

from Patrick Alexander, *Marcel Proust's Search For Lost Time: A Reader's Guide to The Remembrance of Things Past* (Vintage, 2009).

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

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 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



Marcel Proust

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)

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, re-

ferring 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 Crécy, 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

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

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.