *Proust’s Way*, the story is actually told by three different people. Much of the book is recounted by Marcel as a young boy and then as a young man describing the events in his life as they occur. Marcel describes how he felt and how he changed at different times in his life as he developed and matured. But much is also told by the narrator, a much older and more sardonic Marcel, who is looking back and describing his life with the benefit of hindsight. Finally, Proust the author also intrudes, adding a third voice to the “I” of the novel. Because the two main voices, that of Marcel and that of the narrator, interweave and overlap, it is sometimes confusing to tell them apart. That is why it is often difficult, for example, to know the hero’s age at any specific moment in the story.

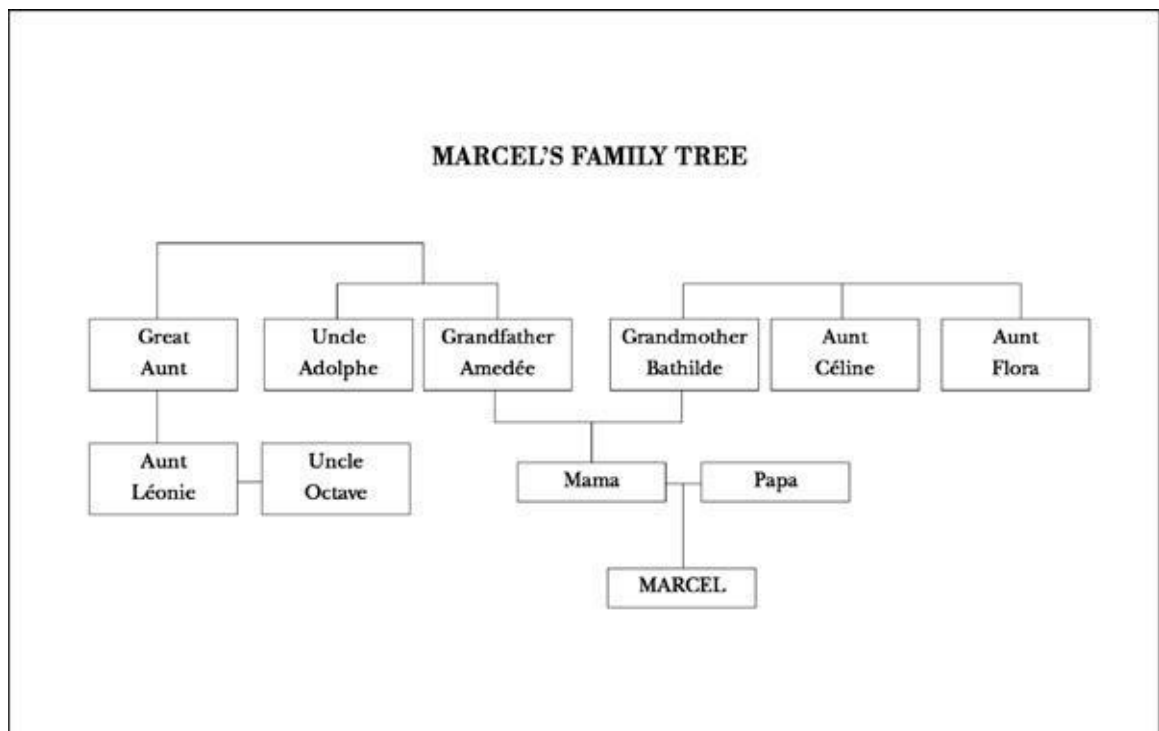
A good example of the two voices can be seen when Marcel describes the slow decline in his relationship with Gilberte. He explains that he stopped visiting her house or going to places where he might see her, but then the narrator, with the benefit of hindsight, adds that by avoiding one such dinner party, he failed to meet Albertine, whom he was to love later in his life. Perhaps the clearest example comes at the very start of the novel, when the writer describes hovering between sleep and wakefulness. It is not clear whether we are listening to a young boy waiting for his mother’s good-night kiss or a middle-

aged man unable to sleep.

The novel begins with the voice of a young boy, and we see the beauty of childhood through the eyes of a child. The voice matures through the course of the novel as Marcel grows older until by the end he has become the wise and all-knowing narrator. The novel ends with the narrator as an old man, planning to revisit his youth and tell the story of his life—and thus the two voices are finally in harmony.

Marcel's Family

Marcel lives with his mother and father and his mother's parents in Paris within easy walking distance of the Champs-Élysées, and when he is a small boy, the family spends its vacations with the rest of the mother's family in the small market-town of Combray. In Combray they stay in the house of his widowed aunt Léonie, where she lives with her mother, his great-aunt.



Before moving in with their daughter in Paris, Marcel's grandparents, Amédée and Bathilde, had their own house in Combray, where Marcel's mother was raised. The grandmother's sisters, Aunt Céline and Aunt Flora, continue to live in Combray and the grandfather's brother, Uncle Adolphe, still has a room in Aunt Léonie's house but no longer visits the family.

The precise relationship between the great-aunt and her daughter, Aunt Léonie, with the rest of the family is not clear; the great-aunt is only described as a cousin to Amédée, Marcel's maternal grandfather. When she dies, she leaves her entire estate to an estranged niece whom she describes as her closest next-of-kin.

Other members of the family include a great-uncle (probably Adolphe), who

terrifies the young Marcel by pulling his curls, and at least one female cousin with whom Marcel enjoys his first sexual encounter on one of Aunt Léonie's sofas. Françoise the cook joins the Paris household following the death of her mistress, Aunt Léonie. Aunt Céline and Aunt Flora continue to live in Combray and insist on staying there to attend a Beethoven concert when their sister, Marcel's grandmother, lies dying in Paris.

Marcel's grandfather survived his wife's death, and it would appear that he still maintained property in Combray, which Marcel's mother attends to when she spends some months there looking after her dying aunt, either Céline or Flora.

Marcel's father does not appear to have any living relatives. In real life, Proust's father had only a bedridden sister and a widowed mother, while Proust's mother came from an extremely large and close-knit family.

Marcel's Mother

“Mamma.” A warm and comforting figure throughout the novel, she nevertheless always favors her husband over her son. She chooses to stay at the dinner table with her husband’s guests rather than go upstairs for Marcel’s good-night kiss, and she chooses to stay in Paris with her husband rather than travel to Balbec with her son. Though she loves her son with all her heart, she is always the perfect and dutiful wife, filled with continuing admiration for and astonishment at the cleverness of her husband.

Marcel described how his mother kept quiet while his father studied the barometer, so as not to disturb him, and watched him with tender respect but not so closely as to penetrate the mysteries of his superior mind. When they went on family walks, whether along Swann’s way or the Guermantes way, she never failed to be proud, surprised, and impressed when her husband would somehow bring them safely to the original point of departure at the garden gate and she would murmur lovingly and admiringly, “You really are wonderful.” Because she was incapable of deceiving her husband, she would force herself to genuinely like his friends, such as Norpois, just so that she could praise them with sincerity.

Like her husband, the mother is a presence throughout the novel but—except for serving the original tea and madeleine cake—she plays no major role. We seldom glimpse her thoughts or feelings, which for the most part are conventional, so the inner woman remains indistinct. Proust’s feelings for his own mother were so overwhelming that he had difficulty describing her with his usual skill. He therefore transferred his expressions of love and maternal emotions to his description of the grandmother.

However, the mother’s strong character is revealed on a few occasions. For example, in *Cities of the Plain*, Marcel’s mother makes her opposition to his marriage with Albertine extremely clear. In a remarkably diplomatic and understated speech, she lets him know that Albertine’s family want him for his money and social standing and that she herself has absolutely no feelings for the girl.

Her amused intelligence is often revealed in the sometimes tart but insightful comments she makes about the social ambitions of Mme Swann, for example, or in her reaction to the news of the engagement between Gilberte and Robert de

Saint-Loup: “To think of the daughter of a woman [Odette] whom your father would never allow me to greet, marrying the nephew of Mme de Villeparisis on whom your father wouldn’t allow me to call at first because he thought her too grand for me.”

She greets the news of young Cambremer’s engagement to Jupien’s niece with the same refined sense of social irony: “And the son of Mme de Cambremer to whom Legrandin was so afraid of having to give us a letter of introduction because he didn’t think us smart enough, marrying the niece of a man who would never come to our apartment except by the service stairs!” (3:674).



Portrait of Proust’s mother, Madame Adrien Proust, in 1880, by Anais Beauvais

When Marcel’s article is finally published in *Le Figaro*, it is indicative of his mother’s subtle kindness that she should quietly place the paper on his bed on top of his mail, opened to the correct page, so that Marcel should see it first thing when he awoke and know that she and “ten thousand others” had also read it. Compare this subtle kindness of the mother with the equally subtle cruelty of Françoise, who would leave an incriminating letter neatly placed on top of his papers, also to let him know that she had read it.

After the death of the grandmother, Marcel’s mother begins increasingly to resemble her and, like her, quotes endlessly from the writings of Mme de Sévigné. Throughout most of the long episode with Albertine in Paris, she is conveniently absent from the house, attending to family affairs and looking after her aunts in Combray. She returns, however, following Albertine’s death and accompanies Marcel on his visit to Venice. The charmingly relaxed and familiar

conversations between Marcel and his mother during this visit probably reflect the close relationship between Proust and his own mother.

Marcel's mother remains ultimately the magical person who can bestow or withhold the good-night kiss with which the novel begins and upon which all of Marcel's happiness is based. Even in later life he prefers his mother's kiss to all the kisses of his various mistresses. In the final analysis, other women can never be trusted; it is only his mother's kiss that will deliver her heart, whole and entire, without qualm or reservation, for Marcel alone.

Marcel's Father

Like Proust's own father, Marcel's was a successful and distinguished member of the establishment. Mme de Villeparisis refers to him as "the Permanent Secretary at the Ministry," and for the young Marcel, his father represented unimaginable powers.

He was so powerful, in such favour with the people who "really counted," that he made it possible for us to transgress laws which Françoise had taught me to regard as more ineluctable than the laws of life and death, as when we were allowed to postpone for a year the compulsory repainting of the walls of our house, alone among all the houses in that part of Paris, or when he obtained permission from the Minister for Mme Sazerat's son, who had been ordered to some watering-place, to take his degree two months before the proper time, among the candidates whose surnames began with "A," instead of having to wait his turn as an "S."

As undisputed head of the household and with a brusque manner, the father would make arbitrary and impulsive decisions that would catch everyone by surprise and throw them into a panic. This would permit him to then criticize them as being absurd for making a fuss about something so trivial. It was the father who controlled the visitors his wife was allowed to receive and the people upon whom she was allowed to call. It was the father who forbade his wife from even talking to Swann about his daughter.

Although he is always distant and somewhat detached, disapproving of his wife's indulgence of their son, it is he who suggests that she spend the night in Marcel's room at the beginning of the novel. At one point Marcel compares his father to Abraham in a painting by Benozzo Gozzoli, which M. Swann had given him, a resemblance possibly first noted by Swann. The painting depicts Abraham as he is about to sacrifice his son Isaac, against his mother's desperate entreaties, and the comparison speaks volumes about Marcel's Freudian feelings regarding his father.

He is a great admirer of the pompous diplomat M. de Norpois, and after forbidding Marcel from attending the opera, he only relents after Norpois persuades him that it would be good for the boy. He remains a vague and remote presence throughout the novel—always competing with Marcel for the attentions

of his wife.

There is even the suggestion that his father is naïve, and perhaps foolish and pompous, easily manipulated by the wily de Norpois when, for example, he asks Norpois for investment advice or unsuccessfully seeks his support to become a member of the academy. (In real life, Marcel Proust's own father, despite two attempts, also failed to get elected to the academy.) As he grows older, Marcel recognizes more of his father's traits in his own character and behavior and wonders whether his father, beneath that icy exterior, also concealed an extraordinary sensibility and was ashamed of his own feelings.

Marcel's Grandmother, Bathilde

Marcel's grandmother is probably the only morally flawless person in the whole novel. Proust has placed in her character all the love and emotion that he felt for his own mother and her mother, Adele, and by the time of her death she has become almost saintlike. The uremia, or kidney failure, from which the grandmother so painfully dies in the novel is the same disease that Proust's mother died from in real life.

When Marcel is still a small boy, his grandmother buys him the novels of George Sand for his birthday. She explains to his mother that she could not bear to give him anything that was not well written. She herself prefers the writings of Mme de Sévigné and quotes endlessly from the letters that this wise and affectionate seventeenth-century marquise wrote to her daughter.

Her own love of fresh air and her concern for her grandson's health are among the reasons she accompanies him to Balbec. She has a love of all things natural and is always opening windows to let the fresh air in. When she walks in the rain, it is with her head turned up so that she can feel the raindrops on her face. The bond she forms with Marcel during the first visit to Balbec, with her wisdom and kindness, slowly envelops the reader and we share Marcel's heartfelt grief when she eventually dies. In a typically moving scene, Marcel is unable to fall asleep and nervously taps on the wall of his grandmother's adjoining room. She immediately responds and comforts him with a good-night kiss. Unlike the mother's, the grandmother's kisses could always be depended on.

The detailed description of the grandmother's long, slow death is one of the ways that Proust attempted to come to terms with the death of his own mother. There are many premonitions of her death long before it arrives, and Marcel is always telling her that he could not live without her.

It was during the first visit to Balbec that his grandmother realizes that she is going to die very soon and, wanting to leave Marcel a souvenir, arranges with Robert de Saint-Loup to have her photograph taken. Marcel foolishly, and much to his later regret, interprets this as self-indulgent vanity on her part. Even the large "shady" hat she wore, which Marcel had dismissed as a sign of narcissism, was chosen so that the signs of her illness would not show in the photograph and blemish her memory.

After being away from his grandmother for a period of time, Marcel finally realizes how ill she is when he returns home and sees a red-faced, slightly crazed, and dejected old woman whom he does not recognize. The description of her protracted death in the center of the novel is brutally painful to read. The loving and sensitive grandmother becomes a twisted and unrecognizable monster. Finally she dies, but as her life withdraws, so too does all the pain and disillusionment. On that funeral couch, Death, like a sculptor of the Middle Ages, has laid her down in the form of a young girl.

It is not until some years later, in a later volume and on his second visit to Balbec, revisiting the hotel where he had stayed with his grandmother, that Marcel finally feels the pain and the loss of her death. The section is called “The Intermittencies of the Heart” and is powerfully heartbreaking. When somebody close to us dies, we respond immediately with grief and pain. But it takes the passing of time before the reality sinks in and we finally understand that the person is truly gone forever and will never, ever return. Marcel could knock all night on the adjoining wall, but his grandmother would never again respond.

Marcel's Grandfather, Amédée

Marcel's family had very firm ideas about what was right and what was wrong, what was correct and what was incorrect. These rules originated with the maternal grandfather, Amédée, who had very strict ideas about the structure of society and the acceptable behavior of individuals. As a younger man he had been a close friend of Swann's father and included M. Verdurin's family among his acquaintances. In later years he distanced himself as "young Verdurin" and his wife began to frequent the "riff-raff of Bohemia."

Although he had been an extremely close to Swann's father, he did not approve of the way that Swann conducted his love life and refused to get involved in his amorous intrigues. However, he maintained contact with his old friend's son and even invited him to his daughter's wedding. His greatest disapproval was reserved for Swann's refusal to remain within the rigid bounds of his social class. To the caste-bound grandfather, this was the worst sin of all. Not only is it wrong to socialize with one's social inferiors, it is also wrong to push one's way into an upper class where one does not belong. After a century of several revolutions and sometimes violent social upheavals, the French bourgeoisie—like the French bureaucracy (to this day)—remains suspicious of change. The concept of "bettering oneself" was impossible for the middle class to understand since nobody could possibly be better than the bourgeoisie of Combray.

Except for his presence in Combray and during the walks along the two "ways," the grandfather's main role in the novel is to epitomize those proper standards against which Marcel is constantly trying to measure himself. The grandfather's rigid sense of social inflexibility was passed on to his daughter. Marcel's mother, whether she admitted it or not, firmly believed that masters were masters and servants were people who ate in the kitchen.

Marcel's Aunt Léonie

It is Aunt Léonie who used to give Marcel his madeleine dipped in tea, which, when he drinks it again years later, brings back all the memories out of which the novel is born. It is in her house that the family stays when visiting Combray. Since the death of her husband, Octave, Aunt Léonie renounced all earthly joys and remained in bed, propped on her pillows and watching the comings and goings in the rue Saint-Jacques outside her window. Nothing happens in Combray—even a stray dog crossing the street—without Aunt Léonie knowing about it and discussing it in detail with Françoise, her cook.

It is on reaching this early description of Aunt Léonie that the reader first realizes this is a comic novel.

In the next room I could hear my aunt talking quietly to herself. She never spoke save in low tones, because she believed there was something broken inside her head and floating loose there, which she might displace by talking too loud; but she never remained for long, even when alone, without saying something, because she believed it was good for her throat, and that by keeping the blood there in circulation it would make less frequent the chokings and the pains from which she suffered ... (1:54)

Despite the terrible way he was to abuse her memory later in his life, Marcel's descriptions of his aunt while he was a young boy in Combray are as warmly affectionate as they are humorous. Because his bedroom was next door to hers, Marcel could hear her talking to herself endlessly, which was her only form of exercise and which she believed was good for the circulation in her throat. As a determined hypochondriac, she insisted to everyone that she was unable to sleep and was always embarrassed when she forgot herself and said something like "what woke me up" or "I dreamed that." She would blush and immediately correct herself. Lying in his own bed, Marcel could hear his aunt next door repeating to herself, "I must not forget that I never slept a wink."

After her death, which she had been predicting daily for many years, she left all her wealth, as well as her furniture, to Marcel. Some of the furniture he later gave to the owner of a brothel in Paris, which the girls put to "their own use." He sold her silver in order to buy flowers for Mme Swann and her china in order to buy flowers for Gilberte, which, in the end, he never gave her.

Even though he squandered her wealth and turned his back on her values, Marcel could not escape his aunt. Despite remembering her as a hypochondriac steeped in piety, a religious maniac who had never known any pleasure in her life and lay mumbling her rosary all day long and with whom he had nothing in common, she haunted him still. It was she who paralyzed him and caused him to stay in bed, unable to move or to act. Aunt Léonie had transmigrated herself into Marcel, and she still exercised control (3:73).

Marcel's Uncle Adolphe

Except for one brief scene, Uncle Adolphe never appears in person. He had already been banished from the family when Marcel first described his uncle's empty room in Aunt Léonie's house in Combray. Much to the disapproval of the rest of the family, Uncle Adolphe had remained an unmarried man-about-town with a wide circle of actresses and courtesans whom he entertained at his apartment, 40 bis, on Boulevard Malesherbes in Paris. (In real life, the Proust family lived at 9, Boulevard Malesherbes.) The young Marcel had visited him one day when he was entertaining a courtesan in a pink dress. Marcel foolishly let his parents know about this meeting with "the lady in pink" and Marcel's father and grandfather were so furious that "words" of a "violent order" were exchanged.

While out walking a few days later, Marcel saw his uncle approaching in an open carriage and was overwhelmed with feelings of guilt, remorse, and love for his uncle. His sense of grief was so strong that he felt that merely raising his hat in greeting would be inadequate and so, unable to express himself in any other way, he turned his head aside. The uncle blamed the parents for this final act of betrayal and he never forgave them. Even though he was to live for many more years, neither Marcel nor his family ever set eyes upon Uncle Adolphe again.

This is a classic Proustian story: on one level, it is very simple and quickly told. It involves a clear-cut and minor misunderstanding among family members that results in an unresolved domestic quarrel. And yet beneath the surface it has the power of a Greek tragedy, for Adolphe spends the rest of his life consumed with the bitterness of having been betrayed by his family while Marcel lives with both the guilt of that inadvertent betrayal and the inability to atone for it. Proust's delicate depiction of Marcel's emotional dithering on the street and his foolishly misguided response to his uncle is a brilliant evocation of one of those clumsy and awkward moments with which, unfortunately, all his readers can probably identify.

The story is also typically Proustian in that what initially appeared to be a simple and unimportant domestic incident has layers of deeper significance that, like ripples from a small pebble thrown in a stream, reverberate throughout the novel. The lady in pink is eventually revealed to be Odette de Crécy, the future Mme Swann. Swann himself quarrels with Uncle Adolphe when, prior to marrying Odette, he made inquiries about Adolphe's ex-mistress. References to

the lady in pink continue throughout the novel, even in the climactic scene in the final volume, when Mlle de Saint-Loup brings together all the threads of Marcel's life.

Even though he does not play an active role in the novel, Uncle Adolphe is always remembered fondly by Marcel, and his collection of signed photographs of actresses and courtesans is inherited by Marcel after his death. He always supported Marcel's ambitions of becoming a writer and told the lady in pink that Marcel would one day be another little Victor Hugo. His valet's son, Charlie Morel, though an utter cad to everyone else, is always loyal to the memory of his father's employer and speaks of him with genuine warmth and reverence.



Uncle Adolphe

Uncle Adolphe was very much based on the character of Proust's maternal uncle, Louis Weil, in whose house in Auteuil Proust was born, in whose garden he discovered hawthorn blossoms, and in whose apartment, on Boulevard Haussmann, he was eventually to write most of his novel. Uncle Louis' mistress, Laure Hayman, was the model for Odette de Crécy—Uncle Adolphe's lady in pink.

Marsantes, Marie-Aynard, Comtesse de

Mother of Robert de Saint-Loup, daughter of the older Duc de Guermantes, and sister to Charlus and Basin. Marie married Aynard, Comte de Marsantes, who had been president of the exclusive Jockey Club for ten years, and who served and was killed in the Franco-Prussian War in 1870 soon after the birth of their son, Robert de Saint-Loup. She was highly regarded in the best society as a melancholy, pure, self-sacrificing woman. Marcel was always puzzled how such a good and virtuous woman could have emerged from the same flower as her “brutal, debauched and vile” brothers.

Known for her Christianity and charitable works, Mme de Marsantes was also known for her great simplicity. However, as Proust points out, simplicity is not easy to acquire and costs a great deal of money. Furthermore, simplicity is effective and charms people only if it is well known that you chose voluntarily to live simply and are in fact very rich.

Throughout the novel Mme de Marsantes is single-minded in her determination to find a wealthy heiress for Robert to marry and to make him break up with his mistress, the whore Rachel. Nevertheless, as Marcel observes, if Rachel, whatever her morals, were a duchess or the heiress to millions, Mme de Marsantes would not have been so opposed to the union. Eventually, and in the face of stiff opposition from Mme de Châtellerauld, Mme de Marsantes is able to capture Gilberte and her fortune of 100 million francs for her son, Robert.

Even when Robert and Gilberte are on the verge of a separation because of his blatant unfaithfulness, it is his mother, Mme de Marsantes, who saves the marriage. She belonged to a world in which constant inbreeding and declining family fortunes encouraged a mature understanding of the necessary compromises concerning wealth and inherited vices.

Morel, Charlie

Violinist, writer, bisexual rent-boy. Among the four hundred or so characters in Proust's novel, none is more vile and odious than the ruthless and degenerate Charlie Morel. His complete lack of any moral or sexual standards was compared to a piece of paper that had been folded so often in every direction that it was impossible to straighten it out.

Morel is the son of naughty Uncle Adolphe's valet. He first appears following Uncle Adolphe's death, when he brings Marcel some of his uncle's possessions. These were objects that Morel's father felt might not be well received by Marcel's parents. They include photographs of famous actresses and notorious courtesans with whom Uncle Adolphe had spent most of his spare time—much to the disgust of his family. Many had personal inscriptions such as "To my best friend." One of them was a photograph of Elstir's painting of Odette de Crécy, *Miss Sacripant: October, 1872*, whom Morel confirmed was the lady in pink and whose meeting with Marcel as a boy had provoked the famous family quarrel.

Although he remained loyal to the memory of his father's master, Uncle Adolphe, Morel went to great lengths to cover up his humble beginnings and was always pretending that Marcel and the Baron de Charlus were merely old family friends. Morel was strikingly good-looking and always well dressed in the most expensive clothes, but nonetheless he still looked like the son of a valet.

He reappears much later near Balbec during his military service and is dressed as a soldier. Charlus spots him immediately and seduces him with an offer of five hundred francs at the railway station. (Charlus's cousin, the Prince de Guermantes, later purchases Morel's services for just fifty francs.) This is the start of a long and tortured relationship.

Morel is a person who will totally debase himself to get what he wants and will promise anything to acquire it. But once he has achieved his ends, he will turn on his benefactor with spite and hatred. Utterly servile and obsequious, he begs Marcel not to reveal anything about his humble beginnings and to support his lies concerning his family background. But once he has established the lie, he treats Marcel with total disdain and won't even speak to him. Similarly, later in the book he begs Bloch to lend him 5,000 francs, which Bloch does. Morel then gets Charlus to give him 1,000 francs a month with which to repay the loan. At first Morel worships Bloch because of his generosity and repays the first 1,000

francs of the loan as soon as Charlus gives it to him. However, by the second month, Morel has decided that the remaining 4,000 francs could be put to better use, so he turns against Bloch and never ceases to criticize and speak badly of him.

A genuinely talented musician, Morel had won first prize at the Paris conservatory and is soon “discovered” by the Verdurins. He quickly becomes their favorite violinist and performs at many of their musical soirees. Charlus is besotted with him, and it is in order to be close to “Charlie” that he begins to frequent the Verdurins’ little clan.

After their return to Paris, they disguise their affair by spending time together with Jupien’s niece as young fiancé and elderly protector, respectively. Charlus encourages the engagement of the young people, both as a way of maintaining his control over Morel and as a way of supporting Jupien’s niece.

Morel continues to have a separate, secret life, which drives Charlus crazy with suspicion. Morel pretends to be taking algebra classes in the evening when in fact he is having sexual encounters with both men and women. In addition to his attempted assignations with the Prince de Guermantes, Morel also organizes orgies with Albertine and innocent young country girls. Charlus intercepts a letter from Léa, a well-known lesbian actress, in which she addresses Morel as a “naughty girl” and “one of us,” which takes Morel’s bisexuality and depravity to ever higher levels of ambiguity.

After the Verdurins have persuaded Morel to break with Charlus, he does not just abandon him but seeks to humiliate him publicly and writes cruel lampoons about him in the newspapers. Perhaps the cruelest revenge that Morel takes on his onetime protector is to seduce his nephew, Robert de Saint-Loup. When Jupien is shown a love letter written by Morel to Saint-Loup and signed “Bobette,” he is furious at the betrayal and tells Marcel all the sordid details of the affair. Eventually Morel falls in love with a woman and becomes a perfect heterosexual husband: the man who could once be purchased for fifty francs could now not even be had for fifty thousand.

When war breaks out, Morel is arrested as a deserter. Mistakenly blaming the baron for his arrest, he denounces Charlus as the pederast who had led him astray, and the baron himself is briefly arrested. Morel is sent to the front, where he conducts himself bravely, and returns at the end of the war with a Croix de Guerre. By the end of the novel, when Marcel sees him at the party given by the Princesse de Guermantes, Morel is widely respected as a distinguished man of

letters. When he entered the room, there was a stir of curiosity and deference from the eminent guests. In Proust's world, vice is often its own reward.

Nassau, Paulette, Princesse de

Aged courtesan, previously Princesse d'Orvilliers, daughter of the Duke of Parma. Although only a minor character, she haunts the novel with her ambiguity. She first appears in *The Guermantes Way* and smiles provocatively at Marcel in the streets on several occasions. Why a well-born aristocrat would want to pick up a young man in the street is never explained. In *Cities of the Plain* she arrives late for the prince's ball and is seen ascending the stairs in a virginal white dress when Oriane, Duchesse de Guermantes, is descending in her red gown and red shoes. This can be interpreted as the moment when the new and corrupted blood begins to take over from the purer blood of the previous regime. It could also simply mean that Oriane was leaving early for another, later party and Paulette was arriving fashionably late.

Her final appearance at the prince's next party in *Time Regained* is delightful. She greets Marcel warmly as an old friend but obviously cannot remember if they ever had sex together, however casual. Her silence covered the possibility that nothing had happened between them, but her deep and passionate gaze managed to simultaneously convey the message that the intensity of the carnal pleasures she had tasted with him were sensual moments that she would and could never forget. She memorably leaves Marcel with lingering glances of smoldering passion as she hurries through the crowd, "galloping towards the grave."

Norpois, Marquis de

Ex-ambassador, friend of Marcel's father, lover of Mme de Villeparisis, and pompous stuffed shirt. M. de Norpois is not a nice man and it is possible that Proust transferred some of the ambivalent feelings he had for his own father into the pompous and boring Norpois. Like Norpois, Proust's father worked for the government and possibly shared Norpois' negative, methodical, conservative spirit, which Marcel describes as a "governmental mind." Despite his initial gratitude to Norpois for persuading his father to let him see Berma at the opera and for speaking approvingly to his parents of his desire to be a writer, Marcel quickly perceives that Norpois is duplicitous and entirely self-serving.

Marcel first meets him when Norpois is his father's honored dinner guest, and Norpois addresses him with kindness tempered by the self-importance of a man who is conscious of the vastness of his own experience. Throughout the novel, Norpois is portrayed as a man who does nothing unless he can profit from it himself, but he has such skill at "killing several birds with one stone" that he always makes the other person—or several other people—feel that he has been acting on their behalf rather than his own.

Just as he failed to introduce Marcel to the Swanns because there would be no personal benefit to him, so too does he decline to support Marcel's father's election to the academy, even though they are old and close friends. He prefers to be the only member of the academy at the ministry. He is also reserving his possible support for another candidate, a prince who will pay better than Marcel's naive father. His typically pedantic and convoluted excuses fail to impress the son when Marcel pleads on his father's behalf for Norpois' support. Marcel's opinion of Norpois is hardly improved when he is spitefully told, by Mme Swann, that Norpois had described him at a recent dinner party as a "hysterical little flatterer." Even worse, it appeared that Norpois had scornfully told everyone about an embarrassing incident from Marcel's childhood when he had almost kissed Norpois' hand.

As a distinguished member of the Academy of Political and Moral Science (part of the prestigious Institut de France), Norpois is in a position of considerable power and influence. It is not only Marcel's father who wants to be elected but also a German diplomat, Prince von Faffenheim, with whom Norpois conducts long and tortuous negotiations. Despite all his efforts and the gifts he gives Norpois, the prince still fails to gain the ambassador's support.

Anticipating his own death due to illness, the prince's main concern is that he may die before he is elected, and *that*, he concludes, would be most disagreeable. (The prince's sense of priorities is similar to that of Mme de Cambremer, who gives herself five more years of social climbing to be accepted by the Duchesse de Guermantes but worries that, due to her illness, she may not live so long.)

In his endless and cold-blooded maneuverings, Norpois is portrayed as the consummate diplomat who does nothing without calculating his personal gain. Underneath all the pompous and meaningless official announcements, and despite the good feelings, fine speeches, and earnest entreaties that ensure the European balance of power, the only question that matters is "What's in it for me?"

In the end, Norpois is one of Proust's most splendidly comic characters. Like the Homeric pretensions of the young Bloch or the hypocritical snobbery of Legrandin, the endless and meaningless pomposity of Norpois' speeches, which cover all diplomatic bases and convey nothing, show Proust's skills of cruel but comic parody at their finest.

One of the delightful examples of Norpois at his wildest involves a conversation with Bloch at the party given by Mme de Villeparisis. Bloch spends much of his time at the party trying to find out where Norpois stands on the Dreyfus case. Norpois runs rings around him with meaningless diplomatic clichés that leave Bloch more confused and bewildered than when he started. Norpois, however, artfully gives the impression of having answered his questions directly and having shared his most personal and deeply felt convictions.

Though he came of respectable stock himself and had once married into the La Rochefoucauld family, he was still looked down upon by the Guermantes as minor nobility. They prefer that their aunt, Mme de Villeparisis, remain his mistress rather than marry him and dilute the noble bloodline. Norpois, however, tries to keep the relationship secret and is always terrified that the impulsive Mme de Villeparisis will say something typically undiplomatic that may harm his reputation. The dry and calculating Norpois and the unconventional and spontaneous Mme de Villeparisis make a very odd couple throughout the novel. Even after a relationship of more than twenty years' length, Norpois will still not introduce her to any of his colleagues at the institute.

In order to disguise the fact that he has spent the afternoon in Mme de

Villeparisis's private quarters, Norpois pretends to have arrived from outside in the street when he attends a tea party in her drawing room. To support the illusion he picks up a hat that he finds in the hallway, but unfortunately it is Marcel's, and it is he who suffers some embarrassment trying to recover it discreetly.

After the death of his mistress, Norpois takes on a new lease on life. Even though all his opinions concerning European diplomacy have proved misguided, his prophecies concerning Germany have proved wrong, and the financial advice he had given Marcel's father has proved disastrous, at the end of the novel he is still writing the same pompous, cliché-riddled newspaper articles as when he first appeared.

Octave

Octave is first introduced in volume 2 when, after an unsuccessful game of golf, he describes himself as “a washout.” A minor character who is introduced at Balbec as a friend of Albertine and her little band, Octave represents to Marcel all the qualities that he himself lacks. Even though he describes himself as a washout, he is a serious golfer and, thanks to his “immensely rich” father, a dedicated baccarat player, a fearless gambler, and a talented dancer. Most of all, he has an easy and self-confident familiarity with all the girls that Marcel could never master.

I was struck by the extreme degree to which, in this young man ... the knowledge of everything that pertained to clothes and how to wear them, cigars, English drinks, horses—a knowledge which he displayed down to its minutest details with a haughty infallibility that approached the reticent modesty of the true expert—had been developed in complete isolation, unaccompanied by the least trace of any intellectual culture. He had no hesitation as to the right time and place for dinner jacket or pajamas, but had no notion of the circumstances in which one might or might not employ this or that word, or even of the simplest rules of grammar.... Octave, at the Casino, took prizes in all the dancing competitions, for the boston, tangos and what-not, an accomplishment that would enable him, if he chose, to make a fine marriage in that seaside society where it is not figuratively but literally that the girls are wedded to their “dancing-partners.” He lighted a cigar with a “D’you mind?” to Albertine, as one who asks permission to finish an urgent piece of work while they go on talking. For he was one of those people who can never be “doing nothing,” although there was nothing, in fact, that he could ever be said to do. And since complete inactivity in the end has the same effect as prolonged overwork, in the mental sphere as much as in the life of the body and muscles, the steadfast intellectual nullity that reigned behind Octave’s meditative brow had ended by giving him, despite his air of unruffled calm, ineffectual longings to think which kept him awake at night, for all the world like an overwrought philosopher. (1:939)

Octave continues to reappear periodically throughout the novel; he is a nephew of the Verdurins, and is in love with Albertine, and, in fact, when she

leaves Marcel, it is because her aunt wants her to marry Octave. However, after a brief liaison with Rachel, he eventually marries Andrée. Despite Marcel's rather disdainful description of Octave's lack of culture, by the end of the novel he has become one of the intellectual and artistic stars of the Paris salons, along with Bloch and Morel.

In many ways Octave is based on the character of Jean Cocteau, a young man with whom Proust had an ambivalent off-and-on friendship. Like Octave, Cocteau was also dismissed by many Paris intellectuals as an ineffectual dandy and poseur despite his brilliant theater work with Stravinsky, Diaghilev, and Picasso. But, as Proust revealed in letters to Cocteau, he recognized his true genius. It is possible that Proust also saw in both Octave and Cocteau a reflection of himself as a young man, when the correct clothes and the most fashionable company were all that counted and Octave's latent genius was hidden "like a key beneath the door-mat."

As regards the young sportsman, the Verdurins' nephew, whom I had met during my two visits to Balbec, it may be recounted here, incidentally and prematurely that some time after Andrée's visit.... This young man produced certain sketches for the theatre, with settings and costumes designed by himself, which effected in contemporary art a revolution at least equal to that brought about by the Russian ballet. In fact, the best qualified critics regarded his works as being of cardinal importance, almost works of genius and indeed I agree with them, confirming thus, to my own astonishment, the opinion long held by Rachel.

[People who had known Octave in Balbec assumed that he had paid Andrée or somebody creative to do all the work for him.]

But all this was untrue, and this young man was indeed the author of those admirable works. When I learned this, I was found myself torn between a number of different suppositions. Either he had indeed been for long years the dullard that he appeared to be, and some physiological cataclysm had awakened the dormant genius in him, like a Sleeping Beauty; or else at the time of his turbulent schooldays, of his failure to matriculate, of his heavy gambling losses at Balbec, of his reluctance to get into the little "tram" with his aunt Verdurin's faithful because of their hideous clothes, he was already a man of genius, distracted perhaps from his genius, which he had left in abeyance in the effervescence of juvenile passions; or again, already a conscious man of genius, and at the bottom of his class only because, while the master was spouting platitudes about Cicero, he

himself was reading Rimbaud or Goethe. (3:617–19)

Parma, Princesse de

One of the leading aristocrats in the Faubourg Saint-Germain. The princess is a minor character who nevertheless reappears throughout the novel as one of society's leading luminaries. There are mentions of a possible immoral affair with the Duchesse de Guermantes, but these are dismissed as jealous rumors. Her main role throughout is to epitomize good breeding, noblesse oblige, and excellent manners. She greets Marcel at his first visit to the Guermantes with such warmth and effusion that he assumes she has mistaken him for somebody else, an old family friend. The description in *The Guermantes Way* of her upbringing and the lessons she learned from her mother about being considerate to those "less fortunate"—for example, those who were not born with practically all the shares in the Suez Canal and three times as many Royal Dutch as Edmond de Rothschild—is Proustian humor at its best. (2:443-45).

Putbus, Mme (maid of)

Symbol of easy virtue and unimaginable carnal delights. Mme Putbus's maid is first mentioned in *Cities of the Plain* when Robert de Saint-Loup is describing his recent adventures in some select Parisian brothels. Among the girls he mentions is a chambermaid employed by Mme Putbus whom he describes as gorgeous and wildly Giorgionesque. Among her other charms, she also likes sex with women.

Without ever having seen the girl, Marcel begins to fantasize endlessly about the sexual promise of Baroness Putbus's chambermaid. He is excited by the combination of swollen pride displayed by girls of her class with the certainty of being able to procure her for his pleasure whenever he wishes. Presumably, the fact that she likes women too adds to the attraction.

Although neither the narrator nor the reader ever meets her, Mme Putbus's maid remains a tantalizing symbol of easy virtue throughout the novel. Marcel goes to great lengths to put himself in places where he knows Mme Putbus has been invited. He also makes inquiries to see if her chambermaid will accompany her on these visits so that he might finally take his pleasure with her. For example, he persuades his mother and Françoise to accompany him to Balbec because of his health, but in reality it is because Mme Putbus and her maid are expected to be staying nearby that he wishes to come.

But his fantasies of lust turn to horror after he becomes involved with Albertine. Suddenly the possible arrival of Mme Putbus, accompanied by her chambermaid, becomes a threat. He imagines Albertine meeting the maid on the beach and being seduced by her when he is not around to protect her. As before, Marcel continues to track the social itinerary of Mme Putbus, but now it is in order to make sure that their paths never cross when he is with Albertine.

Many years later, after Albertine's death, Marcel is in Venice with his mother and preparing to leave for home the next day when Mme Putbus's arrival is announced at the hotel. The very thought of Mme Putbus's maid, even after all these years, is enough to set Marcel's heart racing again, and the thoughts of all the carnal pleasure she represents tempts him to abandon his mother and remain in Venice. In the end he accompanies his mother and they leave the hotel before the arrival of Mme Putbus—or her maid. The possible sexual delights must therefore forever remain a tantalizing enigma.

Rachel

Whore, actress, mistress of Saint-Loup. Rachel is first introduced to the narrator in *Within a Budding Grove* by the madam of a low-class brothel who was always recommending girls for his pleasure. She recommended one girl in particular because she was Jewish and implied that this would offer especially exotic pleasures. Marcel immediately renamed her “Rachel when from the Lord,” which was an aria from a popular opera called *The Jewess* (a grand opera in five acts by Jacques Halévy, the father of one of Proust’s schoolfriends). He found Rachel intelligent-looking but not especially attractive and continued to reject the offer even though the madam kept boasting of the girl’s education and superior intelligence. He was especially turned-off when he overheard Rachel tell the madam that she would be available on the next day “for anyone.” This blatant willingness to earn a few francs with “anyone” made Marcel unable to recognize Rachel as an individual person—she was just a whore.

No further reference is made to Rachel, and, indeed, Marcel stops visiting the brothel because the sight of his chaste aunt Léonie’s sofa, which he had donated to the madam, fills him with guilt when he sees it being put to energetic and imaginative use by the half-naked girls.

We later learn that Marcel’s great friend, Robert de Saint-Loup, is being tormented by his mistress, a rising avant-garde actress from Paris. Even though he lavishes money on her and telegraphs her every day from Balbec, she continues to torment him with her changing moods and her sarcasm. All his friends and family strongly disapprove of the affair and think he is throwing away his fortune, his reputation, and his future. The mistress, however, persuades Robert that all his friends are just jealous and that they are all trying to get her into bed themselves. Robert finally persuades his aunt, the duchess, to allow his mistress to perform one of her avant-garde pieces at her salon. The performance is a disaster, the guests all break into laughter, and she is forced to leave, humiliated. She blames Robert and threatens to break up with him.

It is as a result of this quarrel that Saint-Loup is banished from Paris by his mistress and then first meets Marcel in Balbec. The constant telegraphs from Balbec are all part of his attempt to get back into her good graces. Much to his family’s disgust and his mother’s distress, Saint-Loup remains devoted to his mistress and continues to pursue her. Despite the closeness of his friendship with Robert, Marcel does not even get to see a photograph of the girl or meet her in

person until some years later. One day Robert invites Marcel to the small village on the outskirts of Paris where she lives. As soon as he sees her, Marcel recognizes this mysterious mistress as “Rachel when from the Lord,” whom he had last been offered for twenty francs in a brothel. Marcel says nothing and spends the day with them, listening to their incessant quarreling.

Like all of Proust’s lovers, Robert is insanely jealous and becomes furious when Rachel makes eyes at Aimé, the waiter, or any other young man in the restaurant. After lunch and several quarrels, Marcel and Robert return to Paris and take Rachel to the theater. Although she only has a small walk-on part in the production, Marcel can see that, from a distance, she is much more attractive on the stage—provided one had not previously seen her at close range. Backstage, after the performance, Rachel continues to inflame Robert’s jealousy by flirting with her fellow actors.

It is true that in some ways Rachel is a good influence on Robert, encouraging his interest in literature and the arts and making him more considerate of others. It is Rachel who is responsible for Robert’s courageous and unconventional support of the Dreyfus cause. But more than anything she torments him and makes him unhappy. Robert’s obsessive jealousy and Rachel’s incurable flirtatiousness guarantee an unstable relationship unable to withstand the pressure from their friends. Not only do Saint-Loup’s family and friends endlessly encourage him to abandon her, but Rachel’s own bohemian and avant-garde friends are also opposed to the match and convince her she is wasting her time with a philistine.

Long after the affair is over, Rachel still exerts an influence on Robert’s life. Even after his marriage, his wife, Gilberte, tries to dress and wear makeup like Rachel in order to maintain Robert’s affections. Robert by then, however, has surrendered to his hidden homosexual nature and finds himself attracted to Charlie Morel, possibly because of Morel’s resemblance to Rachel.

By the end of the novel, Rachel has become a famous actress, usurping the position of Berma and even becoming a friend of the Duchesse de Guermantes. Toward the end of her life, feeling that her social position has become irrelevant and the old social order had passed, the duchess seeks the company of the young and hip.

Rachel herself enjoys the friendship with the duchess, not only for the social leverage it gives her but even more for the sense of private revenge. She has never forgotten or forgiven the humiliations she suffered in the duchess’s

drawing room so many years earlier. The duchess has never forgotten that evening either, but in her mind the memory has been transformed. The duchess now claims credit for having first discovered Rachel when she was an unknown and everybody else thought her ridiculous.

At the grand party that concludes the novel, Rachel is invited by the Princesse de Guermantes to recite some poetry. The princess is, of course, the remarried Mme Verdurin, who retains all her love for the avant-garde in order to shock the bores. Rachel chooses something based on the *Fables of La Fontaine*. From the description of her recital, it would appear that not much has changed in her performance since her previous recital, some twenty or more years previously. Gesticulating wildly, shooting bewildered glances in all directions, Rachel recites each word as though it were a groan. The audience has no idea how to react, and although a few ill-mannered young people giggle audibly, most people sit with lowered eyes, waiting for someone else to either laugh or criticize, to weep or applaud. Despite her fame and success, Proust never offers any evidence that Rachel actually displayed any talent—even if it was ahead of its time.

At her first performance Rachel was humiliated because society was more self-assured and more certain of its tastes and standards. A well-known duke had said of Rachel's original performance that it was totally lacking in talent and that whatever might be said, people are not stupid and society is not entirely filled with imbeciles.

Modern society, however, has lost its assurance and its sense of values. It no longer knows what it likes, and people are terrified of being thought old-fashioned or out-of-date. The guests follow the Duchesse de Guermantes' lead and pronounce Rachel's performance as "admirable!" Only Gilberte, who has lost interest in society and hates both the duchess and Rachel, has the confidence of her own opinion. She describes Rachel's performance as "meaningless lunacy."

The poetry recital had also been attended by the daughter and son-in-law of Berma, Rachel's professional rival, who had sneaked away from Berma's tea party in order to listen to Rachel. Rachel takes a great delight in letting Berma know of the daughter's betrayal, and the tragic actress dies of a broken heart shortly after hearing the news. A few days after Berma's death, Rachel grumbles that she is being blamed for the death, even though she has been so kind to Berma's children—and then she laughs.

Saint-Euverte, Marquise de

Society hostess. Mme de Saint-Euverte is first introduced as a fashionable hostess for the most glittering social gathering described in the first two volumes of the novel. It is at her musical gathering that we first meet Oriane, the Duchesse de Guermantes, and it is where Swann first meets Mme de Cambremer. Compared with the provincial dinner parties at Marcel's family's house and the pretentious gatherings at the Verdurins,' the reception at Mme de Saint-Euverte's represents high society at its most dazzling.

We next hear of Mme de Saint-Euverte when Swann and Marcel visit the duke and duchess before going to the reception at the Prince de Guermantes' house. That is the evening when Swann tells his friends he is dying but they are more worried about being late for dinner with Mme de Saint-Euverte. We thus have no reason to question her high social standing.

But Mme de Saint-Euverte's apparently fashionable reputation was hollow and her salon was not held in respect by the Faubourg Saint-Germain. Mme de Saint-Euverte mistook quantity for quality; by filling her parties with "everyone," she lowered their value. The hostess of a really fashionable party, who could have invited every duchess in existence, would content herself with just inviting two or three. Furthermore, such a hostess would not send a list of her guests to the newspapers as Mme de Saint-Euverte and others did. Consequently, the truly fashionable hostesses who are recognized by the Queen of Spain are overlooked by the crowd because the former knows and the latter does not know who they are.

At the Prince de Guermantes' party much later in the novel, there are various rude remarks made about Mme de Saint-Euverte's upcoming garden party. Charlus describes it as a sewer, smelling like a cesspool, which he would not visit even if he had diarrhea. All this is said within Mme de Saint-Euverte's hearing, but she is such a snob that she apologizes to Charlus and still retains hopes of persuading him to attend her party the next day. But her reputation continues to decline, and during the war her salon is described as no more than a "faded banner." The Duchesse de Guermantes is not only rude about her parties but eventually pretends that she has never even met her.

However, at the end of the novel, seeing her carriage riding past in the street, the aged Charlus finally bows to Mme de Saint-Euverte. Comparing the humbled

pride of Charlus to Oedipus and King Lear, the narrator explains the significance of Charlus bowing to the ground in her honor. To have been publicly recognized and honored by Baron de Charlus had been the ultimate goal of Mme de Saint-Euverte's life, just as one of the central goals of Charlus's had been to insult her.

Saint-Loup-en-Bray, Robert, Marquis de

Son of the Comte and Comtesse de Marsantes, nephew of the Due and Duchesse de Guermantes and the Baron de Charlus, and great-nephew of Mme de Villeparisis. Soon after his first appearance, Robert de Saint-Loup charms readers and narrator alike. He is the youngest member of the Guermantes family, both a soldier and a scholar. Young and handsome, he moves with effortless grace and elegance, and Marcel senses the inherited litheness of the mighty hunters who for generations had been the ancestors of this young man. Educated and cultured, he is also filled with kindness and modesty, representing the very epitome of Proust's aristocratic ideal as a true "young son of France."

Just as the romance of the Duchesse de Guermantes' name was always associated with the stained-glass windows and gargoyles of the Gothic church at Combray, so, too, does her soldier nephew make Marcel think of Gothic castles. The fact that Robert was both a soldier and a scholar, combined with his rugged and aristocratic features, reminds Marcel of an ancient Gothic fortress whose interior halls have been converted to libraries.

Robert is introduced to Marcel at Balbec by his great-aunt the Marquise de Villeparisis and they become immediate best friends but with no homosexual suggestions. Though his name is associated with every fashionable young lady in society, Robert is recklessly in love with an actress. Marcel later recognizes her as the prostitute Rachel from the brothel where he had donated his aunt's couch from Combray. Marcel visits him with his regiment at Doncières, and their friendship continues to grow as Saint-Loup slowly introduces Marcel to the rest of his Guermantes relatives. His mother, the Comtesse de Marsantes, is the sister of the Duc de Guermantes and of Charlus.

Robert's passionate embrace of the Dreyfus cause is another sign of his courage and his idealism, since his fellow aristocrats and fellow soldiers are, as a class, all dedicated anti-Dreyfusards. The fact that they continue to accept Robert is just another testament to his powerful charm. It is only toward the end of the novel that we learn Robert's support for Dreyfus was entirely dictated by his mistress. The moment he finally breaks with Rachel, he reverts to the standards of his class, denounces Dreyfus, and regrets he had ever been involved.

The friendship fades somewhat when Marcel is living with Albertine, who

claims not to like Robert. Marcel, of course, worries that she might like him too much, but they continue to maintain contact. After rumors of his engagement to various rich and fashionable heiresses, Robert eventually marries Gilberte, who has inherited Swann's fortune.

After their marriage, Robert becomes increasingly unfaithful to Gilberte and apparently has an endless succession of mistresses. The truth is more sinister, however. Marcel discovers that Robert has inherited all the vices of his uncle Charlus and that the women are just a cover for his real sexual tastes. Robert is even conducting an affair with Charlus's ex-lover Morel. Despite all this he remains a sympathetic figure, noble and brave to the end, and his letters from the front are "delightful." Two days after seeing Marcel in Paris, he returns to his regiment and is killed while covering the retreat of his men from a German bombardment. He is buried at Combray.

Robert de Saint-Loup was possibly an inspiration for Lord Sebastian Flyte in *Brideshead Revisited* by Evelyn Waugh and for the equally fey and aristocratic Charles Stringham in Anthony Powell's *Dance to the Music of Time*. All three of these aristocratic golden boys share the same handsome looks, dashing allure, and sexual ambiguity. All three are sophisticated charmers, enchanting reader and author alike with their easy charisma. But all three are damned, lost souls in a modern world that has no further use for aristocratic insouciance.

Saint-Loup, Mile de

Daughter of Robert and Gilberte de Saint-Loup. More a symbol than a real character, Mlle de Saint-Loup represents the final reconciliation of the Guermantes way and Swann's way. As the daughter of Gilberte Swann and Robert de Saint-Loup—a Guermantes—she represents a fusion of all the themes and characters in the novel. In a wonderful image, Marcel compares her to one of those star-shaped crossroads in a forest where roads that have come from so many different directions converge. Marcel is struck not only by her beauty but also by the Guermantes family resemblance and the fleeting memories of Swann and Robert, who are both dead and yet who live on within her. It is this meeting with Mlle de Saint-Loup that finally inspires the narrator to begin his great novel. She is the ultimate muse for *In Search of Lost Time*.

Mme Sazerat

A neighbor from Combray. Mme Sazerat is a minor character who lives in genteel poverty after her father squandered the family fortune because of an infatuation with a duchess. For most of the novel Mme Sazerat's role is merely to represent the continuity of Combray life. Although she does not actually appear in person until the sixth volume, she appears indirectly, or is referred to, throughout the previous five volumes. She is quickly established as a respectable citizen of Combray, visiting her sister for lunch, kneeling in church, and, most memorably, being the owner of a dog that was known to Aunt Léonie, Françoise, and presumably the rest of the town.

The various brief references to her throughout the novel serve to express the conventional values and opinions of Combray, so that by the time she finally appears we feel that we already know her and, like Marcel's father, are already bored by her. This is a very Proustian technique, to weave minor characters slowly into the texture of the backdrop so that when they eventually step out upon the stage we see them as fully developed people with individual personalities and histories.

Like many of Proust's characters, Mme Sazerat also has the ability to surprise and to act out of character. For example, in defiance of everybody else in Combray, Mme Sazerat is a determined Dreyfusard, convinced of Dreyfus's innocence—despite her own anti-Semitism. So strong are her convictions that she snubs Marcel's father, an anti-Dreyfusard, in the street and ignores Marcel's mother when they meet at the house of a mutual friend.

But despite this, the families remain friends. Thanks to his immense influence at the ministry, Marcel's father is able to assist Mme Sazerat's son in taking his exam earlier—with those whose names begin with an "A" rather than waiting for the "S"s. Marcel's mother is always sympathetic to Mme Sazerat's family misfortune and aware that her reduced circumstances are due entirely to her father's unfortunately misdirected passions.

It is this family history that finally defines Mme Sazerat's importance in the novel. Dining with Marcel and his mother at their hotel in Venice, she reveals that the "hideous, red-faced, old woman" at another table, Mme Villeparisis, was in fact the wicked duchess who had so unscrupulously destroyed the Sazerat family.

Stermaria, Mlle

Later Mme, finally Vicomtesse Alix de Stermaria. Like Mme Putbus's maid, Mlle de Stermaria is more a symbol of lust than an actual character in the story. However, unlike Mme Putbus's maid, who never even appears in the novel, Mlle Stermaria does at least have a physical presence. She and her father are fellow guests at the Grand Hotel in Balbec, on a visit from their ancestral home in Brittany. Marcel is attracted by her pretty face and her pallid, almost bluish complexion, which, combined with her tall figure and her name, emphasize her breeding and aristocratic upbringing. Coming from an old and romantic Breton family, Mlle Stermaria displayed all the traits that Marcel found irresistible in a woman: she was aristocratic, beautiful, cold, aloof, and did not—even once—acknowledge his existence. From the time she and her father have him evicted from their regular table at the hotel in Balbec, forcing her to notice him and release the fires of lust roiling beneath her icy demeanor becomes one of Marcel's major ambitions.

He is completely unsuccessful in achieving his goal, and throughout the visit to Balbec never exchanges a single word, either with Mlle Stermaria or her arrogant father. However, just staring at her from afar permits him to speculate on the taste for sexual pleasures that she hides beneath her cold exterior. A fleeting blush on her pallid cheek convinces him that one day she would abandon some future husband for a night of debauched pleasure with a casual lover, and he dreams of spending a life of pleasure and poetry with her on the romantic coast of Brittany.

Much later in the novel, Robert de Saint-Loup writes to him that he had met Mlle (now Mme) de Stermaria in Morocco following her recent divorce. Marcel's lust, dormant since Balbec, bursts once more into flame. Interpreting Robert's letter as meaning that Mme de Stermaria is "ready for it," Marcel writes to invite her to dinner. He is even more excited when she writes back to accept his invitation. Turning down long-sought-after social invitations from the Guermantes, Marcel indulges in pages of romantic fantasies concerning his assignation with the woman of his dreams. With Albertine's help he rents a private room on an island in the Bois de Boulogne, so certain is he of the promise of her passion and the certainty of his conquest.

At the last moment she sends him a brief note expressing her regrets. He never sees her again but, like the maid of Mme Putbus, her potential for offering

unbridled sexual delights to Marcel remains in full force.

Swann, Charles

Connoisseur and well-connected art collector. All of Proust's characters exhibit a complex mix of good and bad qualities, but of all the hundreds of people in the novel, Charles Swann is perhaps the most complicated. Proust quickly makes it clear that Swann is a dilettante with no serious goals, a man who has wasted his talents on an aimless and superficial existence. His superficiality is reflected in his taste for surface appearances: loving Odette, for example, merely because of her resemblance to a Botticelli painting even though, as a woman, she is not "his type." Perhaps his major fault, in Proust's judgment, was failing to complete his study of Vermeer. But the author is equally diligent in portraying Swann's honesty and loyalty, his refinement and sensitivity, and his loving strength as a husband and father. More than any other character, most readers will identify with Swann, and although he seldom reappears after the first volume, his presence permeates the whole novel. Charles Swann is Proust's "Everyman," just as Leopold Bloom in *Ulysses* was James Joyce's "Everyman." That the two greatest novels of the twentieth century, both written in Paris during the same period, should feature Jews as the representative of Modern Man is a subject to be pursued elsewhere.

Wealthy and Jewish, Swann was a cultured boulevardier. He was a personal friend of the Prince of Wales and the Count of Paris, a member of the exclusive Jockey Club—which did not normally admit Jews—and counted Baron de Charlus and the Duke and Duchesse de Guermantes among his closest friends. Swann's father had been a close friend of Marcel's grandfather, which is why Swann continued to maintain contact with the family. Marcel's relatives only saw him as an old family friend and had no idea of the brilliant social life in which he was welcomed by all the most fashionable and aristocratic salons in Paris. Nevertheless, they were grimly aware that Swann had broken the bounds of his "caste" and moved in a world different from their own. Swann, the son of a stockbroker, should, certainly in Marcel's grandfather's eyes, spend his life with stockbrokers, not hobnobbing with aristocrats. From the young Marcel's perspective, Swann's significance was even more limited, and his arrival for dinner with the family simply threatened the promise of his mother's good-night kiss.

Long before Marcel was born, Swann had become involved with a well-known courtesan called Odette de Crécy, whom he eventually married after the

birth of their daughter, Gilberte. It was because of this unfortunate marriage that Swann could only visit Marcel's family by himself; his wife was not welcome. His wife and child were also excluded from the aristocratic and fashionable society of the Faubourg Saint-Germain that had once been his home, and Swann was forced to start over and create a new social position among the bourgeoisie. A man who had once included the Prince of Wales and the Comte de Paris among his closest friends now boasted about his acquaintance with M. Bontemps "from the Ministry." From his home on the aristocratic Ile Saint-Louis, Swann moved to join Odette at the western end of the Champs-Élysées near the vulgar and bourgeois Bois de Boulogne.

Following a luncheon at the Swanns' house when Marcel was first introduced to Bergotte, the two of them shared a cab and Bergotte cruelly remarked how Swann was in need of a doctor. Bergotte explained that Swann was typical of a man who has married a whore and has to swallow the daily insults of women who refuse to meet his wife and of men who have slept with her.

Swann belonged to that class of intelligent men who have led a life of idleness and who seek consolation and perhaps justification in the idea that the situations they encounter in their idle pursuits are as worthy of their interest as any that could be attained by art or learning and that "real life" contains as much true romance as any romantic novel ever written. However, this contradicted his true nature, which found in the living world endless reflections of great art. Swann was a well-known collector of paintings and had been working on a study of Vermeer before abandoning it during his pursuit of Odette. It was Swann who advised the Prince de Guermantes to invest in the painter Elstir and helped him to build his valuable collection. Swann's love of paintings was reflected in his mania for comparing living people to famous old masters. It was Swann who noticed the resemblance between the poor scullery maid whom Françoise used to torture in Combray with Giotto's famous painting of Charity, as well as the resemblance of Bloch to Bellini's portrait of Mohammed II. He also noted the resemblance of his own coachman Rémi to Rizzo's bust of the Venetian doge, Loredan, and Mme Blatin's similarity to the portrait of Savonarola by Fra Bartolommeo. In the same way, even though he did not personally find Odette attractive, he had noticed her resemblance to Zipporah, the wife of Moses, in the painting by Botticelli. When he embraced Odette, therefore, it was Botticelli's precious painting he was holding in his arms.

Rather than trying to find charm and beauty in the women with whom he was socially obliged to spend his time, Swann preferred to spend his time among

women that he already found attractive. Unlike the cultured female charms of his social circle or the refined beauty that he admired in the sculptures and paintings of his favorite masters, Swann was attracted to more vulgar physical aspects. A woman displaying depth of character or a sad and thoughtful expression would quickly soften his ardor, which would rise again only at the sight of a firm and healthy display of rosy female flesh. That he should end up married to a woman to whom he was not physically attracted, only because she reminded him of a Renaissance master, was one of the ironies of Swann's complex nature.

Although Swann himself continued to visit the fashionable salons of the Faubourg Saint-Germain, his wife was never invited. Despite Odette's persistent hints and complaints, Swann and Odette had lived together for some considerable time without marrying, even after the birth of their daughter. Indifferent to the judgment of the rest of society, Swann cared only for the opinion of Oriane, Duchesse de Guermantes. Whenever he considered the possibility of being married, he imagined presenting his wife and daughter to the Princesse des Laumes (as she then was) and would daydream of the way that Oriane would fondly spoil Gilberte and make him proud. For the rest of his life it was Swann's greatest dream to introduce his wife and daughter to his old friend, the Duchesse de Guermantes, before he died. Unfortunately, his marriage was badly received and Odette and Gilberte were never socially accepted during his lifetime. His situation was not improved by his unabashed and unpopular support of Dreyfus. Even after he learned that he had only a few months to live, his friends refused to take him seriously: "You're as sound as a bell. You'll bury us all!" the duke insisted.

Swann's Death

The death of Swann and the way his death is handled represents one of the major themes of the novel. Marcel Proust does not shy away from the subject of death. The painful illness and delayed realization of the grandmother's death is one of the most powerful descriptions of human mortality in literature. News of Albertine's unexpected death, contrasting the speed of the newfangled telegraph with the slower postal service, is one of the most dramatic. The report of Robert de Saint-Loup's death at the western front is a classic reflection on the terrible human waste of the First World War. The famous death of Bergotte, with his tragic-comedic collapse in front of Vermeer's painting and subsequent redemption in the windows of the Parisian bookstores, is one of the most inspiring, and, of course, prefigured Marcel Proust's own death. But the death of

Swann is apparently given less attention than the fall of a sparrow.

The reader already knew that Swann was dying, and the whole incident of the duchess's red shoes is preparation for the later scenes of hypocrisy and indifference with which society treats human aspirations. Just as the duke and duchess are about to leave for dinner, Swann mentions that his doctors have recently given him a few months to live, and he will regrettably be unable to join them on their planned visit to Italy, because by then he will have been dead for several months. The duchess is torn between her social obligation to leave for dinner and the conflicting obligation to console her oldest friend, realizing "in a vague way that the dinner party to which she was going must count for less to Swann than his own death." The duke, who is more concerned with the color of his wife's shoes, simply ignores the idea of Swann's death. The reader might reasonably expect the illness and death of Swann to be given a similar treatment as was given to the grandmother's suffering, which is why the accidental and offhand mention of Swann's death is so shocking.

Tucked away within a long paragraph concerning the Verdurins' slow but ineluctable social ascent, the death of Swann is revealed with a brutal casualness by the Principessa di Caprarola, a character apparently created with no other purpose than to reveal, in the third person, Swann's death to the reader.

So far, this latent social success of the Verdurins had expressed itself in two facts only. In the first place, Mme Verdurin would say of the Principessa di Caprarola: "Ah! She's intelligent, that one, she is a charming woman. What I cannot endure are the imbeciles, the people who bore me—they drive me mad." Which would have made anybody at all perspicacious realize that the Principessa di Caprarola, a woman who moved in the highest society, had called upon Mme Verdurin. She had even mentioned the Verdurins' name in the course of a visit of condolence which she had paid to Mme Swann after the death of her husband, and had asked whether she knew them. "What name did you say?" Odette had asked with a sudden wistfulness. "Verdurin? Oh, yes, of course," she had continued glumly, "I don't know them, or rather, I know them without really knowing them, they are people I used to meet with friends, years ago, they are quite nice." (2:899-90)

This is such a deliciously convoluted and oblique reference—with the emphasis primarily on the Verdurins—and only secondly on Mme Swann, and finally, only in passing, on her dead husband, that it is easy to overlook. This is

not accidental. This is a most complex and carefully contrived third-person construction. It is deliberately hidden in the middle of a long two-page paragraph that immediately carries the reader forward to an entertaining and important discussion of the social successes of the rival salons of Odette and Mme Verdurin.

Proust is making a very powerful statement about the relative unimportance of our individual human lives and might almost be saying there is *no* Providence in the fall of a sparrow. Proust pointed his finger at his readers when he wrote that description of the Principessa di Caprarola's social visit to Mme Verdurin. He in effect said, "You too will pass unnoticed and unobserved when your time comes. Unless you leave behind an expression of your true self through art, the best you can hope for is a newspaper obituary."

Both Swann and Proust were great admirers of Dutch painting; Swann was writing a study of Vermeer, and Proust referred to Brueghel in his wonderful description of the bustling streets of Doncières, filled with the vitality and physical joy of life (2:97). It might be argued that the offhand presentation of Swann's death was inspired by Pieter Brueghel the Elder's painting *The Fall of Icarus*, in which the death of Icarus is merely a small and unobserved splash in an otherwise rich and busy landscape. Referring to Brueghel's painting, W. H. Auden said of human death and suffering, "It takes place while someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along." Similarly, Joseph Conrad, who was a great admirer of Proust, described the death of one of his characters who drowned in the ocean as falling into the "immense indifference of things." It is the immense indifference of things that Proust emphasizes in his treatment of Swann's death.

Despite the reader's reasonable expectations, the narrator does not later describe the death of Swann with the feeling that he expressed for his grandmother, but he does depart from his usual neutral tone to describe the posthumous treatment of Swann by his daughter, Gilberte, and his best friends, the Duc and Duchesse de Guermantes. In a deliciously Proustian aside he suggests that had Swann and his parents still been alive, the duke "would not have had a moment's hesitation in recommending them for a post as gardeners!" (3:592).

Meanwhile, Gilberte has dropped her father's name, "as humans have dropped the tail of the monkey," and adopted the more aristocratic name of de Forcheville. Despite Swann's fond beliefs that he would be remembered after his death through the love and intercession of his daughter, she in fact rejected him,

and she, who ought to have refreshed if not perpetuated his memory, found herself hastening and completing the process of death and oblivion. By the end of the novel, all references to Swann have been obliterated and he is referred to only as “an adventurer”—meaning “a cheap scoundrel,” a “bounder.”

The second reference to Swann’s death occurs when Marcel reads about it in *Le Figaro*. Unlike a book, a newspaper is an ephemeral thing—it carries today’s news and then is thrown away. Had Swann not been distracted by Odette, continued his study of Vermeer, and published his book, he would have lived on, beyond his death, in the pages of his book. As Bergotte achieved immortality through his books, Vinteuil lived on through his music, and Elstir through his paintings, Proust argued passionately that it is only through art that we can defeat Time. It is only through art that we, as humans, can reach beyond ourselves and beyond time and make the experience of our brief passing live on for others to share. Swann, despite all his qualities, had never created any art; he had never “produced” anything that would last beyond his death. He had created a daughter, it is true, and invested all his love and hopes in her—but that was not enough, for she quickly betrayed all traces of his memory.

The casual passing of Swann and the destruction of his character and of his reputation through indifference are among the most powerful themes of this novel. Compared to all the other characters, Swann represents good taste, discretion, wisdom, and decency. His love for his daughter is profound, and the reader assumes that she will carry his values, like his name, into the next generation. In the event, it is only his fortune and her mother’s values that Gilberte carries forward. Odette marries her longtime lover, the vulgar Baron de Forcheville, and Gilberte assumes her adopted father’s name. By the end of the novel, all traces of Swann, his name, and his memory have been obliterated.

Swann was openly based on the art collector and critic Charles Haas, whom Proust had known as a young man, and in a strange aside in volume 5, *The Captive*, Proust finally uses his own art to bestow immortality on both men.

Swann on the contrary was a remarkable intellectual and artistic personality, and although he had “produced” nothing, still he was lucky enough to survive a little longer. And yet, my dear Charles———[Haas], whom I used to know when I was still so young and you were nearing your grave, it is because he whom you must have regarded as a young idiot has made you the hero of one of his novels that people are beginning to speak of you again and that your name will perhaps live. If, in Tissot’s picture representing the balcony of the Rue Royale club, where you figure with

Galliffet, Edmond de Polignac and Saint-Maurice, people are always drawing attention to you, it is because they know that there are some traces of you in the character of Swann. (3:199)

Swann, Mme, Odette de Crécy

Mme Swann and later Mme de Forcheville. Odette started life as a whore working in brothels before marrying the Comte de Crécy, whom she abandoned after draining him of his family fortune. She became a well-known courtesan in Paris and a friend of Mme Verdurin, with whom she was reputed to have had an affair. Marcel eventually learns that she was the lady in pink, one of his uncle Adolphe's mistresses. According to Charlus, Odette would organize orgies with five or six men at a time and, according to an anonymous letter Swann received, enjoyed sex with women as well as men. Even by her own admission, she continued to be pestered by procuresses and brothel keepers wanting her to work for them. She walks provocatively in the Bois de Boulogne, and there are numerous suggestions of casual sex in the woods with both men and women. After a long and torrid affair, she gave birth to Gilberte and then used access to their daughter to blackmail Swann into marrying her. Although she was famous for her beauty, her attractions were not to Swann's taste:

... he used to regret, while she was talking to him, that her really considerable beauty was not of the kind which he spontaneously admired. It must be remarked that Odette's face appeared thinner and sharper than it actually was, because the forehead and the upper part of the cheeks, that smooth and almost plane surface, were covered by the masses of hair which women wore at that period drawn forward in a fringe, raised in crimped waves and falling in stray locks over the ears; while as for her figure—and she was admirably built—it was impossible to make out its continuity (on account of the fashion then prevailing, and in spite of her being one of the best-dressed women in Paris) so much did the corsage, jutting out as though over an imaginary stomach, and ending in a sharp point, beneath which bulged out the balloon of her double skirts, give a woman the appearance of being composed of different sections badly fitted together; to such an extent did the frills, the flounces, the inner bodice follow quite independently, according to the whim of their designer or the consistency of their material, the line which led them to the bows, the festoons of lace, the fringes of dangling jet beads, or carried them along the bust, but nowhere attached themselves to the living creature, who, according as the architecture of their fripperies drew them towards or away from her own, found herself either strait-laced to suffocation or else completely buried. (1:215)

In the first volume, “Swann in Love,” Odette is relentlessly portrayed as ignorant, vulgar, and duplicitous. She displays appalling taste, uses affected English expressions all the time, and, despite all her pretensions, has no idea of Swann’s true social standing or the real values of smart society. In the second volume, “Madame Swann at Home,” she is portrayed as the very epitome of bourgeois respectability and the personification of good taste. Not only is she well regarded in the social circles of the Faubourg Saint-Honoré where the Swanns (and the Proust family) live, but she is also shown to be a good wife, a fond mother, and a kind hostess to Marcel, who becomes very fond of her.

But having reestablished her character as the embodiment of fashion and respectability, we learn from Bloch that she is known to engage in casual, though energetic, sex on a train with complete strangers. Throughout the course of the novel there are references to her sexual proclivities, and she is reputed to have been the mistress of many of the book’s main characters.

After Swann’s death she marries her longtime lover, the snobbish but vulgar Baron de Forcheville. With her new title and her strident anti-Dreyfusism, she begins to be accepted into society. Although the Duchesse de Guermantes refuses to acknowledge her, Odette gradually makes social progress. After her daughter, Gilberte, inherits several millions from one of Swann’s uncles and marries Robert de Saint-Loup, she is seen in all the best houses.

But by the end of the novel she has become the mistress of the Duc de Guermantes, who jealously obsesses over her, just as Swann had done so many years before. Having overcome her past as the lady in pink, having achieved respectability and even social prominence, her life comes full circle and she ends it once again as a notorious kept woman.

Swann, Gilberte

Mlle Swann, later Mlle de Forcheville, and finally Marquise de Saint-Loup. In the opening pages of the novel (in the eighth paragraph), there is a passing reference to a Mme de Saint-Loup and the bedroom in her house. This can have absolutely no meaning or significance to a first-time reader. But for those embarking on a second reading of the novel, that passage has a very powerful effect, and the subtle and intricate structure of the whole work is suddenly revealed. What had seemed random on a first reading is now seen to have been carefully planned and artfully assembled. Gilberte is first introduced in Combray as the young daughter of Charles Swann and his mysterious wife. Marcel is fascinated to learn that she is the “great friend of Bergotte” and later catches a tantalizing glimpse of her during a family walk past the grounds of Swann’s estate. A little girl with fair, reddish hair was watching him from inside the park with gleaming black eyes and such an intensity of gaze that it seemed as though she was trying to carry off his soul. Although the two do not speak, she makes a strangely “indelicate gesture” to him before running off in obedience to her mother’s summons.

Gilberte immediately becomes the symbol of all the unattainable yearnings of young love. Marcel meets her again in Paris, and they begin to play together every day in the Champs-Élysées, even to the point of his premature ejaculating while innocently wrestling. She is very much the spoiled princess and a “daddy’s girl,” but Marcel is besotted and thinks only of the next time they can play together. Even the imagined possibility of his beloved grandmother’s death in an accident is seen as an unwanted interruption to his games with Gilberte. Eventually, after much maneuvering, Marcel is invited to her home and becomes a regular visitor to the Swanns’ household. He can play with Gilberte whenever he wishes.

But, as always with Proust, familiarity breeds contempt and his feelings for Gilberte begin to change as soon as he is accepted. As the relationship sours, Marcel transfers his affection to the mother and only visits when he knows Gilberte will be out of the house. There are some early hints that Gilberte had a lesbian relationship with Albertine when they were schoolgirls together, and later in the novel, Albertine admits to having kissed her. One of the last times that Marcel visits Gilberte, he sees her walking in the street with an unknown young man. Years later he discovers the young man was Léa, a well-known

lesbian, dressed in drag. But these hints of Gilberte's Sapphic tastes are never pursued or resolved.

After Marcel's first visit to Balbec, Gilberte disappears from the story, but her memory remains and is often evoked when Marcel describes his feeling of love and yearning for other girls. She does not reappear until *Cities of the Plain*, when it is revealed that she has inherited a considerable fortune from an uncle of Swann's. Gilberte is now one of the richest heiresses in France—a fact that immediately makes her of great interest to the Faubourg Saint-Germain.

Because of Swann's unfortunate marriage, Gilberte and her mother, Odette, have never been accepted or even acknowledged by smart society. It was the greatest regret of Swann's life that he was unable to introduce his daughter to his friend the Duchesse de Guermantes. However, after Swann's death, Odette marries her longtime lover, Baron de Forcheville, and Gilberte changes her name from Mlle Swann to Mlle de Forcheville.

Having exchanged her Jewish name for a noble title and having a considerable fortune at her disposal, Gilberte is suddenly much sought after by the highest society. All the doors that poor Swann had found closed for his daughter are now open. The Duchesse de Guermantes invites her to lunch and the Comtesse de Marsantes organizes Gilberte's marriage to her son, Robert, Marquis de Saint-Loup. But the moment that Gilberte is finally able to fulfill all of Swann's fondest dreams, she snobbishly rejects him and obliterates his memory.

But social success does not bring her happiness, and after her marriage to Robert de Saint-Loup and her alliance to the Guermantes, she withdraws from society and becomes a recluse in Tansonville, Swann's old house outside Combray. While Gilberte waits for him in the country, Robert runs around Paris being openly unfaithful with other women—and secretly unfaithful with other men. Hoping to win him back, Gilberte starts to dress herself like Robert's old mistress, Rachel, with vulgar clothes and too much makeup. Marcel spends a lot of time with Gilberte during this period. Together they revisit the scenes of their youth and Marcel finally reconciles the two "ways" around Combray. During the war, Gilberte lives alone at Tansonville and has German soldiers billeted in her house.

After Robert's death, Gilberte and Marcel have a final meeting at the novel's final big party, hosted by the Princesse de Guermantes, when Marcel is introduced to Gilberte's daughter, Mlle de Saint-Loup, who brings together all the themes of the novel. Gilberte has become completely like her mother and

Marcel even mistakes her for Odette. At the party Gilberte displays her disdain for high society, including both the Princesse and the Duchesse de Guermantes, and she is the only person to openly ridicule the performance of Rachel. There are suggestions in the book and in his notes that after the death of Oriane, Proust planned for Gilberte to marry the duke and finally become the Duchesse de Guermantes. But in the version that he left us, Oriane is still alive and the duke is frolicking in bed with Gilberte's mother.

Vaugoubert, Marquis de

Diplomat and closet queen. Vaugoubert is a minor character but a perfect example of how Proust “seeds” his novels with clues and allusions long before they have any specific relevance or meaning. The diplomat Vaugoubert is first mentioned early in the novel as an unknown character in one of M. de Norpois’ pompous and cliché-ridden ramblings. Norpois knows him “intimately” as a “sensitive and tender-hearted” man with “artistic leanings.” He is also mentioned in connection with the court of the “boyish” king Theodosius. These are all throwaway remarks that only acquire significance upon a second reading of the novel.

Vaugoubert himself does not appear until volume 4, *Cities of the Plain*, when he is presented as the most desperate of closet queens, obsessed with his fantasies of sex with rough men and equally obsessed with public disgrace. Even when he hears a news vendor in the street yelling “The press!” he shudders with terror, imagining himself to have been recognized and denounced.

When Marcel is introduced to M. de Vaugoubert’s wife at the Prince de Guermantes’ reception, he recognizes the physical chemistry behind the marriage. The wife has the mannish build and mannerisms of a market porter, which is what her husband had found attractive. Vaugoubert is on tenterhooks at the Prince de Guermantes,’ as he speculates, to the displeasure and embarrassment of Charlus, which of the young men present at the party is “one of us.”

Unfortunately, Charlus always brings out the worst in Vaugoubert, and while turning to flirt with every good-looking young man in the room, Vaugoubert refers to everything male in the feminine. This simply annoys Charlus, but Vaugoubert finds it extremely witty. At the same time, always frightened of being exposed and losing his job, he alternates between bouts of suggestive sniggering and fits of terror whenever he recognizes a colleague from the ministry.

Despite his indiscretions in company with Charlus, Vaugoubert is normally the soul of discretion and good manners. He is so polite that when playing tennis, he always asks permission of his partners before hitting the ball, with the result that his team inevitably loses.

However, the downfall of M. and Mme Vaugoubert had nothing to do with

their sexual tastes but, like Charlus, had more to do with their insensitivity to social niceties. As ambassadors to the court of King Theodosius, they knew the king and his wife intimately. When the king and queen moved to Paris for a long visit, it was natural that knowing nobody else, they would spend most of their time with the Vaugouberts. Instead of taking advantage of this unexpected social wealth and sharing it with their friends by introducing the king and queen to Parisian society, the Vaugouberts remained aloof and thus aroused the resentment and jealousy of their fellow diplomats. As soon as the king left Paris for his own country, Vaugoubert was “retired” from the foreign service. Vaugoubert’s downfall is compared to that of Charlus who, by not introducing his society friends to Mme Verdurin, ensured the enmity of the Verdurins and his own social ruin.

M. and Mme Vaugoubert have a brief but sad final appearance in the novel when Robert de Saint-Loup mentions them in his final letter from the front. Their son had died bravely in the trenches and they were given permission to attend the funeral on condition that they not wear mourning clothes or remain more than five minutes, due to the German shelling. The mother bore the visit stoically but the father was a complete wreck and collapsed, sobbing, unable to tear himself from his son’s body.

Verdurin, Gustave (Auguste)

Husband of Mme Verdurin. M. Verdurin's subordinate role is made clear the moment he is introduced, and we are told that he never formed an opinion on any subject until his wife had formed hers. His sole function was to carry out her wishes, which he did with boundless enthusiasm and ingenuity. Marcel's grandfather had been acquainted with M. Verdurin's extremely wealthy family but had gradually distanced himself as the "young Verdurin" joined the bohemian riffraff.

M. Verdurin does not play a major role in the novel beyond acting as foil and support for his wife, enforcing the rules of the house and providing her with followers. Combined with the Verdurins' desire to keep the little clan loyal and cohesive, there was also an opposite desire to keep them on edge and competing with one another. M. Verdurin was always on the prowl for a victim from the little clan whom he could trap in his web of ridicule and hand to his spider mate like an innocent fly. As soon as one of the faithful had left the room, M. Verdurin would make fun of him in front of all the others.

M. Verdurin's other major role is to die conveniently in the final volume so that his wife is free to marry the Duc de Duras, followed two years later by marriage to the Prince de Guermantes. After Verdurin's death, it is revealed that he had been a well-respected art critic in his youth and had published a book on Whistler. According to Elstir, he had the truest understanding of his (Elstir's) paintings. Indeed, Elstir was the only person in the novel who mourned his death.

Despite his occasional acts of kindness and his genuine appreciation for art, M. Verdurin was a cruel and unforgiving bully, cravenly subservient to his wife and hypocritical in his attitude to the aristocracy.

Verdurin, Mme

Later Duchesse de Duras and finally Princesse de Guermantes.

Like Charlus, Mme Verdurin is a larger-than-life “monster” of Proust’s imagination. If Oriane, the Duchesse de Guermantes, represents the decline of the aristocracy at the turn of the century, Mme Verdurin represents the ruthless ascendancy of the bourgeoisie. Although she and her husband both come from immensely wealthy families, their money comes from trade and industry, not land. Without a social pedigree or noble blood, they are therefore excluded from the aristocratic world of the Faubourg Saint-Germain. Rather than acknowledge this rejection by smart society, the Verdurins dismiss society as being full of “bores” and have created their own alternative and more bohemian circle. Mme Verdurin’s salon is filled with a cast of rather brash and buffoonish characters: “the faithful” or “the little clan” who worship “the Mistress” and slavishly attend all her soirees. In contrast to the Duchesse de Guermantes’ salon, Mme Verdurin rules her little clan with a brutal determination and accepts no threat to her authority. From her high stool Mme Verdurin surveys all her guests, controls all the conversations, and encourages everyone to have a “good time.”

Everything about Mme Verdurin is exaggerated. In order to demonstrate her appreciation of her guests’ witticisms, she would laugh with such violent heartiness that at one time she dislocated her jaw. To avoid a repetition she would now, instead of laughing, bury her face in her hands as though defending herself from a mortal blow or an indecent sight. Completely enveloped and hidden from the world behind her hands, she would seem to be struggling with an expression of such hilarity that, were she unable to suppress it, she must surely collapse or even die.

Her appreciation for music was demonstrated with the same exaggerated fervor. She maintained that her ear was so sensitive that beautiful music made her ill with sobbing and even confined her to bed. When her husband first invited Swann to listen to Vinteuil’s sonata, Mme Verdurin protested:

“No, no, no, not my sonata!” she screamed, “I don’t want to be made to cry until I get a cold in the head, and neuralgia all down my face, like last time. Thanks very much, I don’t intend to repeat that performance. You are all very kind and considerate; it is easy to see that none of you will have to stay in bed for a week.” (1:224)

By the time Marcel himself had become part of the Verdurin's circle, her exaggerated reaction to beautiful music had become so well established that she needed medication before she could even listen.

Meanwhile I was struck, as was everybody who approached Mme Verdurin that evening, by a far from pleasant odor of rhino-gomenol. The reason was as follows. We know that Mme Verdurin never expressed her artistic emotions in an intellectual but always in a physical way, so that they might appear more inescapable and more profound. Now, if one spoke to her of Vinteuil's music, her favorite, she would remain unmoved, as though she expected to derive no emotion from it. But after looking at you for a few moments with a fixed, almost abstracted gaze, she would answer you in a sharp, matter of fact, scarcely civil tone.... "I have nothing against Vinteuil; to my mind, he's the greatest composer of the age. Only, I can never listen to that sort of stuff without weeping all the time" (there was not the slightest suggestion of pathos to the word "weeping"; she would have used precisely the same tone for "sleeping"; certain slander-mongers used indeed to insist that the latter verb would have been more applicable, though no one could ever be certain, for she listened to the music with her face buried in her hands, and certain snoring sounds might after all have been sobs). "I don't mind weeping, not in the least; only I get the most appalling sniffles afterwards. It stuffs up my mucous membrane, and forty-eight hours later I look like nothing on earth. I have to inhale for days on end to get my vocal cords functioning. However, one of Dr. Cottard's pupils ... has been treating me for it. He goes by quite an original rule: 'Prevention is better than cure.' And he greases my nose before the music begins. The effect is radical. I can weep like all the mothers who ever lost a child and not a trace of a cold. Sometimes a little conjunctivitis, that's all. It is completely efficacious. Otherwise I could never have gone on listening to Vinteuil. I was just going from one bronchial attack to another." (3:242-43)

When she hosted a concert of Vinteuil's septet, she sat upright and motionless, as though courageously telling the musicians that they need not spare her nerves, that she would not flinch at the andante and would not cry out at the allegro. Eventually, however, she buried her face in her hands as though overcome with emotions too powerful to display—or possibly she had fallen asleep. Eventually, however, Marcel realized that the snoring sounds came from Mme Verdurin's

little dog and not from the mistress herself.

As the years pass, the exaggerated expressions that she adopted when listening to music actually engrave themselves onto her features. Her face finally becomes a permanent expression of the pained sensitivity that she had strived so hard to display.

Let us here briefly remark that Mme Verdurin, quite apart from the inevitable changes due to increasing years, no longer resembled what she had been at the time when Swann and Odette used to listen to the little phrase in her house. Even when she heard it played, she was no longer obliged to assume the air of exhausted admiration which she used to assume then, for that had become her normal expression. Under the influence of the countless head aches which the music of Bach, Wagner, Vinteuil, Debussy had given her, Mme Verdurin's forehead had assumed enormous proportions, like limbs that become permanently deformed by rheumatism. Her temples, suggestive of a pair of throbbing, pain-stricken, milk-white spheres, in which Harmony endlessly revolved, flung back silvery locks upon either side, and proclaimed, on the Mistress's behalf, without any need for her to say a word: "I know what is in store for me to-night." Her features no longer took the trouble to formulate, one after another, aesthetic impressions of undue violence, for they had themselves become as it were their permanent expression on a superbly ravaged face. The attitude of resignation to the ever impending sufferings inflicted by the Beautiful, and the courage required to make her dress for dinner when she had barely recovered from the effects of the last sonata, caused Mme Verdurin, even when listening to the most heartrending music, to preserve a disdainfully impassive countenance, and even withdrew into privacy to swallow her two spoonfuls of aspirin. (2:936)

Despite the comic exaggerations of her behavior, we first become aware of her sinister powers when she turns against Swann because of his high social connections and destroys his relationship with Odette. Years later, after Odette marries Swann, she reappears as a rival when the two women host competing salons. Despite the rivalry, however, there are occasional suggestions of a past sexual relationship between them.

The Verdurins live in the rue Montalivet in the Faubourg Saint-Honoré, but after having been exclusively Paris-based throughout *Swann's Way*, in the second volume they rent a large country house, La Raspelière, from the Cambremers.

This permits them to become part of the Balbec social scene during the season. Mme Verdurin is slowly rising on the social scale and becoming a player. Under the guise of being obliged to invite her landlords to dinner in order to get a better rent the following year, she is secretly delighted to entertain the Marquis and Marquise de Cambremer at her soirees and to introduce them to her little clan. To reflect their evolving social position upon their return to Paris, the Verdurins purchase a new house, with electricity in every room, on the Quai Conti. They have made the big move from the bourgeois Faubourg Saint-Honoré on the right bank (Swann's way) across the river to the more aristocratic Faubourg Saint-Germain on the left bank (Guermantes way).

Despite her vulgarity and her relentless social climbing, Mme Verdurin does display a genuine appreciation of art and music, and her salon is increasingly attended by the leading musicians, writers, and artists of the day. While the Guermantes' salon attracts the famous and well established, the Verdurins' attract the rising stars and avant-garde. Just as Mme Verdurin had once been in the vanguard with her love of all things Oriental, now her support of the Ballet Russe, Nijinsky, and Stravinsky is a reflection of the growing French taste for all things Russian. Just as Proust himself attended the trial of Zola every day during the height of the Dreyfus Affair, so too does Mme Verdurin sit beside Mme Zola at the trial, immediately below the judges' bench. Her salon becomes a center for the Dreyfusards, in direct opposition to the Guermantes and the rival anti-Dreyfus salon of Odette Swann. Always in the vanguard, Mme Verdurin's salon had included Vinteuil, the leading composer, and Elstir, the leading painter, of the day. Like a bird building its nest with various discarded scraps, Mme Verdurin selected individuals from each political crisis or artistic revival in order to assemble her salon. Even after the Dreyfus Affair had ended, Anatole France remained in her salon.

With the help of Charlus, who is in love with one of her protégés, the violinist Morel, Mme Verdurin's social circle widens and she begins to entertain her neighbors from the Faubourg Saint-Germain. Just as she had previously separated Odette from Swann and banished Swann from the little clan, so she now conspires to separate Morel from Charlus and to have Charlus publicly humiliated. Following the denigration of Charlus, her social ascension is inexorable, and by 1916 she is referred to as one of the "queens of this war-time Paris."

An example of her power at this time was her breakfast croissant. In a wartime city where bread was strictly rationed and croissants were banned, Mme

Verdurin had Dr. Cottard prescribe for her specially made croissants to cure her daily “migraine.” The first time the special croissants were delivered, Mme Verdurin was reading a report in the morning newspaper about the sinking of the *Lusitania* and the loss of all lives. Although she observed that this was something even worse than a stage tragedy, the expression of deep satisfaction on her face while she read the tragic story reflected her deeper pleasure in the taste of croissant and coffee.

After the death of M. Verdurin, she married the Duc de Duras, and, after his death two years later, his cousin, the widowed Prince de Guermantes. Finally, with her monocle still firmly in place and her false teeth rattling, Mme Verdurin has become the leading light of the Faubourg Saint-Germain—and queen of all the bores.

Villeparisis, Madeleine, Marquise de

Daughter of Cyrus, Comte de Bouillon; aunt to the Duc as well as the Duchesse de Guermantes; great-aunt of Robert de Saint-Loup; and mistress of M. de Norpois. An old school friend of Marcel's grandmother, she is described by Odette de Crécy in *Swann's Way* as looking like a lavatory attendant or like an old charwoman. When she reappears at the Grand Hotel in Balbec in volume 2, she is still wearing the same black woolen dress and old-fashioned bonnet that had so upset Odette many years before. As aunt to Baron de Charlus as well as the Duchesse de Guermantes, she is a true aristocrat and knows everybody worth knowing in Europe. At Balbec she first introduces Marcel into the world of the Guermantes and describes her own childhood as daughter of the Comte and Comtesse de Bouillon. In their various country châteaux, her parents had entertained all the leading writers and artists of the previous generation.

During his first visit to Balbec, Marcel is always surprised by Mme de Villeparisis's knowledge of his father's daily activities—even if his father is away on a diplomatic tour of Spain with M. de Norpois. It is later that he discovered that Mme de Villeparisis and Norpois have been lovers for many years. Mme de Villeparisis makes no secret of their relationship, but Norpois, a dry and stuffy diplomat, prefers to be more discreet. After spending the day at Mme de Villeparisis's house, he would pick up a hat in the hallway before joining her guests in the drawing room so as to give the impression that he had just entered the house from the street. The trick usually worked unless one of the guests recognized his own hat.

Born Mlle de Bouillon into one of the oldest families in France, descendants of the ancient Tour d'Auvergne nobility, Madeleine was one of three daughters. Her two sisters made successful marriages into the Guermantes family, one becoming the mother of Basin, Charlus, and Marie, while the other sister became the mother of Oriane. Madeleine, however, pursued a different path. As Duchesse d'Havre by her first marriage, she conducted a succession of scandalous affairs that led to the ruin of many wealthy and prominent gentlemen. Her second marriage was to a village nobody, a M. Therion from Villeparisis. With no legal justification, Therion gives himself the title "Marquis de Villeparisis," which according to Charlus had been extinct for more than a hundred years.

In addition to being a true blue blood, she was also a bluestocking. Intelligent

and well educated as a young lady, she liked to shock those less educated than herself. As a result of her wild and unconventional youth, she was gradually rejected by most of respectable society other than family. Having already had two husbands, she had been de Norpois' mistress for more than twenty years when Marcel first met her at Balbec. At first Marcel assumed her low social position was because of her illicit relationship with Norpois. However, this did not make sense, especially in a world in which the smartest women boasted lovers far less respectable than he. This became even more puzzling when the Duchesse de Guermantes observed that even as a mistress her aunt "has long ceased to serve any practical purpose."

In fact, Mme Villeparisis is one of three elderly Parisian hostesses who, although extremely well bred and from the noblest families, have so disgraced themselves during their youth that they are now exiled from top society. The only people who will attend their salons are members of their family, who have no choice, and members of the bourgeoisie or provincial nobility, who have no idea. When Marcel states that dissolute conduct is not necessarily a barrier to social success, he is assured that what Mme Villeparisis had done in her youth was far beyond the pale, and she had been the ruin of an incalculable number of gentlemen.

Although her niece the Duchesse de Guermantes is a regular visitor, she has a very low opinion of Mme de Villeparisis. She compares the culinary standards of her aunt's kitchen to those in China, where the greatest delicacy served is a dish of completely rotten ortolan's eggs. The duchess also claims there is no more middle-class, solemn, drab, commonplace mind in Paris than her aunt's. This is a rather unfair judgment since it was Mme Villeparisis who had raised Oriane and Charlus when they were children. It is thanks to her that they both received such an excellent education, and it is from her aunt that Oriane inherited much of her celebrated wit.

In addition to her flower painting, Mme de Villeparisis keeps herself occupied writing her "Memoir" and maintaining the "School of Wit" at her salon. The description of the afternoon party she hosts in *The Guermantes Way* is one of the great set pieces in the novel. Possibly because she has known him well since he was a small boy, she appears to be the only member of the Guermantes clan to recognize Charlus's sexual orientation, and she tries to protect the young Marcel from his advances. Before dying in isolation, forgotten by the rest of the world, including Norpois, Mme de Villeparisis reappears briefly while Marcel and his mother are visiting Venice. Mme Sazerat, an old neighbor from Combray who

was staying in the same hotel, had wanted to see Mme de Villeparisis because, as a society beauty years earlier, she had driven Mme Sazerat's father wild with passion until he had squandered all his money on her and left his wife and daughter destitute. As a consolation, the daughter finally wants to take this opportunity to see the most beautiful woman of her father's generation and thus to finally understand why he had destroyed all their lives.

When Marcel identifies Mme de Villeparisis, sitting with M. de Norpois in the hotel dining room, Mme Sazerat is puzzled: she complains that she can only see an old gentleman and a "hideous, red-faced, old woman." Despite her School of Wit, it is Time, not Mme de Villeparisis, that has the last word.

Vinteuil

Retired piano teacher and famous composer. Vinteuil was much more of a composite figure than Bergotte or Elstir. Proust combined the music and personalities of Claude Debussy, Gabriel Fauré, César Franck, and Camille Saint-Saëns to create the composer Vinteuil. Proust's greatest friend and longtime lover was the respected composer Reynaldo Hahn, who would not only have educated Proust's ear to the subtleties of musical structure and language but would also have introduced him to all the leading composers and musicians of the day. Certainly in describing music, Proust had a genius for conveying the emotions and almost the sounds of what he heard.

Vinteuil is introduced in *Swann's Way* as a retired music teacher living near Combray. He is presented as a quiet and rather prudish old man whose only love in life is his daughter. When Swann meets him in the street in Combray he always has the feeling that there is something that he wants to ask but can never remember what it is. He invites M. Vinteuil to bring his daughter to the house in the hope he will remember what had been puzzling him by the time of their visit.

However, Vinteuil never does bring his daughter to Swann's house at Tansonville because he is tortured by the local gossip concerning her lesbianism. So Swann never gets the opportunity to ask the question that had been obsessing him for so long.

In "Swann in Love," which takes place many years before the rest of the novel, the Verdurins persuade Swann to listen to a sonata in F-sharp that they had discovered. Swann is delighted to recognize a little phrase in the music as something he had heard before but had never been able to track down. That evening at the Verdurins, hearing the music again made him feel as though he had accidentally met, in a friend's drawing room, a woman whom he had seen and admired in the street and had despaired of ever seeing again. He learns that the composer of the sonata is called Vinteuil.

The little phrase by Vinteuil quickly becomes the "national anthem" of Swann and Odette's love affair. Odette plays the little phrase (badly) for Swann on her piano and in later volumes she also plays it for Marcel. Swann subsequently hears it played at Mme de Saint-Euverte's, and Marcel also plays it for Albertine. The little phrase of Vinteuil becomes a running motif throughout all seven volumes of the novel. It acts as a metaphor for everything, from

unrequited love and happiness to the subconscious recollections of lost time. It even has the same effect on Swann as the famous cup of tea and madeleine had on Marcel.

Thus nothing resembled more closely than some such phrase of Vinteuil the peculiar pleasure which I had felt at certain moments in my life, when gazing, for instance at the steeples of Martinville, or at certain trees along a road near Balbec, or, more simply, at the beginning of this book, when I tasted a certain cup of tea. Like that cup of tea, all those sensations of light, the bright clamor, the boisterous colors that Vinteuil sent to us from the world in which he composed, paraded before my imagination, insistently but too rapidly for me to be able to apprehend it, something that I might compare to the perfumed silkiness of a geranium. (3:381)

Because Vinteuil's sonata had such an overwhelming influence on his life, Swann was never able to associate Vinteuil, the famous composer, with the little old piano teacher in Combray. The fact that they shared the same last name did puzzle him, however, and he always planned to ask him if they were related. That was the question that Swann always forgot to ask whenever he was in Combray.

Vinteuil himself dies very early in the novel, when Marcel is still a boy in Combray. Nobody imagined that the "modest writings of the retired village organist" would ever have any real value or that he would later be referred to as the greatest of modern composers, enjoying an extraordinary prestige.

Following his death, Vinteuil's daughter and her lesbian friend, as if to atone for the pain they had caused him, spend years deciphering his scribbled notes until they have finally restored his greatest composition: the septet. This masterwork gets its first public performance at Mme Verdurin's new salon in the Faubourg Saint-Germain, which is the dramatic scene of Charlus's downfall.

Proust's many descriptions of Vinteuil's music appear in all seven volumes of the novel and constitute some of his most beautiful and evocative writing. Just as Bergotte's books survived his death and became the symbol of his resurrection, so, too, it was Vinteuil's music that survived long after the man himself had died. It is art alone that can give immortality and defeat the ravages of Time.

Vinteuil's Music

The origin of the little phrase in the andante from Vinteuil's Sonata for Violin and Piano has been variously attributed to several of Proust's contemporaries. Possible sources include the seven-note tune that opens Debussy's Quartet, the opening ninth chord of Franck's Sonata for Piano and Violin in A Major, the rising phrases that begin the Adagio of Saint-Saëns's Sonata for Piano and Violin no. 1 in D Minor, and Fauré's Ballade in F-sharp Major as well as his Sonata for Piano and Violin, but nobody is absolutely sure. Also worth noting is Franck's String Quartet in D Major. Its cyclical structure, recalling themes from section to section, is an apt musical parallel to the form of Proust's novel. Proust first heard it in 1916, and sensing its deep relevance to his writing, he hired the musicians to come to his apartment late at night and perform it for him, alone, while he lay in bed drinking beer and eating ice cream from the Ritz.

Just as looking through a book of impressionist paintings is a wonderful accompaniment to a reading of this novel, so, too, is the experience of listening to a selection of the above composers. Mark Calkins at www.tempsperdu.com gives direct links to some of these pieces so that it is possible to listen to them on the Internet.

Just as it is futile (and insulting to the author) to try to define a single individual as the source for one of Proust's characters, it is also futile to select a single piece of music for Vinteuil's sonata. The little phrase is described in so many different ways that no single piece of music matches all of the descriptions. Again and again throughout the novel Proust describes the music with such visual and sensual images that the reader is convinced he is listening and not reading. The fragrance of roses, the slow swellings of a wave, the stillness of a Dutch painting are all images with which he creates the magic of Vinteuil's music.

He began, as always, with the sustained tremolos of the violin part which for several bars was heard alone, filling the whole foreground; until suddenly it seemed to draw aside, and—as in those interiors by Pieter de Hooch which are deepened by the narrow frame of a half opened door, in the far distance, of a different color, velvety with the radiance of some intervening light—the little phrase appeared, dancing, pastoral, interpolated, episodic, belonging to another world. It rippled past, simple and immortal, scattering on every side the bounties of its grace, with the same ineffable smile; but Swann thought that he could now discern in it

some disenchantment. It seemed to be aware how vain, how hollow was the happiness to which it showed the way. In its airy grace there was the sense of something over and done with, like the mood of philosophic detachment which follows an outburst of vain regret. (1:238)

One evening when Proust was entertaining friends in his apartment and Reynaldo Hahn was playing the piano, Proust asked him to play “the little phrase.” One of the friends later asked Reynaldo what exactly the “little phrase” was. “Most of it,” said Reynaldo, “is a passage from Saint-Saëns’ *Sonata in D Minor*, but Marcel has embroidered it with things he has remembered from Franck, Fauré and even Wagner.”

In a letter to the French writer Jacques de Lacretelle written in 1921, Proust confided, “To whatever extent I make use of reality—actually, a very slight extent—(starting at the end) at the Saint-Euverte soirée, the little phrase of the sonata is, and I have never told this to anyone; the charming but infinitely mediocre phrase of a sonata for piano and violin by Saint-Saëns, a musician I don’t like. (I will show you the exact passage, which recurs several times and which was the triumph of Jacques Thibaud.) At the same soirée, a little later on, I shouldn’t be surprised if, in speaking of the little phrase, I had thought of the ‘Good Friday-Spell.’ Again, at this same soirée when the piano and violin sigh like two birds answering each other’s call, I thought of the Franck sonata, whose quartet will appear in subsequent volumes. The tremolos that overlay the little phrase at the Verdurins were suggested to me by a prelude to Wagner’s *Lohengrin*, but the prelude itself, at that moment, was suggested by something of Schubert. At that same soirée at Verdurin’s there is a ravishing piano piece of Fauré.”

Elsewhere, in a letter to his friend Montesquiou, Proust described the little phrase as the “sort of music a pederast might hum while raping a choir-boy.”

Vinteuil, Mlle

Lesbian daughter of the retired piano teacher in Combray.

Proust, that most subtle and delicate of writers, could also be unmistakably direct. Old Vinteuil's daughter on her first entrance is immediately described as having a "boyish appearance" and a "gruff voice." And yet one could see beneath the mannish face the finer features of a young woman in tears.

As a young boy, Marcel happens to see a scene of lesbian passion through the window of Mlle Vinteuil's house that culminates with her lover spitting on the photograph of her father, the recently deceased piano teacher. Yet despite the sadism of this scene and the cruelty displayed to the memory of the man who adored her, there is a delicate sensitivity inside Mlle Vinteuil, hidden by the vicious young woman she longed to be thought. Deep down there was a young girl who fought back against the rough and swaggering trouper that she presented to the world.

The memory of this sadistic scene of lesbian love lies buried deep in the narrator's subconscious for many years until Albertine unexpectedly reveals that she had spent much of her youth with Vinteuil's daughter and her older friend, whom she always called her two big sisters. Though Mlle Vinteuil and her friend seldom appear again in the novel, they are often mentioned, and always as the very epitome of lesbian lust. Just the idea that Albertine might meet them again at Balbec is enough for Marcel to reverse all his plans to break up with Albertine and decide to marry her instead.

Finally, the shy and suppliant inner maiden is released by art and is redeemed by her father's lost music. Vinteuil's daughter and her friend gradually transcribed all the notes and jottings that Vinteuil had left behind in Combray after his death. It is thanks to their work and dedication that Vinteuil's true genius is finally revealed, and his great septet is performed at the Verdurins' grand soiree.

The words of Marcel's mother at the time of Vinteuil's death, so many years earlier, now appear prophetic: "'Poor M. Vinteuil,' my mother would say, 'he lived and died for his daughter, without getting his reward. Will he get it now, I wonder, and in what form? It can only come to him from her.'" (1:173)

PART THREE

The World of Proust

A Brief Life of Marcel Proust

Marcel Proust strongly believed that a writer should be judged exclusively on the evidence of his written work and not upon the facts of his life. The French critic Sainte-Beuve had inspired a school of critics in the nineteenth century, *l'homme et l'oeuvre*, who devoted as much study to a writer's life and letters as to his actual writing in order to form an understanding of his work. Indeed, *À la recherche du temps perdu* evolved out of the essay *Against Saint-Beuve*, which specifically criticized this mixture of the writer's art with his life. In his essay, Proust is very specific: "Saint-Beuve's work adds nothing to our understanding of a writer. The famous technique of not separating the author from his work which made him the leading critic of the nineteenth century ignores what should be obvious to anyone upon reflection, that a book is produced by a different person than the one whom we see in his daily life with his strengths and his weaknesses as a man." Proust argued that the "different person" who had created the work could only be understood by studying the text of his writing, not the incidents of his life.

Proust provides many illustrations of this within the novel. Swann, for example, who so loved the music of Vinteuil, was unable to imagine it being written by the humble piano teacher of Combray. Likewise, Marcel was unable to reconcile the beautiful novels of Bergotte with the myopic little man with a red nose curled like a snail shell who had written them, while the audiences at the opera to whom Berma represented glamour and fantasy could never imagine the sordid reality of her home life. To judge Elstir by the simpering foolishness of his youth or by the bourgeois domesticity of his later years would be to ignore the revolutionary creativity demonstrated in his use of color, light, and perspective—which is his only true measure and monument.

Be that as it may, many readers feel that no other writer of fiction so closely entwined his own fictional imaginings with his own well-documented life as did Marcel Proust and the nameless hero of his novel. It can be argued that the life of the narrator in *In Search of Lost Time* so closely parallels that of its author that even the places where Proust lived become significant and worthy of study.

Place-Names: The Places

Valentin Louis George Eugène Marcel Proust was born in a house belonging to his mother's uncle, Louis Weil, at 96, rue de La Fontaine, Auteuil (16th arrondissement), a wealthy suburb of Paris, on July 10, 1871. Uncle Louis was a wealthy Jewish manufacturer of porcelain buttons with a factory and a shop in the 10th arrondissement, as well as a large and fashionable apartment at 102, Boulevard Haussmann, in the 8th arrondissement, where he lived. Uncle Louis had a mistress called Laure Hayman, who was one of the models for Odette de Crécy and might also have been a mistress of Marcel's father, Dr. Adrien Proust. (It has been suggested that she was even a mistress of Proust himself.) Louis Weil remained a bachelor all his life and provided the model for Marcel's naughty uncle Adolphe, who famously entertained the lady in pink in *Swann's Way*.

When Marcel was just two years old the family moved to a first-floor apartment at 9, Boulevard Malesherbes, in the 8th arrondissement close to the Madeleine church. Although Marcel was to describe it in *Swann's Way* as "one of the ugliest parts of Paris," it was an extremely central and fashionable area, and the Proust family remained there for the next twenty-seven years. Except for his first two and final three years, Marcel was to live in the 8th arrondissement his entire life and, as the map of Paris following this chapter makes clear, much of *In Search of Lost Time* takes place there.

The 8th arrondissement—the Faubourg Saint-Honoré—was very haute bourgeois and popular with successful professionals, bankers, government ministers, and doctors like Marcel's father. It was also popular with Bonaparte nobility from the first and second empires. But all his life Marcel looked south, across the river, to the 7th arrondissement of Saint-Germain, where the nobility of the ancien régime had built their great town houses and hotels, hidden behind high walls. High society was referred to as the Faubourg Saint-Germain. If the 8th was "Swann's way," then the 7th was the "Guermantes way," and Marcel yearned to be there. In some ways *In Search of Lost Time* is a chronicle of the decline of the Faubourg Saint-Germain with all its aristocratic traditions and the rise of the bourgeois Faubourg Saint-Honoré with its "new money" and lack of tradition.

On October 1, 1900, when Marcel was twenty-nine, the family moved to 45, rue de Courcelles, on the corner of rue Monceau. Close to their previous home,

this much larger apartment was no less socially acceptable, and Marcel continued to host elegant dinner parties just as he had done while living on Boulevard Malesherbes. Hosting fashionable dinner parties in his parents' home did have some bizarre consequences, and on one occasion Oscar Wilde was so surprised and unnerved to find himself confronted with Proust's parents that he spent the evening hiding in the lavatory. Still living at home on an allowance, Marcel was widely regarded as a very eccentric man, even by his indulgent family. He would not emerge from his bed until late afternoon and would not return to bed till dawn. When he did leave the house to socialize, he would be swathed in layers of fur coats and mufflers, which he would often continue to wear at the dinner table.

Marcel's father died on November 26, 1903, and his mother followed his father in less than two years, dying painfully of uremia and leaving Marcel alone on September 26, 1905, at the age of thirty-four. For two months after the death of his mother he was completely overcome and remained locked in his room, an isolation followed by six weeks in a private clinic.



Proust's mother, Jeanne Weil Proust, in 1904, the year before she died (PHOTOGRAPH BY PAUL NADAR)

With the death of Uncle Louis in 1896, Marcel's mother, with other family members, had inherited the large apartment at 102, Boulevard Haussmann. Following the death of his mother, Marcel moved into the apartment on December 27, 1906. There were no more dinner parties and, at the age of thirty-

five, Marcel became a virtual recluse, starting work on *In Search of Lost Time*, which he continued for the rest of his life. To guard against the noise from the busy Boulevard Haussmann, in 1909 Marcel had the significantly named architect Louis Parent line the walls with cork, while the windows were closed to keep out the fresh air and the shades drawn to exclude the daylight.

In 1919 his aunt Amélie Weil, with no prior warning, sold the whole apartment and Marcel was forced to move. Temporarily homeless, he stayed for a while in the apartment of a friend, the actress Rejane, in rue Laurent-Pichat, which he hated for a variety of reasons. Among them was the fact that the apartment had noisy neighbors who made love with a violent frenzy, occasions that later inspired the memorable encounter between Jupien and Charlus in *Cities of the Plain*.

At the age of forty-eight Marcel finally left the 8th arrondissement and moved a few blocks away to 44, rue Hamelin in the 16th, just south of the Arc de Triomphe. Ironically, rue Hamelin is almost a continuation of rue La Pérouse, which is where Uncle Louis' mistress, Laure Hayman, lived and where Marcel had placed Odette de Crécy at number 4 in the first volume. Swann was so infatuated with Odette at one point that even the name of the street where she lived became magical to him. He would eat at the restaurant Lapérouse just because of the similarity of its name to the street, rue La Pérouse, where she lived.

Three years later, on November 18, 1922, Marcel Proust died in bed, just a few steps away from the home of his imaginary hero's great love.

Marcel's father was the son of a shopkeeper in the small provincial town of Illiers near Chartres, about sixty miles south of Paris. Each year Dr. Adrien would take his wife and two sons for the annual vacation to stay with his family at his elder sister Elizabeth Amiot's house on the rue Saint-Esprit. Today the house is a Proust museum, open to the public. Elizabeth's husband, Jules, built a small park near his house that he called the Pré-Catelan, after the park with same name in the Bois de Boulogne in Paris. For Proust and his brother, Robert, both parks conjured powerful memories of their childhood.



Proust's father, Adrien Proust (PHOTOGRAPH BY PAUL NADAR)

In his imagination and in his book, Marcel transformed Illiers into Combray, and the similarity is so close that the town has since been officially renamed Illiers-Combray. Perhaps because of Proust's genius at making his own memories fuse with those of the reader's, visiting Illiers-Combray today and watching the water lilies along the banks of the river is almost like visiting your own childhood. You feel you have come home.

Proust's mother's large family was based in Paris, and Proust was born in his maternal uncle's home in Auteuil on the outskirts of the city. The house was set in a large parklike garden that Uncle Louis had planted with hawthorns and a pond, just like Uncle Jules's park in Illiers. The young Marcel spent more time among the hawthorns of the Auteuil garden than he ever did in Illiers. In his letters, Proust referred to both the park in Illiers and the garden at Auteuil as remaining vivid in his memory, and both obviously inspired his rhapsodic descriptions of the countryside around Combray in the novel.

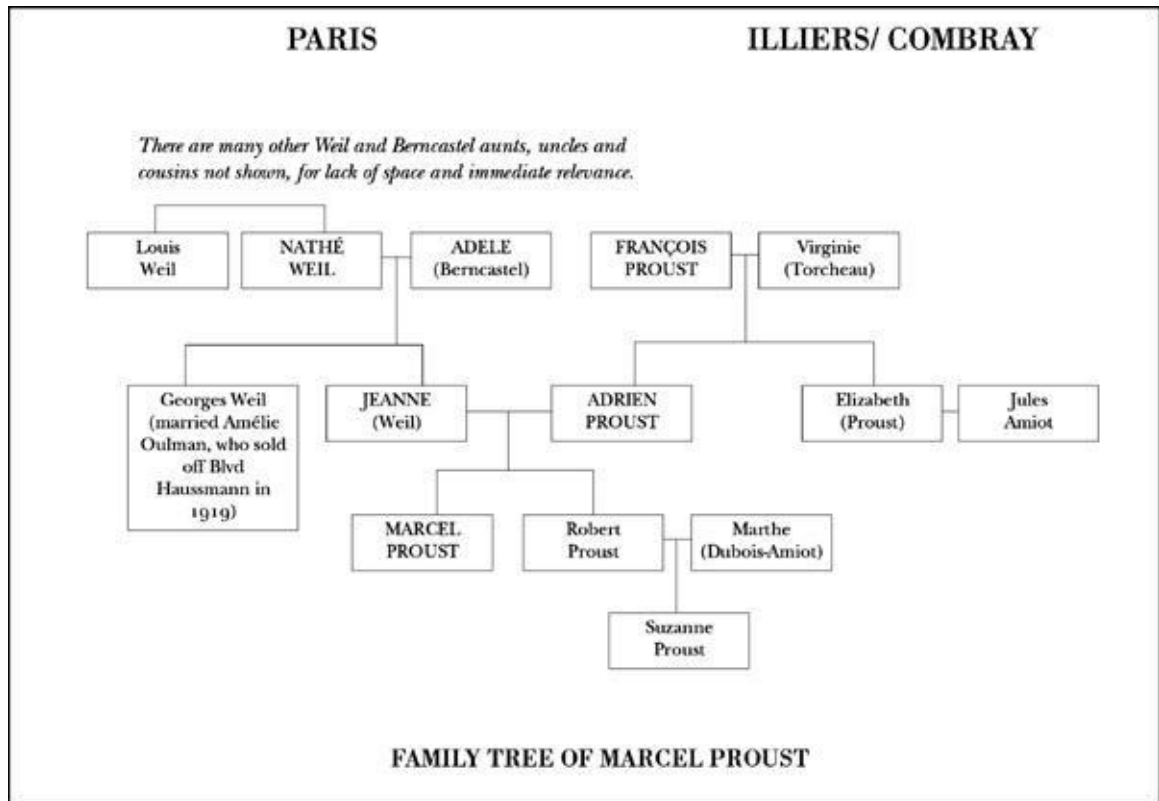
Another small town that Marcel immortalized was Cabourg on the Normandy coast. The town has not officially renamed itself as Balbec (yet), but signs of Proust are everywhere, and the Grand Hotel is just as Proust described it. He continued to vacation at Cabourg for the rest of his life.

The only other places of importance mentioned in *In Search of Lost Time* are Venice, which he visited with his mother in 1900, and Doncières (Orleans), where he spent his eighteenth year with the seventy-sixth Infantry Regiment doing his military service. Marcel's visit to Venice with his mother is described in *The Fugitive*, and his military experience is described through his visit to Robert de Saint-Loup in *The Guermentes Way*.

Family

Marcel Proust was born into a respectable bourgeois family in Paris. His brother, Robert, was born two years later and eventually became a successful doctor like their father. The two brothers remained close all their lives, but it is interesting that the narrator of *In Search of Lost Time* does not have a brother. Marcel's mother, Jeanne Weil, came from an extremely cultured, wealthy, and prominent Jewish family, but Marcel and his brother were raised as Catholics. His father, Adrien, was a well-known and successful professor at the Faculty of Medicine, famous for having invented the "cordon sanitaire" to combat outbreaks of cholera, which still ravaged Europe. Through his job at the ministry, his father knew most members of the government, and Marcel's public support of Dreyfus was later to cause great social and political embarrassment.

Although it is obvious from the lyrical descriptions of Combray that Marcel had fond memories of the family vacations in Illiers, his relationship with his father was always distant—as portrayed in the novel. The father's family in Illiers consisted only of his widowed mother; his invalid sister, Elizabeth; and her husband, Jules. Life in Illiers was somewhat austere and provincial and centered on the church. By contrast, the mother's family in Paris was large and sophisticated. There were uncles and cousins with lively dinner-table conversations and an innate love of books and education. Marcel was much closer to his warm and witty mother, and her death devastated him. Perhaps this is the reason that his mother's large family, along with the hawthorn bushes from the Weil garden at Auteuil, were transposed by Proust to his father's home in Illiers/Combray.



In the novel, Marcel’s mother remains somewhat vague and undefined, and Proust’s true feelings for her were transferred to Marcel’s grandmother. Just as in the novel, Marcel’s mother, Jeanne Weil, and her own mother, Adèle Weil, were extremely close, and throughout their lives they read and quoted to each other from the letters of Mme de Sévigné.

Education and Professional Life

From the age of twelve, Marcel attended the prestigious Lycée Concordat in central Paris. After leaving school in 1889 he did a year's military service in Orleans. In 1890 he registered in the Faculty of Law at the Sorbonne, and in 1893 he began a degree in literature, switching to philosophy in 1894. One of his professors was the philosopher Henri Bergson, who, coincidentally, married Proust's cousin Louise Neurburger in 1891 and had a profound influence on his thinking. Bergson's much-acclaimed book *Matter and Memory* was significant in its emphasis on the importance of memory in the formation of the self and consciousness, which despite his denials had a major influence on Proust. Proust also successfully passed a competitive exam to work in the National Library—a position he never bothered to pursue. Apart from his writing, Marcel never had a job and dedicated himself to a life as a “boulevardier” and man-about-town.

For most of his life, Marcel was a determined social butterfly, attending all the most fashionable soirees, accepted in the best salons, and hosting elegant dinner parties at his parents' apartment. Even before he left school Marcel had begun his energetic social climbing and was already being received in various fashionable salons. At the age of nineteen, in the salon of Mme Armand de Caillavet, he was introduced to the celebrated author Anatole France, who was to provide a certain model for Bergotte. Three years later he met Count Robert de Montesquiou-Fezensac, scion of one of the oldest families in France. Montesquiou opened the doors for Marcel into the highest rungs of the French aristocracy and the salons of Saint-Germain. One of the count's ancestors had been the model for the swashbuckling D'Artagnan of Dumas' *The Three Musketeers*, and he himself had been the model for Huysmans's decadent hero of his quintessential fin de siècle novel *A Rebours*. Montesquiou was a well-known symbolist poet and occasionally wrote articles on aesthetics. In one of them he referred to Marcel by name, which resulted in Jean Lorrain, a literary critic, referring to Marcel as “one of those small-time fops in literary heat.” Publicly insulted, Marcel was obliged to defend his honor by fighting a duel in 1897. Pistol shots were exchanged, both missed, and honor was restored. Unfortunately, Jean Lorrain died seven years before *Swann's Way* was published and so he never knew how misdirected his insult, like his bullet, was to prove.

In later years, Montesquiou never forgave Marcel for portraying him in his novel as the flamboyant homosexual Baron de Charlus.

Drugs and Sex

Following his first asthma attack at the age of nine, Marcel remained a sickly hypochondriac all his life. His condition was exacerbated by a history of heavy drug abuse and his homosexuality. From an early age his parents were concerned about his obsessive masturbation. After vainly trying to persuade Marcel to desist from his solitary vice for at least four days, his father gave him ten francs to visit a brothel in the hopes that this would cure him of his habit. The visit was not a success, as the seventeen-year-old Marcel explained in a letter to his grandfather, Nathé Weil.

My dear grandpapa:

I'm appealing to your kindness for the sum of 13 francs that I would like to ask Monsieur Nathan for, but that Mamma prefers that I ask you for. Here is why. I so needed to see a woman to cure my bad habit of masturbating that papa gave me 10 francs to go to a brothel. But first in my agitated state I broke the chamber pot, 3 francs, and second, in this same agitated state, I was unable to screw. So here I am, still awaiting each hour 10 francs to satisfy myself and in addition, 3 francs for the chamber pot.

With a steady and determined diet of caffeine (one of his hosts recorded his drinking seventeen cups of coffee in an evening), opiates, barbiturates, amyl nitrate, and pure adrenaline, Marcel Proust probably consumed more drugs than any other figure in European literature. The vivid and hallucinatory memories that recur throughout the novel were obviously inspired by something stronger than madeleines and herbal tea. “Not far from thence is the secret garden in which kinds of sleep, so different from one another, induced by datura, by Indian hemp, by the multiple extracts of ether—the sleep of belladonna, of opium, of Valerian—grow like unknown flowers whose petals remain closed until the day when the predestined stranger comes to open them with a touch and to liberate for long hours the aroma of their peculiar dreams for the delectation of an amazed and spellbound being....” The reference to datura and valerian, two obscure but powerful hallucinogens, shows that Proust had more than a casual knowledge of drugs and an interest that reached beyond merely treating his asthma.

While his drug taking was fairly open, if not blatant, his homosexuality—for a

variety of social and legal reasons—was kept hidden. He had many discreet affairs with various aristocratic and artistic men, including the concert pianist and composer Reynaldo Hahn, with whom he remained close for the rest of his life. After he retreated into seclusion following his mother's death, he was able to hire his lovers as secretaries, valets, and chauffeurs. One of his greatest loves was Alfred Agostinelli, whom he met at Cabourg in 1907. He employed Alfred as his chauffeur until 1914, when he was killed in an airplane accident. It has been suggested that much of their liaison was sublimated into Marcel's relationship with Albertine, whom Marcel first met at Balbec/Cabourg and who may in some ways have been based on Alfred.

Like Charlus in the novel, Proust spent a lot of time in male brothels, especially one belonging to an unsavory friend, Albert Le Cuziat, located in the Hôtel Marigny on rue de l'Arcade. Proust possibly helped finance this establishment and furnished it with the family chaise longue. There are also accounts that he displayed photographs of his mother at this establishment, just as Mlle Vinteuil permitted her friend to spit on the photograph of her father. The Hôtel Marigny was obviously the model for Jupien's establishment in the final volume and also the inspiration for the gift of the aunt's sofa to the brothel where Marcel first met Rachel. Like a leitmotif of his secret life, rue de l'Arcade runs between Boulevard Malesherbes, where Proust spent his youth, and Boulevard Haussmann, where he finally wrote his novel.

When Monty Python's character in the famous "All-England Summarize Proust Competition" listed his hobbies as "strangling small animals, golf and masturbating," he might well have been referring to Proust's own form of relaxation. In his memoir of his relationship with Proust, André Gide describes how Proust would visit brothels and pay young boys to strip and masturbate in front of him while he lay in bed beneath a sheet and did the same. If the visual stimulation was not sufficient to bring him satisfaction, he would order two starved rats to be placed in a cage and bring himself to climax while the animals tore each other to shreds. According to Gide this reflected Proust's "preoccupation with combining, for the sake of orgasm, the most heterogeneous sensations and emotions."

The Writer

Proust later claimed that he started working on his first book, *Jean Santeuil*, at the age of fourteen but did not formally start writing it until ten years later, in 1895. He abandoned the work in 1899, and much of *Jean Santeuil* was eventually incorporated into *In Search of Lost Time*. His first book, a collection of short stories, was self-published in 1896 with the title *Les plaisirs et les jours* and included a preface by Anatole France. About this time he also began writing articles for *Le Figaro* and cofounded a literary revue called *Le Banquet* to which he regularly contributed articles.

When the Dreyfus Affair burst on the French scene in November 1897, Marcel became a committed Dreyfus supporter and, along with Anatole France, actively helped organize the “Petition of the Intellectuals.” Attending court for every session of Zola’s trial, until Marcel was taking a principled but controversial stand in opposition to his family and most of his social circle.

From 1899 until the death of his mother, Marcel became a devoted follower of John Ruskin, the English art critic. With his mother’s help he translated some of his books and visited the places in France and Italy that Ruskin had described. Proust’s descriptions of Norman churches in the second volume of *In Search of Lost Time* owes much to Ruskin, as did his visit to Venice with his mother—both in real life and in the novel.

Although he wrote newspaper and magazine articles for most of his adult life, his output increased dramatically following the death of his parents. Many of the essays of social and literary criticism he wrote during this period became incorporated in the great novel, which he finally began writing in 1908. Between the death of his mother in 1905 and August 16, 1908, when he wrote to Mme Straus that he had “begun—and finished—a whole long book,” Marcel appears to have found his literary voice and vocation. In fact, he had completed “Combray” and the conclusion, as well as most of the structure and most of the characters that were eventually to be part of the final novel. In Notebook 3, which dates from that summer, there are eight different versions of the initial awakening scene.

In January 1909 he actually had a surge of memory when dipping a piece of dry toast into a cup of tea. He described the incident in his extended essay *Against Sainte-Beuve*; which by July 1909 it had evolved into its final form as a

novel, and the dry toast had evolved into a madeleine cake. Not only did Proust spend the first twenty-nine years of his life in a house close to the Madeleine church, but Illiers/Combray was on the historic pilgrims' route to Saint Jacques de Compostelle, and the scallop shell, like the petite madeleine cake, was a symbol of the pilgrimage. Madeleines were being sold on rue Saint-Jacques outside the bedroom window of Aunt Léonie for centuries before Proust made them so famous. The madeleine theme was further expanded in his choice of George Sand's book *François le Champi*, which his mother reads to him in bed at the beginning of the novel and which he finds again in the library of the Prince de Guermantes in the final volume. Sand's incestuous mother, who marries her adopted son in the book, was called Madeleine. The transformation of the dry toast into a petite madeleine therefore had great symbolic significance from the very beginning.

The book was originally conceived as an essay titled *Against Saint-Beuve*, but by 1909 it had already taken on its final form as a novel. It was in 1909 that he lined the walls of his apartment with cork and dedicated the rest of his life to completing what was provisionally renamed *Les intermittences du coeur*. In the final title, *À la recherche du temps perdu*, the French expression "temps perdu" means not only lost time but also wasted time.

Proust had originally planned the whole structure of the novel in three volumes: *Swann's Way*, *The Guermantes Way*, and *Time Regained*. By 1912 he had completed the first volume and had paid a secretary to type it into some seven hundred pages. Finding a publisher proved difficult: Proust was rejected by three. The first publisher, Fasquelle, returned the manuscript on Christmas Eve 1912 after a devastating and heartbreaking report by the editor Jacques Normand: "Reading cannot be sustained for more than five or six pages ... one can set down as a positive fact that there will never be a reader hardy enough to follow along for as much as a quarter of an hour, the nature of the author's sentences doing nothing to improve matters. At the end of seven hundred and twelve pages, one has absolutely no idea what this manuscript is about. What is it trying to achieve? What does it mean? Where is it trying to head? Impossible to answer any of these questions! Impossible to say anything about it!"

The second publishing house rejected the book without even reading it. André Gide, who was on the editorial board of the well-respected *Nouvelle Revue Française*, knew Proust socially and dismissed him and his thick, heavy novel as the work of a lightweight snob and social butterfly. Proust learned of this second rejection on the same Christmas Eve, December 24, 1912, that he heard from

Fasquelle. Of course, Gide was to later apologize profusely and became one of the novel's greatest champions.

M. Humblot, the director of the third publishing house, Ollendorff, did at least struggle to read the first section of the novel. But he finally reported, in apparent bafflement, that "Maybe I'm as thick as two short planks, but I cannot understand how a man can take thirty pages to describe how he turns about in his bed before he finally falls asleep." The novel was again rejected. Proust wrote feelingly to a friend, "You must feel as I do, that our actual profession seems easy, but trying to get into print, dealing with publishers, seem to be overwhelming tasks. It was so easy to write these volumes, and all the more enjoyable for the demands they made. But how difficult it will be to get them published."

Marcel finally paid to have the book published at his own expense by a new publishing house named Grasset. He described his work as "a sort of novel... though so complex in structure that I'm afraid no one will notice and it will seem like a series of digressions." The first copies of *Swann's Way* went on sale on November 14, 1913, nine months before the start of World War I. The second volume was being set in proof by the publisher when war was actually declared.

Like the hero of his novel, Proust was delighted to have his articles published in *Le Figaro*, which is why he dedicated *Swann's Way* to Gaston Calmette, an editor at *Le Figaro*, who had been a quiet supporter of Proust for many years and who had encouraged his writing. Unfortunately, Calmette was not to enjoy the honor for long. In March 1914, a few months after the publication of *Swann's Way*, Calmette received a visit from the wife of the minister of finance, whom he had been attacking for his pacifist stance against Germany in the pages of *Le Figaro*.

"Do you know why I am here Monsieur?" she asked him.

"No Madame," Calmette replied.

Pulling out a Browning automatic, the outraged wife fired four shots, killing him on the spot. The minister, Joseph Caillaux, had to resign his post the next day, but during a spectacular trial later that year, his wife was acquitted. Proust did not need to look far to find inspiration for his fiction.

During the war, due to the shortage of paper and the need for lead to make armaments, nothing could be printed. Proust had to wait a further six years before he was able to finally publish his second volume—even though it was already in the hands of the publisher and the final part of his novel was already

completed in draft format. He therefore started adding to the structure of the novel. Between the first and second volumes he added a completely new volume, *Within a Budding Grove*, which introduced the important character Albertine. Between what were originally the second and third volumes, he inserted another three volumes and more than doubled the novel in length. The new additions were more radical in their exploration of the homosexuality of Charlus, the lesbianism of Albertine, and the destructive jealousy at the heart of all relationships—which can only be resolved by death. It should be noted that these sections were written during the period leading up to and following the death of his chauffeur, Alfred Agostinelli, with whom Proust had conducted a passionate and stormy affair since their first meeting at Cabourg. Having run away from Proust's home, where he felt like a prisoner, Alfred was killed in a plane crash using the name Marcel Swann.

Following the critical success of *Swann's Way*, Proust changed from being an unknown writer forced to pay for his own publication to being an author fought over by all the publishing houses in Paris. Fasquelle, Ollendorff, and the NRF all competed for the honor of publishing the second volume, and eventually Gallimard, the most prestigious house in Paris, became—and remains—his publisher to this day.

When the second volume, *Within a Budding Grove*, was published by Gallimard after the war, it was received with such critical and popular acclaim that Proust was awarded the Prix Goncourt in 1919—France's highest literary honor. The following year he received France's greatest civilian honor—the Légion d'honneur. One wonders what M. Humblot and M. Normand thought about that.

Despite the apparently accidental creation of the novel over the space of many years and despite the apparent randomness of its construction, there is in fact a rigorous purity to its vast design that has often been compared to a cathedral. André Maurois wrote: "Proust's great work has the simplicity and majesty of a cathedral." Jean-Yves Tadie, perhaps the greatest living French authority on Proust, entitled one of his books *Proust: La cathédrale du temps*.

Proust wrote to Jean de Gaigneron in 1919, when five volumes still remained to be published, "When you speak to me of cathedrals, I cannot but feel touched at the evidence of an intuition which has led you to guess what I have never mentioned to anybody, and here set down in writing for the first time—that I once planned to give each part of my books a succession of titles, such as *Porch*, *Windows in the Apse*, etc ..., so as to defend myself in advance against the sort

of stupid criticism which has been made to the effect that my books lack construction.” From page one of volume one, Proust fully understood the symmetry of his blueprint, and like the vast and complex gothic masterpieces that tower over Rouen and Chartres, each piece of the construction is solid and deliberately placed with a precision that is perfectly balanced within the grand design.

From the time he began the novel in 1909, Marcel seldom left his apartment. Friends would be summoned to visit him in his bedroom after midnight, and he would continue talking until dawn the next day. When he did emerge into the outside world, it was as a grotesque figure, filled with drugs and wrapped in blankets and overcoats.

Two famous excursions are worth mentioning. Invited to attend a dinner party at the Hotel Majestic with Diaghilev, Picasso, Cocteau, Stravinsky, and James Joyce, among others, Marcel managed to drag himself out of the house. The irony is that neither of the two greatest novelists of the twentieth century had ever read the other’s work and knew nothing about each other. Joyce later described the meeting to a friend:

“Our talk consisted entirely of the word ‘Non.’ Proust asked me if I knew the Duc de so and so. I said ‘Non.’ Our hostess asked Proust if he had read such and such a piece of *Ulysses*. Proust said ‘Non.’ And so on.” Apparently the only subject upon which these two great giants of Western literature were able to share an understanding concerned the painful obduracy of their bowels.

Before his death Proust attended an exhibition of Vermeer paintings and was particularly keen to see the famous work *View of Delft*, with its “little patch of yellow wall.” Proust anticipated this visit in *The Captive* (3:185) when his fictional writer, Bergotte, emerged from his sickbed to visit the Vermeer exhibition and, overcome with emotion in front of the *View of Delft*, fell to his knees on the floor and slowly died. “‘All the same,’ he said to himself, ‘I shouldn’t like to be the headline news of this exhibition for the evening papers.’” The last known photograph of Proust before his death was taken in May 1921, standing outside the Vermeer exhibition at the Jeu de Paume, where he had gone to see the *View of Delft*.

The first four volumes had already been successfully published when Proust succumbed to pneumonia in 1922. He had added the death of Bergotte to volume 5, *The Captive*, and was feverishly editing the manuscript of the final three volumes when he died in his bed on November 18.

According to Francois Mauriac, who visited the death chamber, the last word that Proust ever wrote was upon a soiled envelope that had previously contained tisane—used to make the tea that, when drunk with a piece of madeleine, was so famously to inspire all those memories of his past and imagined life. The actual word that he had written upon the envelope, Proust’s final word, was *Forcheville* — the name of Charles Swann’s rival and usurper. As Mauriac observed: “To the very end, his creatures had been feeding on his substance, had drained him dry of what remained of life.”

Jean Cocteau visited Proust’s apartment to view the body after his death and noticed the unfinished manuscripts piled beside the bed. Years later, in *Poésie Critique*, he famously observed, “That pile of paper on his left was still alive, like watches ticking on the wrists of dead soldiers.”

In her memoirs, Proust’s housekeeper, Céleste Albaret, wrote that a few days after the death, a strange thing happened: “Coming out of the apartment... I suddenly noticed the window of the bookshop nearby on rue Hamelin. It was all lit up, and behind the glass were the published works of M. Proust, arranged in threes. Once again I was dazzled by his prescience and his certainty. I thought of the passage in his book in which he speaks of the death of the writer Bergotte: ‘They buried him, but all through the night of the funeral, in the lighted windows, his books arranged three by three kept watch like angels with outspread wings, as if they were, for him who was no more, the symbol of his resurrection.’” (*Monsieur Proust* by Céleste Albaret)

Proust was buried in Père Lachaise Cemetery four days later.

Marcel Proust's Paris

Though Combray and Balbec play important roles in Proust's novel, the center of his universe is always Paris; the different neighborhoods of the city play as important a role as some of the characters. As the map on page 354 makes clear, Proust's life and the action of his novel all center on a small part of Paris: the 8th arrondissement, the Faubourg Saint-Honoré.

Just as Combray can be divided between the bourgeois Méséglise way and the aristocratic Guermantes way, so too can Paris be divided between the bourgeois Faubourg Saint-Honoré on the right (north) bank of the Seine and the aristocratic Faubourg Saint-Germain on the left (south) bank.

Most of the Guermantes and their aristocratic friends live south of the river in Faubourg Saint-Germain where the eighteenth-century nobility had built their grand palaces and "hotels" after the Sun King tore down the city walls to allow Paris to expand. The Prince and Princess de Guermantes have their palace on rue de Varenne, Baron de Guermantes lives on rue de la Chaise, and another cousin lives on rue Vaneau, all in the same neighborhood south of the river. Charlus himself lives close by on Quai Malaquais, also on the left bank of the river, next to the noble old Hotel Chimay—now the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts. Even the real-life model for Charlus, Robert de Montesquiou, lived in his father's vast mansion on nearby Quai d'Orsay.

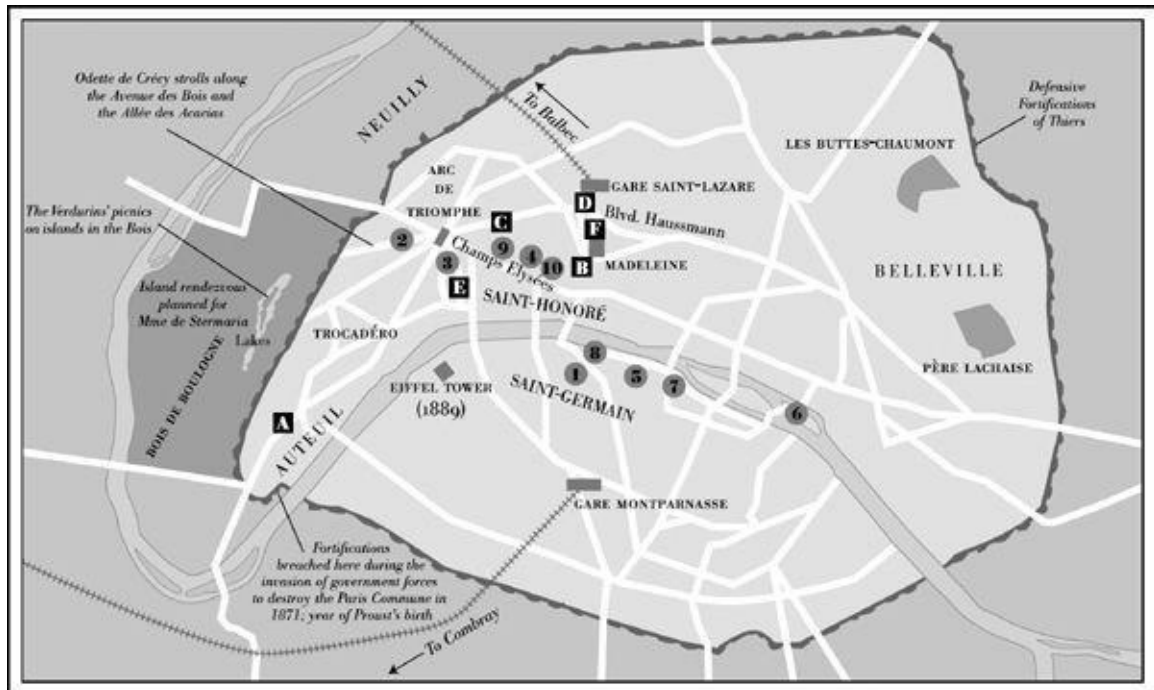
But by the late nineteenth century, the Faubourg Saint-Germain had taken on a meaning greater than its mere geographical location. As Balzac explained in *La Duchesse de Langais*, "What we in France call the Faubourg Saint-Germain is not actually a physical location, neither a neighborhood, nor a sect, not even an institution; it is something quite impossible to explain. La Place Royale, le Faubourg Saint-Honoré, la Chaussee d'Antin (all in the 8th arrondissement on the right bank) also contain great houses where you may breathe the air of the Faubourg Saint-Germain. In other words, not all the Faubourg is actually in the Faubourg." Or to put it more simply, the Faubourg Saint-Germain had become an expression referring to the elite of high society.

Regarding themselves as more "modern" than their stuffy and old-fashioned cousins, the Duc and Duchesse de Guermantes had therefore moved beyond the confines of the old quarter, and their Hôtel de Guermantes was across the river in the 8th arrondissement. Although the duchess is described as having "the

foremost house in the Faubourg Saint-Germain,” it is physically located in the Faubourg Saint-Honoré, and this might even be seen as an early indication of her gradual social descent, which the novel traces.

By contrast, the bourgeois Verdurins, whose original home is on rue Montalivet in the Faubourg Saint-Honoré, eventually move across the river, south to the Faubourg Saint-Germain and build a splendid new home on the Quai Conti, very close to Charlus on Quai Malaquais. This move can certainly be seen as an indication of Mme Verdurin’s unstoppable social ascent.

Perhaps reflecting his ambivalent position as a man accepted in the most exalted of aristocratic circles despite his background as a bourgeois and a Jew, Charles Swann lives on an island in the river, halfway between both banks. Ile Saint-Louis is an old aristocratic neighborhood with a noble history of which the bourgeoisie, such as Odette or Marcel’s great-aunt, are entirely ignorant. At the same time it has a slightly artistic background and was popular with painters, writers, and poets such as Baudelaire—which is entirely appropriate for a serious art collector like Swann. It should also be noted that Swann was not only a close personal friend of the Prince of Wales, heir to the British throne, but also of Louis-Philippe Albert, Duc de Orléans, Comte de Paris and heir (or pretender) to the French throne. The duke lived in exile in England at Twickenham, and Swann is often mentioned as having news or a letter “from Twickenham.” Swann’s royal connections and Orléanist sympathies are further emphasized by his address at Quai d’Orléans, which faces the left-bank’s Boulevard Saint-Germain.



PROUST'S PARIS OF THE BELLE ÉPOQUE

KEY TO MAP

● LOCATIONS IN THE NOVEL:

- 1 Prince de Guermantes' original palace on rue de Varenne
- 2 Prince de Guermantes' new house on Avenue des Bois (Avenue Foch)
- 3 Odette de Crécy's apartment at 4, rue La Pérouse. (Also home of Laure Hayman, the mistress of Proust's maternal uncle Louis in real life.)
- 4 Verdurins' original house on rue Montalivet, Faubourg Saint-Honoré
- 5 Verdurins' new house on Quai Conti, Faubourg Saint-Germain
- 6 Swann's house on Quai d'Orléans, Ile Saint-Louis.
- 7 Oriane's cousin, Baron de Guermantes, on rue de la Chaise
- 8 Charlus's house on Quai Malaquais
- 9 Swann family home: Odette de Crécy lived on the ground floor of rue La Pérouse before she was married, but although she remained in the vicinity after her marriage, it was clearly a different building since Marcel used an elevator to reach the Swanns' apartment — probably near the Champs-Élysées and rue de Berri.
- 10 Marcel's family originally lived within walking distance of the Champs-Élysées and the Swanns' apartment, before moving, within the same neighborhood, to the Hôtel Guermantes "for the improved air." Both settings are close to where Proust lived between the age of two and twenty-nine, near the Madeleine on Boulevard Malesherbes.

■ MARCEL PROUST'S RESIDENCES:

- A 96, rue de La Fontaine, Auteuil (1871–73)
- B 9, Boulevard Malesherbes (1873–1900)
- C 45, rue de Courcelles (1900–1906)
- D 102, Boulevard Haussmann (1906–19)
- E 44, rue Hamelin (1919–22)
- F Rue de l'Arcade, running from Boulevard Malesherbes to Boulevard Haussmann, where Proust maintained his secret life in the male brothel at Hôtel Marigny.

Notes: Albertine and Andrée dispersed themselves wantonly at the Buttes-Chaumont and visited Léa at the Trocadéro. At one stage, Albertine pretended to be in Balbec but was actually hiding in Auteuil, where Proust was born. Auteuil is also where the French government broke through the fortifications of Thiers to destroy the Paris Commune in the year of Proust's birth.

Despite Marcel's obsession with the Faubourg Saint-Germain, the heart of the novel is the Faubourg Saint-Honoré in the 8th arrondissement, where Proust spent nearly all his life and where most of the action takes place. Contrasting the two modern churches, the Madeleine and Saint Augustin, at either end of the street where Proust lived—with the traditional French values represented by the area around his own local church, Notre Dame de Paris—Charlus rants about how traditional Christian values are being usurped and the Jews are taking over. This “Christian” versus “Jew,” like “traditional” versus “modern” or “aristocratic” versus “bourgeois,” adds yet another contrast between the left bank Saint-Germain versus the right bank Saint-Honoré. This contrast is, of course, a Parisian version of the same division already described in the Combray sections of the novel between the Guermantes way and Swann's way.

Proust and his narrator endlessly criticize Saint-Honoré but seem unable to leave it. Marcel describes the Champs-Élysées where Gilberte and her family live as being a “melancholy neighborhood” and describes his own home nearby as being “in one of the ugliest parts of Paris,” yet this is where many important scenes take place. It is here, in these “Elysian Fields,” that Marcel has his first sexual encounter with Gilberte and where, years later, his grandmother begins her slow descent into the grave. It is in the streets of Saint-Honoré, around the Hôtel Guermantes, where the duke exercises his horses and where the duchess takes her discreet morning walks—contrasted with the very public promenades that Odette takes in the Bois, in the west of Paris.

Just as the novel traces the rise of the bourgeoisie and the decline of the aristocracy in the years leading up to the First World War, so, too, does it trace the westward movement of Paris away from the traditions and historic buildings in the center toward the more modern and vulgar developments rising in the west. Under the Second Empire, Baron Haussmann had destroyed much of the old medieval Paris, created the grand boulevards for which the city is now famous, and had opened up the city to the west. Odette's lover de Forcheville represents the sort of brash and vulgar types who were at home in the new cafés and restaurants of Haussmann's grand boulevards and is contrasted with the more refined Swann, who was more at home in the salons of the old aristocratic faubourgs.

Odette's apartment at rue La Pérouse, close to the Arc de Triomphe, is to the west of Paris, in an area that was still in the process of being developed. After their marriage, Swann left the Ile de Saint-Louis and moved west to join Odette in a new apartment close to her old one, nearer the Champs-Élysées yet close

enough for her to continue her daily promenades in the Bois de Boulogne. In volume 2, Mme Verdurin would sometimes leave her grand house on Quai Conti in the heart of Saint-Germain to visit Odette “out in the wilds” near rue de Berri at the far end of the Champs-Élysées and would worry aloud that due to her isolated location Odette might have rats in the house. However, by volume 7, after the widowed Mme Verdurin has married the widowed Prince de Guermantes and become herself the Princesse de Guermantes, she persuades the prince to leave his old palace in the Faubourg Saint-Germain and move to a splendidly modern one on the Avenue des Bois, at the western edge of Paris, in the Bois de Boulogne, where the novel finally ends.

Marcel Proust and French History

This chapter covers only those aspects of French history that are referred to or that directly affect our understanding of *In Search of Lost Time*.

Following the fall of the Roman Empire in the fourth century A.D., Gaul was invaded by various Germanic tribes from the northeast, of whom the Salian Franks were the most dominant. The first Frankish leader to declare himself king was Clovis I, who established his kingdom in Paris in 481 and who ruled until 511. Clovis converted to Christianity and founded the Merovingian dynasty, which ruled France until 768.

The Merovingians were important to Proust because, as the oldest French dynasty, they were the most romantic and their descendants the most aristocratic. The popularity of the name Louis for French kings refers back to the first king, Clovis. When introducing his fictional dynasty, the Guermantes, in the beginning of *Swann's Way*, Proust is very specific: "Great and glorious before the days of Charlemagne, the Guermantes had the right of life and death over their vassals" (1:192). The origins of the Merovingians are lost in history and many myths have evolved about them: that they are the descendants of the children of Priam who fled Troy or the offspring of the wife of King Clodio and a monstrous Quinotaur. The recent success of Dan Brown's *Da Vinci Code* has revived the ancient but controversial legend that the Merovingians are the actual descendants of Mary Magdalene and Jesus Christ. It is not surprising that such myths should have appealed to the romantic in Proust, whose narrator describes in the first few pages of the novel the story of Geneviève de Brabant as it appears on his magic lantern. In his childhood books and in the stained-glass windows of the church at Combray, Marcel relives the romantic glories of the Merovingian past with the stories of Clovis, Dagobert, Childebert, and always Geneviève de Brabant.

When introducing his friend Robert de Saint-Loup, who was a descendant of the Merovingians, Marcel sensed "the inherited litheness of the mighty hunters who had been for generations the ancestors of this young man" (1:792). For Proust, the Merovingians represented the true soul of France. In real life, his friend Count Robert de Montesquiou, and in the book Montesquiou's alter ego, Baron Charlus, both make a point of tracing their lineage from the Merovingians. Among his many other titles, Charlus was Duke of Brabant, making him a direct descendant of Geneviève de Brabant. The Merovingian period reminds Marcel of "the ancient heritage, the poetic domain from which

the proud race of the Guermantes, like a mellow, crenellated tower that traverses the ages, had risen already over France, at a time when the sky was still empty at those points where later were to rise Notre-Dame de Paris and Notre-Dame de Chartres” (2:7).

The Merovingians gradually fell into decline, and real power was placed in the hands of the mayor of Paris, Charles Martel, who had defeated the advancing Islamic armies at Poitiers in 732. His grandson, also called Charles (Charlemagne—Charles the Great), founded the Carolingian dynasty when he was crowned king in 768. The Lusignan family emerged at this time as dukes of Poitou and played a prominent role in the Crusades, which the French led to the Holy Land. The Lusignans eventually became kings of Jerusalem and Cyprus, and the Duc de Guermantes was very proud to claim a direct descent. (It should be emphasized that the Lusignans are an actual historical family, while the Guermantes are entirely fictional.)

The Carolingian dynasty was succeeded by the Capetians when Hugh Capet, Count of Paris, seized the throne in 987. The Capetians ruled France for the next eight hundred years under various family names, such as Capetians, Valois, and Bourbons. When King Louis XVI was led to the guillotine in 1793 during the French Revolution, he was referred to as Citizen Louis Capet. Even though the Capets had ruled France since 987, Proust’s fictitious dynasty, the Guermantes, traced their lineage back much further. At one point they are described as being “a family more ancient than the Capets” (3:848).

Especially under the Valois (1328-1589), the kings of France controlled little more than the land around Paris, the Ile de France. For many years their vassals, the dukes of Normandy, Burgundy, and Aquitaine (who were also kings of England), and even the Lusignac dukes of Poitou were far more powerful than the French monarch. Throughout much of the Middle Ages, France was more of a geographical than a political reality.

The threat from the English and even from the fickle Paris mob was so great that for many years (1403-1598), the royal court moved from Paris to various palaces on the Loire, such as Blois. In *Within a Budding Grove*, Baron Charlus, whose ancestors had resided in the royal chateau at Blois, was horrified to discover that the janitor now stored brooms in their private chapel. Following the successful end of the destructive Hundred Years’ War with England, the Valois embarked on the equally devastating wars of religion. The country was torn between Protestants (Huguenots) and Catholics. Those Protestants who were not slaughtered during the St. Bartholomew’s Day massacre in 1572 fled the country,

taking with them their wealth and their mercantile and trading skills. Finally, the Protestant leader Henri de Navarre decided that “Paris is worth a mass” and converted to Catholicism. He was crowned King Henri IV in 1594 and four years later brought the royal court back to Paris, unified the country, and founded the Bourbon dynasty.

Under the Bourbons, between 1594 and 1793, France entered a period of great prosperity and power, becoming arguably the most powerful country in Europe. For the first time in its history, Paris no longer needed defensive walls. Louis XIV, the Sun King, had them razed and replaced with the grand boulevards. Many members of the aristocracy moved “beyond the walls” to build their palaces in what was later to become the 7th arrondissement—the Faubourg Saint-Germain. The expression “Faubourg Saint-Germain,” used to describe the milieu of Duchesse de Guermantes, refers back to this period when the aristocracy lived in splendid palaces on the left bank of the Seine. This was the great golden age for French culture when Racine and Molière wrote plays that Marcel was to watch Berma perform in Paris three hundred years later. The supremely confident and civilized mood of this period is well captured in the letters that Mme de Sévigné (1626-96) wrote to her daughter. The narrator’s grandmother, and later his mother, continued to read and to quote these letters throughout the pages of *In Search of Lost Time*. Mme de Sévigné lived in the Marais, close to Swann’s house on the Ile Saint-Louis.

The French Revolution (1789-99) and the execution of Louis XVI marked the end of the ancien régime and the power and relevance of the old aristocracy, such as the Guermantes. Following the Reign of Terror (1793–94) and the establishment of the First Republic, France found itself at war with nearly every country in Europe. Napoleon seized power in 1799 and crowned himself emperor in 1804. Though eventually defeated at Waterloo in 1815, France and Napoleon’s effect on Europe remain to this day. A new legal system (code Napoleon) and the metric system are just two of the revolutionary ideas that were imposed during the Napoleonic Wars. Other revolutionary ideas, such as the concept of liberty and nationalism, had more wide-ranging effects. Also, during the fifteen years of Napoleon’s reign, he created a whole new class of nobles and aristocrats, which he drew from the middle classes. The rivalry between the “old nobility” and the upstart “new nobility” of the Bonapartists continues into the twenty-first century. The ill will between the two groups was a major theme of Victor Hugo’s *Les Misérables* and is an ongoing theme throughout the pages of *In Search of Lost Time*. The description of the relationship between Robert de Saint-Loup and his commanding officer, the

Prince de Borodino in *The Guermantes Way*, makes these differences very explicit.

During the revolution, many of the old aristocratic homes in the Faubourg Saint-Germain were destroyed or deserted when their owners fled the country. The new aristocracy under Napoleon preferred to live north of the river and built their palatial homes along the rue Saint-Honoré. Often decorated with statuary and materials from the churches destroyed during the Terror, the homes of the Faubourg Saint-Honoré housed the new aristocracy. Their owners were all those whom the revolution had made prominent and rich: army suppliers, generals who had made war in Italy, government ministers, doctors, artists, and actors. The Verdurins, whose wealth came from manufacturing and armaments, were typical of the new bourgeois aristocracy of the Faubourg Saint-Honoré, as was Proust's wealthy bourgeois family. Looking south across the river toward the old patrician homes of the Faubourg Saint-Germain inspired all of Proust's romantic yearnings for an aristocratic past, embodied in the family of the Duchesse de Guermantes.

The European authorities, threatened by the ideas unleashed during the French Revolution, tried to move the clock back and to restore the ancien régime. They restored the Bourbon monarchy in Paris and hoped to force the genie back into the bottle, but the French people threw out the monarchy, first in 1830 and again in 1848, when they declared the Second Republic. In 1852, Napoleon's nephew seized power and declared himself Emperor Napoleon III. This was known as the Second Empire and was a period of expansion and great prosperity.

Proust's parents grew up and married during the Second Empire, a period of relative calm until July 1870, when Bismarck's Prussians invaded France. Jeanne Weil and Adrien Proust actually married on the day following the French surrender. Behind the massive fortifications constructed at Thiers, the Parisians thought they were safe and that the Prussians could never take Paris. Instead the Prussians surrounded the walls, starved the population, and—using their fearsome new weapons—fired over the fortifications into the heart of the city. The “glorious” French army was an utter shambles and suffered the most ignoble and humiliating of defeats. After less than two months of war, Napoleon III surrendered at Sedan in September 1870 and spent the rest of his life in ignominious exile in England while the rest of France continued to struggle until March 1871. At that time, the people of Paris, refusing to surrender or to recognize the new French government based in Versailles, declared their independence as the Paris Commune.

This was a terrible time to live in Paris. With mob rule from Belleville and starvation widespread, the population was forced to eat anything that moved. After all the cavalry horses had been eaten and all the exotic animals in the zoo, the people ate their own cats and dogs and, finally, all the city's rats. To escape the shelling and street fighting in the center of the city, Dr. Adrien Proust took his very pregnant wife Jeanne to her uncle's house in the suburb of Auteuil. Proust's mother gave birth within weeks of La Semaine Sanglante (Bloody Week) when the Commune was finally and ruthlessly crushed and its members slaughtered. Dr. Proust had been shot at and narrowly missed death himself at the hands of street mobs. When the government finally destroyed the defenses and invaded Paris to crush the Commune, it was near the Prousts' home at Auteuil that they broke down the walls. The nervous indisposition and lifelong weakness of the baby, Marcel, was often attributed to the conditions of his confinement and the sufferings of his mother during those terrible nine months.

With the abdication of Napoleon III and the suppression of the Paris Commune, France declared the Third Republic, which successfully survived the tribulations of the Dreyfus Affair (see page 369) and the First World War. The Third Republic, which began in the year of Proust's birth, lasted until 1940 and only ended with the invasion of the German armies in World War II. This was a period that saw the domination of an ascendant bourgeoisie over the declining aristocracy, the triumph of the Faubourg Saint-Honoré over the Faubourg Saint-Germain, and the triumph of Swann's way over the Guermantes way.

The one hundred years following the revolution of 1789 had been a devastating period for France. Everything had been torn apart and destroyed. The Reign of Terror was followed by the Napoleonic Wars and then the revolutions of 1830 and 1848. Now, in 1871, the year of Proust's birth, everything was in ruins again. The Tuileries Palace, the Palace of the Legion of Honor, the State Council, even the immortal City Hall across the river from Notre Dame: all were destroyed in the year of his birth.

But somehow, as though in a supreme effort of denial, Paris reasserted itself and entered one of the most exciting and "fabulous" periods in its history as the nineteenth century came to a close. Public monuments and splendid private residences were constructed; ladies in jewels and silk dresses and men in silk top hats all converged on the Opéra. Artists, musicians, and writers from around the world all gathered in the cafés and boulevards. Picasso, Rodin, Rouault, and Klimt competed for café tables with Seurat, Renoir, Pissarro, and Sisley. In addition to direct references to the actual artists whom he knew personally,

Proust created four archetypal characters to represent the different arts. Bergotte was an amalgam of contemporary writers, Elstir was a combination of various painters, Vinteuil represented composers, and Berma represented singers and actresses of the Belle Époque. At the end of the novel when everything else has been ruined, friendships have been betrayed, reputations destroyed, and careers shattered, all that remains is art. Even after the death of Bergotte, his books remain, as do the canvases of Elstir and the little sonata of Vinteuil. Only art is real and eternal. Only through art can Time be defeated.

The last three decades of the nineteenth century—until the First World War commenced in 1914—was known as the Belle Époque, when Paris displayed itself in all its glory. And Proust was there to observe and record it for posterity.

La Belle Époque

La Belle Époque was an expression coined in the 1920s to describe Paris from the 1870s until the outbreak of war in 1914. Following the brutal devastation of the First World War and the senseless slaughter of the majority of French husbands, fathers, and sons, the years at the turn of the century must indeed have seemed like a golden age. This period of less than forty-five years, which saw an unparalleled flowering of French arts, culture, and industry, was “book-ended” by two of the most devastating disasters in French history. The First World War was to leave 2 million Frenchmen dead and 5 million badly wounded or disfigured, and created 630,000 war widows. The war of 1870 was no less destructive.

It is impossible to overemphasize the horrors of 1871, the year of Proust’s birth. Not only did France suffer one of the most humiliating defeats in its history, but the continued resistance of Paris—first against the Prussian armies and then under the Commune against the French government based in Versailles—created scenes of horror that are remembered to this day.

In addition to the humiliation of total defeat, German soldiers remained stationed on French soil until the war fine of 5 billion francs was paid to Prussia. Further, the historically French provinces of Alsace and Lorraine were annexed by Germany. For the next forty-three years, and throughout the course of Proust’s novel, no Frenchman forgot the humiliating terms of Bismarck’s peace or ceased to yearn for the return of Alsace and Lorraine. This thirst for revenge and sense of national humiliation at the hands of the Germans are key elements necessary for understanding French society during this period and is a theme that underlies the novel. Certainly it helps explain the passions unleashed by the Dreyfus Affair (discussed in the following section). Dreyfus himself was a Jew from Alsace, and this only added to the sense of betrayal. Pride in the newly restored French army was a way of overcoming the defeat of 1870; any criticism of the army was seen as an attack on France.

France was determined to overcome the surrender at Sedan. The first half billion of the fine was paid off within one month, and the full 5 billion was paid to Germany in just two years. By September 1873 the last German soldiers were removed from France. The splendid Paris Opera House was opened in 1875 and the historic Hôtel de Ville, destroyed during the Commune, was completely rebuilt. French industry thrived, and in 1889 Paris hosted a world’s fair with the

Eiffel Tower, the tallest building in the world, as its centerpiece. At a second world's fair, in 1900, the entire world was represented in splendid pavilions and palaces, and the underlying and not-so-subtle message was that Paris was once more the center of the universe.

By following the clues offered by the career of Odette de Crécy, we can trace the time line of the novel as it covered the whole of the Belle Époque. Elstir's painting of Odette as the transvestite Mlle Sacripant was dated October 1872, the start of the Belle Époque. This was the period when she was a member of Mme Verdurin's fledgling salon and having affairs with Elstir and Uncle Adolphe. A man in the Bois de Boulogne remembered having sex with her "the day that McMahon resigned." In real life, McMahon was president of France from 1873 until he resigned in January 1879. Her affair with Swann had already started at this date because she lies to him about being at the Queen of Spain's charity ball at the Hippodrome, when in fact she was cheating on him with de Forcheville. In real life, the queen's charity ball was held on December 18, 1879. By the time the Russian czar visited Paris in 1896, Odette was already established as a fashionable society hostess, prominent as an anti-Dreyfusard during the trials of the 1890s.

Mme Verdurin's salon also provides a history of the Belle Époque, for she was always on the cutting edge of the latest artistic fashion. After providing a gathering place for impressionist painters like Elstir, and for the performance of Wagner's music in the 1870s and '80s, her salon became the central meeting place for the Dreyfusards in the 1890s. Real-life figures like Anatole France, Clemenceau, and Col. Picquart are all described as being guests at her salon. After the Dreyfus Affair had passed, "Anatole France remained," and her salon became the launching place for Paris's new love affair with all things Russian.

The Franco-Russian alliance of 1894 was signed by Czar Alexander III and provided France with a strong ally against Germany. The Alexander III Bridge, built in his honor over the Seine, is still one of the most splendid bridges in the city. Mme Verdurin's salon reflected the new French love of all things Russian, and she entertained Stravinsky, Nijinsky, Diaghilev, and the cast of the Ballet Russe.

Parisians loved the culture of their new allies. Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*, choreographed by Nijinsky, had its scandalous first performance in Paris in 1913, and Proust attended the opening night of Rimsky-Korsakov's *Scheherazade* in June 1910, when Nijinsky famously performed the role of the slave with no underwear beneath his tights.

Proust's long novel chronicles a Paris at the height of its artistic glory. The City of Lights at the turn of the century was the center of the universe for writers, painters, and musicians, and Marcel Proust knew many of them personally. The pages of the novel are filled with contemporary references to the music of Wagner and Debussy and the writings of Zola and Flaubert as well as the paintings of Monet and Degas. The world that Proust describes is the same world that was being painted by the impressionists. If you ever look at a painting by Whistler or Manet and wonder what those people were thinking, or what lives they were leading, read Proust. One of the last dinner parties that Proust was known to have attended was in company with Serge Diaghilev of the Ballet Russe, Pablo Picasso, Jean Cocteau, Igor Stravinsky, and James Joyce. This was a time of great artistic energy, when impressionism was giving way to cubism, surrealism, Dadaism, fauvism, and abstractionism. It was a time of revolution. Through his friendship with the young Jean Cocteau (who partly inspired the character of Octave), Proust was kept abreast of the rivalries between the Dadaists and surrealists as well as the latest creations of Stravinsky, Diaghilev, and Picasso.

Unlike the staid and still Victorian London across the channel, Paris was a city of unabashed pleasure and excess. Paris was filled with brothels and prostitutes. Rachel would strut her charms in the promenade of the Folies Bergères, and Charlus would pick up young rent-boys outside the Olympia. It was the world of carnal delights portrayed in the posters of Toulouse-Lautrec. Artists clustered in the bars and cafés of Montmartre beneath the new cupola of the Sacré-Coeur. It was the world of *La Bohème*, absinthe, and the cancan. There were more than two hundred *café-concerts*, *bals musettes*, and *cabarets artistiques*—or what the English called music halls. Rich and poor alike would go to seek their pleasure or their fortune. It was also a city of scandal and danger. Anarchist bombs caused death in public places through the 1890s, including the Avenue de l'Opéra, the Chamber of Deputies, and the Gare Saint-Lazare—just behind Proust's apartment on Boulevard Haussmann. In 1894 the president of France, Sadi Carnot, was stabbed to death by an anarchist. Not for nothing was this period also referred to as the Naughty Nineties and, in Paris at least, lesbianism was suddenly in vogue. The lesbian poems of Sappho were first discovered and translated into French during the 1890s. The famous authoress Colette created something of a scandal by conducting love affairs with French society women such as the Marquise de Belboeuf. Drug abuse was also on the rise, and at the final party in *Time Regained*, Marcel almost fails to recognize the Vicomtesse de Saint-Fiacre, whose features have been so ravaged by years of cocaine addiction.

On the surface, the Belle Époque was indeed a golden age for painting, music, public monuments, and technological advance. It was the age of electricity, the telephone (the wonders of which Proust describes beautifully), bicycles, trains, airplanes, and motor cars. But it was a period built upon the humiliation of defeat and, as Proust shows, it reflected a society in the process of disintegration, “galloping towards the grave” and preparing itself for the horrors, waste, mud, and blood of the trenches at Ypres and the Marne.

At the start of the Belle Époque, in 1872, Edmond Goncourt described a conversation among several writers at the Café Riche, including Flaubert, Zola, Turgenev, and Daudet: “We began with a long discussion on the special aptitudes of writers suffering from constipation and diarrhea” (Alistair Horn, *Seven Ages of Paris*). At the close of the Belle Époque, some forty years later, two other great writers, James Joyce and Marcel Proust, had a similar conversation—agreeing that the unfortunate state of their bowels was all that they had in common. Some things just never change. As the Duchesse de Guermantes said to Swann during Mme de Saint-Euverte’s musical soiree: “It ends just in time, but it ends badly.” Or as Baron de Charlus would have said, “It’s all caca.”

The Dreyfus Affair

Like the effects of the Vietnam war or the Iraq War on the United States, the Dreyfus Affair ripped French society down the middle and created enmities and cultural divisions that were to last decades. Like political divisions in current society, such as that between pro-life and pro-choice groups, the underlying differences reflect much broader issues of religion, culture, and class. Reflecting the reality of their society, most of the characters in the novel are either for or against Dreyfus, and the evolution of the affair is an important subtheme throughout the book.

On December 22, 1894, a Jewish army officer, Captain Alfred Dreyfus, was convicted of treason for passing military secrets to the Germans. After being stripped of his uniform, his sword was ceremoniously broken, and Dreyfus, protesting his innocence, was deported to Devil's Island prison camp in the Caribbean. The central evidence against Dreyfus was a handwritten letter that had been discovered by Major Hubert Henry. In 1896, Lt. Colonel Georges Picquart unearthed different evidence, which proved Dreyfus innocent and instead implicated Major Ferdinand Walsin Esterhazy. Following a court-martial, Picquart was dismissed from the army and Esterhazy was acquitted.

The affair became a major public issue in 1898, when France's leading novelist, Emile Zola, published an open letter entitled "J'Accuse," which charged the French army was guilty of a cover-up. Zola's letter burst upon the public stage and split French society in two. The socialist Dreyfusards saw the affair as not just a cover-up but also a grave miscarriage of justice and a blatant example of anti-Semitism. The anti-Dreyfusards, mainly nationalists and Catholics, saw the affair as a sinister attack on both the French military and the establishment. Proust's father was a member of the establishment, with many friends in the government, and he was horrified when his son organized the "Petition of the Intellectuals" in favor of Dreyfus. Like Mme Verdurin, Proust attended court every day in support of Zola during his trial. Zola was found guilty of libel and sentenced to a year in jail. He avoided incarceration by moving to England, which was presumably preferable to prison. As Proust shows, many prominent people, either because they were Jews or supported Dreyfus, were excluded from smart society, and many people who were previously unacceptable were warmly embraced because of their anti-Dreyfus views. The opposite was also true: Mme Sazerat from Combray snubbed

Marcel's father because he was anti-Dreyfus (even though she herself was also anti-Semitic). The socially impossible Odette finally became accepted by the Faubourg Saint-Germain because of her staunch position as an anti-Dreyfusard. At the same time, Mme Verdurin's salon became equally well known as a center for the Dreyfusards, and she entertained Zola, Lt. Col. Picquart, Clemenceau, and Anatole France.

The many complex motives that Dreyfus inspired in society are well illustrated by a study of the Guermantes. The slow and thoughtful conversion of the prince in favor of Dreyfus is contrasted to the superficial positions of his cousins. No longer influenced by Rachel and her intellectual circle, Robert has given up all his pro-Dreyfus sympathies and, reverting to caste, has become an anti-Dreyfus supporter. Meanwhile, the duke, influenced by three beautiful princesses whom he tried to seduce at a spa, has temporarily reversed his opinions and become an ardent Dreyfusard. His wife, on the other hand, condemns Dreyfus simply on the basis of his poor letter-writing style, which she contrasts unfavorably with his accuser, M. Esterhazy, who has more of a knack for phrase making, "a different tone altogether." The Baron de Charlus, of course, has a different perspective from everybody. He argues that since Dreyfus is a Jew, he is not really a Frenchman and therefore cannot be guilty of treason: "Only of breaching the laws of hospitality."

In fairness to the anti-Dreyfusards, the blind nationalism, anti-German paranoia, and fanatical loyalty to the French army was both a reflection and a direct result of the humiliating military defeat in the war of 1870. Possibly it was also a premonition of the horrors to follow in 1914.

Following Zola's trial, Major Henry, before committing suicide, confessed that he had forged all the evidence against Dreyfus. Major Esterhazy immediately left the country. A second trial was ordered for Dreyfus in 1899, and he was again found guilty, but this time the government interceded—Dreyfus was given a presidential pardon and Zola returned from England. It was not until 1906 that the second trial was reversed by the court of appeals and Dreyfus was finally reinstated into the army with his honor restored. A quarter century later, in 1930, extracts from the papers of Colonel Schwartzkoppen, who had been the German military attaché in Paris in 1894, finally proved that the spy had been Esterhazy all the time. Dreyfus was just an innocent scapegoat selected because he was Jewish. He never recovered from the ordeal and died in obscurity.



Portrait of Marcel Proust by Jacques Emile Blanche

Appendix

A. The Seven Novels

The following are the novels that make up the complete version of *À la recherche du temps perdu*:

FRENCH ORIGINAL

1. *Du côté de chez Swann* (1913)
2. *À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs* (1919)
3. *Le côté de Guermantes* (1920)
4. *Sodome et Gomorrhe* (1921)
5. *La Prisonnière* (1923)
6. *Albertine disparue* (1925)
7. *Le Temps retrouvé* (1927)

ENGLISH TRANSLATION

- Swann's Way* (1922)
- Within a Budding Grove* (1924)
- The Guermantes Way* (1925)
- Cities of the Plain* (1927)
- The Captive* (1929)
- The Fugitive* (1930)
- Time Regained* (1931)

B. Page References

Throughout this book, all quotations and page references are to the following edition:

Proust, Marcel. *Remembrance of Things Past*. Translated by C. K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin. New York: Random House / Vintage Books, 1981. All page references are to the same three-volume edition. Vol. 1, books 1 and 2; vol. 2, books 3 and 4; vol. 3, books 5, 6, and 7. The page reference (2:853) means that page 853 in the Vintage volume 2 would be about 230 pages into *Cities of the Plain*.

C. Page and Word Count

The Vintage Books edition is published in the following three volumes:

	Pages	Words <i>(rough est.)</i>
<hr/>		
VOLUME 1 (1:3-1,018)		
1. <i>Swann's Way</i> :	459	196,911
• Overture		
• Combray		
• Swann in Love		
• Place-names: The Name		
2. <i>Within a Budding Grove</i> :	553	237,237
• Madame Swann at Home		
• Place-names: The Place		
VOLUME 2 (2:3-1169)		
3. <i>The Guermantes Way</i>	617	264,693
4. <i>Cities of the Plain</i>	546	234,234
VOLUME 3 (3:1-1,107)		
5. <i>The Captive</i>	421	180,609
6. <i>The Fugitive</i>	281	120,549
7. <i>Time Regained</i>	398	170,742
<hr/>		
Total	3,275	1,404,975

Suggestions for Further Reading

The following selection is from my own bookshelf. and I must acknowledge my gratitude and indebtedness to all the authors listed here for their scholarship and for increasing my understanding, knowledge, and enjoyment of Marcel Proust's wonderful novel.

Aciman, André, ed. *The Proust Project*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004. Twenty-eight modern writers combined to share their favorite passages from Proust and describe their experience of the novel. The passages quoted are taken from all seven volumes of the original and so act as a sort of synopsis of the novel.

Albaret, Céleste. *Monsieur Proust*. Translated by Barbara Bray. New York Review of Books, 2000. Céleste Albaret was Proust's housekeeper, secretary, and nurse from about 1913 until his death in 1922. Although she probably reveals more private details than Proust would ever have wanted, it is nonetheless an intimate and loving portrait of the great writer.

Bales, Richard, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Proust*. Cambridge University Press, 2001. A rather dry series of essays by academics, for academics.

Beckett, Samuel. *Proust*. Grove Press, 1957. As one might expect, this is a rather dense read, but worth the effort. Beckett focuses on Marcel's series of epiphanies.

Bernard, Anne-Marie. *The World of Proust, as seen by Paul Nadar*. Translated by Susan Wise. Preface by Pierre-Jean Rémy. Photographs by Paul Nadar. MIT Press, 2004. Many of Nadar's portraits were used as inspiration for illustrations in this book.

Bloch-Dano, Evelyne. *Madame Proust*. University of Chicago Press, 2007. By focusing on Proust's mother, Jeanne Weil, this wonderful book reveals a wealth of new information about the writer's formative years and the extraordinary relationship between mother and son.

Botton, Alain de. *How Proust Can Change Your Life*. Pantheon, 1997.

This became a well-deserved best seller and can be thoroughly enjoyed even by people who have never read Proust.

Carter, William C. *Marcel Proust: A Life*. Yale University Press, 2000. Currently this is the best and most comprehensively updated biography of Proust.

Carter, William C. *Proust in Love*. Yale University Press, 2006. If anyone reads Proust just for the sex, this is the book! Carter takes us on a glorious romp from the little room smelling of orrisroot to the caged rats of later years. Nevertheless, this is a book of serious scholarship, and the author's knowledge and passion for his subject are apparent on every page.

Caws, Mary Ann. *Marcel Proust*. Overlook Duckworth, 2003. Although a very slim volume and a quick read, Mary Ann Caws has crammed a lot of fascinating information into this well-illustrated portrait of the author, his family, and his friends.

Davenport-Hines, Richard. *Proust at the Majestic*. Bloomsbury, 2006. Centered on the famous dinner party at the Majestic hotel where Proust sat down with Joyce, Picasso, Stravinsky, and others, this book offers a fascinating study of Proust's final days and his social relationships.

Hayman, Ronald. *Proust: A Biography*. Carroll & Graf, 1990. Hayman is a well-respected professional biographer, and this is an accessible biography for the first-time reader of Proust.

Heuet, Stephane, illustrator. *Remembrance of Things Past*. Illustrated version. NBM New York, 2007. Stephane Heuet has taken on the daunting task of illustrating the whole of *À la recherche du temps perdu* in a graphic novel format. So far only two volumes have appeared in English, covering *Swann's Way*. The drawings capture Proust's world perfectly, the details are exquisite, and Heuet visually captures the subtle nuances that lie beneath the text. (Five volumes are available in French—see below.)

Hindus, Milton. *Reader's Guide to Marcel Proust*. Syracuse University Press, 1962. This is an excellent synopsis of all Proust's written work, not just *Remembrance of Things Past*. It remains as valid today as when it was first written, almost fifty years ago.

Hodson, Leighton. *Marcel Proust: The Critical Heritage*. Routledge, 1997. The most complete and exhaustive collection of essays and articles written about Proust and his writings, from the original preface by Anatole France in 1896 to Edmund Wilson's *Axel Castle* in 1931. Includes original reviews by Beckett, Conrad, and many others and even includes an insulting review by Jean Lorrain, with whom Proust was later to fight a duel.

Karpeles, Eric, ed. and intro. *Paintings in Proust*. Thames & Hudson, 2008. This is an extraordinary companion to any reading of Proust's novel. Eric Karpeles has identified, located, and reproduced the many paintings to which Proust makes reference in the novel; in other cases, where only a painter's name is mentioned to indicate a certain style or character trait, Karpeles has chosen a representative work to illustrate the impression that Proust sought to evoke.

Kilmartin, Terence. *Reader's Guide to "Remembrance of Things Past."* Vintage Books, 1984. This book could never have been written without Kilmartin's wonderful guide. Kilmartin lists every character and incident in the novel with page references to the Random House / Vintage Books edition, which he cotranslated with C. K. Scott Moncrieff.

King, Shirley. *Dining with Marcel Proust*. The University of Nebraska Press, 1979. A practical guide to the French cuisine of the Belle Époque, with more than a hundred recipes from hors d'oeuvres and soups to desserts.

Kristeva, Julia. *Proust and the Sense of Time*. Translated by Stephen Bann. Columbia University Press, 1993. A dense psychoanalytical study of Proust's work that contains a wonderful analysis of the significance of the madeleine in the novel, as well as a detailed exploration of the influence of Schopenhauer's writing on Proust's philosophy.

Ladenson, Elisabeth. *Proust's Lesbianism*. Cornell University Press, 1999. An extremely erudite and witty study of lesbianism in Proust's novel. Comparing it to his treatment of male homosexuality, Ladenson also ties it to his relationship with his mother, grandmother, and the letters of Mme de Sévigné.

Maurois, André. *The Quest for Proust*. Translated by Gerard Hopkins.

Constable, 1984. Now sadly out of print but still to be found thanks to the wonders of amazon.com and abe-books.com. This excellent and sympathetic analysis provides a wonderful companion to Proust's great novel.

Monbrun, Estelle. *Murder Chez Proust*. Arcade, 1995. A fun murder mystery that makes savage fun of literary professionals in general and Proustians in particular.

Naudin, Jean-Bernard. *Dining with Proust*. Random House, 1992. This is the perfect gift for the Proustian in your life. Based on the various meals that Proust describes in the novel, this is a lavishly illustrated celebration of fine dining during the Belle Époque.

Painter, George D. *Marcel Proust*. Vols. 1 and 2, *The Early Years* and *The Later Years*. For many years this was the definitive biography of Proust, since replaced by William C. Carter's.

Pinter, Harold. *The Proust Screenplay*. Grove Press, 1977. As might be expected from Pinter, this is an excellent screenplay in its own right; it is also the best English-language abridgment of the novel. Unfortunately, it has never been produced on film.

Quennell, Peter. *Marcel Proust*. Simon & Schuster, 1971. Written to celebrate the centenary of Proust's birth, this delightful collection of general essays is accompanied by paintings and photographs of Proust and his world.

Rose, Jacqueline. *Albertine*. Vintage, 2002. Because Proust described the Marcel/Albertine relationship entirely from Marcel's perspective, Jacqueline Rose has rewritten the story, but entirely from Albertine's point of view.

Shattuck, Roger. *Proust's Way*. W. W. Norton, 2000. Roger Shattuck taught at Boston University and is one of the country's leading Proust scholars. This book is accessible to the general reader as well as the serious researcher.

Spalding, P. A., comp. *Reader's Handbook to Proust*. Barnes and Noble, 1975. This was the original guide upon which Kilmartin based his own guide.

Tadie, Jean-Yves. *Marcel Proust*. Translated by Evan Cameron.

Viking, 2000. More and yet at the same time less than you ever wanted to know. Tadie is the editor in chief of the Pléiade edition, the “Bible” of Proust. While obsessed with the minutiae of Proust’s life and writing, he tends to ignore anything that might harm the reputation of his hero and master.

White, Edmund. *Marcel Proust*. Lipper/Viking, 1999. Despite its emphasis on everything homosexual, this is an excellent short biography of Proust. Part of the Penguin Lives series, White enthusiastically offers an extremely concise, detailed, and very knowledgeable summary of Proust for the first-time reader and Proustian alike. A new edition was released by Penguin Books in 2009.

Books in French

Baudry Jean Louis. *Les Figures d'Elstir*. Musée de Beaux-Arts de Caen, 1993. In 1993 the city of Caen, in Normandy, mounted an exhibition of paintings in honor of Proust—contemporary paintings that he might have seen and that might have inspired many of the paintings described in the novel. This book is the catalog to the exhibition.

Coulon, Bernard. *Promenades en Normandie avec un guide nommé Marcel Proust*. Éditions Charles Corlet, 1986. This is a guide to the countryside of Normandy using quotations from Proust and illustrated with photographs and postcards from the Belle Époque.

Grenier, Laurence. *À la recherche du temps perdu*. Abridged version. Proustpourtout.com, 2005. Laurence Grenier has bravely condensed all seven volumes (3,000 pages) into a single volume of less than 500 pages. The book is a mixture of Grenier's condensed summary and Proust's original text (in print of a slightly different color). Purists will, of course, be horrified. Tant pis! Grenier bravely shuns the academic elite and is determined to popularize Proust and to make him more accessible to the modern reader. Bravo!

Heuet, Stephane, illustrator. *À la recherche du temps perdu*. Illustrated version. Guy Delcourt, 1998. Stephane Heuet has taken on the daunting task of illustrating the whole of *À la recherche du temps perdu* in a graphic novel format. So far only five volumes have appeared, covering *Swann's Way* and *Within a Budding Grove*. The drawings capture Proust's world perfectly, the details are exquisite, and Heuet visually captures the subtle nuances that lie beneath the text. I eagerly await volume 6.

Laget, Thierry. *L'ABCdaire de Proust*. Flammarion, 1998. As the title suggests, this well-illustrated little book covers everything Proustian from A to Z.

Raczymow, Henri. *Le Paris littéraire et intime de Marcel Proust*. Parigramme, 1997. Well illustrated with period and contemporary

photographs, this book describes Proust's Paris and shows the places where both his fictional and his real-world friends and family lived.

Saiki, Shinichi. *Paris dans le roman de Proust*. Edition SEDES, 1996. This is an extraordinary book that uses the very fabric of Paris, its streets and neighborhoods, to analyze and comment upon the psychology of the novel's characters. Shinichi Saiki's knowledge of the history of Paris is as impressive as his familiarity with every aspect of the novel.

Tadie, Jean-Yves. *Proust: La cathédrale du temps*. Gallimard, 1999. This beautifully illustrated little book combines the story of Proust's life with thumbnail sketches of the main characters in the novel. Tadie, of course, is the editor of the ultimate French edition of Proust: the three-volume Pléiade edition, which is the Bible.

Books of Photographs (English)

Adams, William Howard. *A Proust Souvenir*. Vendome Press, 1984. Paul Nadar was the leading society photographer in Paris during the Belle Époque and consequently photographed many of Proust's friends and most of the society figures on whom he based his characters. Charlus, the Duc de Guermantes, Odette—all are here in splendid black-and-white drawings. Nadar's photographs provided the models for many of the illustrations in this book.

Books of Photographs (French)

Seeberger Brothers. *Jardins Parisiens à la Belle Époque*. Monum, Éditions du patrimoine, 2004. Contemporaries of Proust, the three Seeberger brothers photographed Parisian street life during the Belle Époque. Many of these photographs—children playing in the park, fine ladies and gentlemen on parade in the Bois de Boulogne, and bourgeois families strolling through the zoological gardens—come directly from the pages of Proust’s novel.

Beautheac, Nadine. *La Normandie de Proust*. Éditions du Chêne, 2001. Accompanied by the appropriate quotations from Proust, this book shows the beautiful countryside around Proust’s Balbec (Cabourg).

Beautheac, Nadine. *Marcel Proust: La figure des pays*. Flammarion, 1999. Before he died, tragically young, François-Xavier Bouchart took a series of black-and-white photographs of every place that Proust described in his writing. Combray, Paris, Normandy, and Venice are all featured in these spectacular and evocative photographs, each accompanied by an appropriate quotation from Proust’s work.

Internet Resources

The following Web sites are listed for informational purposes only. The publisher takes no responsibility for the content of the sites, which can change at any time, and the listing of the sites does not imply any recommendation or endorsement on the part of the publisher.

General Readers and Scholars

In English: <http://www.tempsperdu.com>. This excellent site is devoted to Marcel Proust's novel *À la recherche du temps perdu* for an audience of both general readers and scholars. While the webmaster's interest in Proust is broad, these pages focus on the novel rather than on biography. Mark Calkins believes a genuine homage to Proust, to paraphrase Alain de Botton, means looking at our world through his eyes, rather than looking at his world through ours. This is a wonderful site filled with paintings and resources that enrich our understanding and enjoyment of Marcel Proust's work. Mark's list of characters is about ten times longer than the list in this book. His studies of the chronology and time lines of the novel are alone worth a visit to the site.

Online Text

In English: <http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/p/proust/marcel/>. The University of Adelaide in Australia has uploaded the complete novel online. I found this very useful for finding specific sections of text within the novel.

In French: <http://jydupuis.apinc.org/Proust/index.htm>. PDF versions of the complete French text in fifteen volumes.

Reading and Discussion Groups

Proust Society of America

New York: <http://www.mercantilelibrary.org/groups/proust/php/>

San Francisco: <http://www.milibrary.org/proust.html>

Boston: <http://www.bostonathenaeum.org/proust.html>

Yahoo Online Discussion Group

<http://groups.yahoo.com/phrase/marcel-proust>. This is an endlessly irritating, fascinating, argumentative, and very knowledgeable group of people from all over the world who simply like talking and arguing about the writings of Marcel Proust and who sometimes get distracted and pursue something else altogether. (Just like Proust.)

Other Sites of Interest

English Selections from Proust: <http://www.ljhammond.com/proust.htm>. Edited by L. James Hammond. This wonderful site contains hundreds of quotations from Proust arranged by themes.

French Selections from Proust: <http://pagesperso-orange.fr/proust/proust/Index.htm>. A collection of quotes in French.

Italian Site on Proust: <http://www.marcelproust.it/>. This is the most beautiful and fascinating of all the Proust sites on the Internet, but unfortunately it is only written in Italian.

Monty Python's "All England Summarize Proust Competition": http://www.geocities.com/fang_club/summarise/proust_competition.html. Full text of the BBC Proustian classic. You may also watch it on www.youtube.com/watch?v=uwAOc4g3k-g.

Paris Walking Tours: <http://www.nysoclib.org/travels/proust.html>. The New York Society Library has organized five Proust-related walking tours of Paris. The text and Web site by Marilyn Bender are filled with fascinating information about the world of Proust.

Proust Ephemera: <http://www.yorktaylor.free-online.co.uk/index.htm>. A truly wonderful site dedicated to publishing English translations of Marcel Proust's lesser-known writings. It is filled with short articles, literary pieces, and letters by Proust that, as far as I am aware, are not available in translation elsewhere.

Who's Who in Proust: <http://www.proustguide.com>. An interesting site dedicated to all things Proustian with original illustrations of some fifty characters. Only natural modesty prevents me from saying more.

Acknowledgments

This book could never have been written without the prior research and superior scholarship of all those writers listed in “Suggestions for Further Reading,” to whom I will always remain humbly grateful.

I would also like to express my gratitude to Diana Secker Tesdell, my editor at Vintage Books, whose warm support and encouragement, professional guidance, and shared enthusiasm for Proust have made this present book possible. For reading and patiently proofing the manuscript, persuading me to attempt the illustrations, and assisting me in every step, I am eternally indebted to my wonderful wife, Jude.

I would like to thank my eldest daughter, Peggy Morel, who—like Proust—divides her time between Paris and the Normandy coast, and for many years has provided me with local research and valuable Proustiana.

Finally, I would like to thank Mitchell Kaplan of Books & Books in Coral Gables, and Karen Throckmorton and the women of the Ransom Everglades Reading Group in Miami for inspiring and encouraging me to express on paper my love for this most fascinating and enjoyable of novelists.

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Illustration Acknowledgments:

Laure de Sade, Comtesse Adhéaume de Chevigné by Federico de Madrazo y de Ochoa (Spanish, 1875–1934): The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Anonymous gift. 1983 (1983.498) Image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art

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Portrait de Marcel Proust by Jacques Emile Blanche (1892): (RF 1989-4). Paris, Musée d'Orsay © 2009 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Alexander, Patrick, 1946–
Marcel Proust's search for lost time : a reader's guide to
Remembrance of things past / Patrick Alexander.
p. cm.

1. Proust, Marcel, 1871–1922. À la recherche du temps perdu—
Handbooks, manuals, etc. I. Title.
PQ2631.R63A7664 2009
843'.912—dc22 2009019230

eISBN: 978-0-307-47560-2

www.vintagebooks.com

Author photograph © *Jude Alexander*

v3.0

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