Swann's Way Study Guide

Swann's Way by Marcel Proust

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Contents

Plot Summary

Swann's Way, Remembrance of Things Past was written by Marcel Proust. It was originally written in French, and Swann's Way is just a portion of the entire manuscript. This edition is translated by C. K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin. It is set in France, during an unspecified time, probably late 1800's, early 1900's.

The book is comprised of four parts, narrated by an unidentified French gentleman, remembering his life as a boy, and centered around another older man named Charles Swann. The Narrator begins his story by describing his lifelong inability to sleep well. He is unhappy to be in his room alone and thinks of ways to bring his beloved mother into his room for additional attention. Every piece of furniture in the room, including the walls, drapes and lamp, is described in detail. The Narrator further tells the reader of the emotions evoked by each one.

The Narrator has vivid memories of his dreams, his thoughts before sleeping and his thoughts while awakening. His memories of Combray, a town where his family used to spend their summers, are special to him, and the town is described for the reader in detail. While in Combray, the Narrator's family stay with a great aunt, take long walks in the countryside and interact with the people who live year round in Combray. The great aunt is a wealthy hypochondriac whose relatives and staff are amused by her behavior but love her anyway. The Narrator's experiences with the aunt color his world, and he distinctly recalls helping her with her various herbs and medicines and overhearing her discussions with her few visitors.

Combray is described as the perfect sleepy French village, with eccentric landowners, busybodies, church goers, a boring reverend, and shopkeepers. The characters of the great aunt and her handmaid are drawn especially clearly, and their sad lives are evident. The Narrator speaks at length about the town's surroundings and walks he and the family take about the area. Rivers, paths through the woods, trees, flowers and animals are all described in rich detail, engaging all the senses of the reader.

A neighbor in Combray, who also is an acquaintance from the family's Parisian home, is Charles Swann. Charles Swann is well connected with the French aristocracy and therefore lives a life of interest to the Narrator. Charles Swann falls in love and marries a courtesan named Odette; the third chapter of the book recites the story of Swann and Odette, their meeting and love affair. Swann is an gentleman, with a love of art, theatre and women; Swann's life is often the subject of discussion with the Narrator's family. He is admired by some in the family and looked down upon by others. Through the family discussions and stories from Swann himself, the love affair is told to the reader. It is not a happy love affair because Odette soon tires of Swann once she has won him. Although other references in the book show that Odette and Swann eventually marry, the third chapter ends with that conclusion well in doubt.

In the last chapter of the book, the Narrator is in the story again and tells of his own love of Gilberte, Swann's daughter. The Narrator happens upon her first when he is a young

boy playing in the woods of Combray but does not see her again until sometime later in Paris. He becomes obsessed with this child of the man his family seems obsessed with and begins to build his life around her every move. Gilberte is unconcerned and unconnected to the Narrator, and the novel ends with the Narrator taking on the characteristics of his great aunt and of Swann, observing the world, loving parts of it, but not actively taking part in it.

Overture

Overture Summary

Swann's Way is a series of detailed memories of a man whose name is never given and who will be referred to in these summaries as The Narrator. The Narrator is a deeply-introspective person. At the beginning of Overture, The Narrator is remembering his thoughts as a boy in his Parisian bedroom and how he is dreaming of wakening. He is wondering about time and where it goes when he is asleep.

He remembers his bedroom and describes the lamp at his bedside, the drapes that hang across the windows of his room, and remarks that his bedroom furniture is old and dark. His bedroom does not make him feel cozy and warm and only reminds him that it does not contain his Mother, whom he adores. He is having depressing thoughts about lonely people and experiencing childish terrors contrasting with sexual dreams about women.

The Narrator wakes in his present adult state and chooses rather than go back to sleep, to remember all the places he has ever been and to go into more detail concerning his feelings for his mother. The Narrator speaks of his Mamma's kisses and how precious they were. He remembers the anticipation of her good night kiss as exciting yet torturous to him as the arrival of a late guest could eliminate his opportunity to be with his Mother. He remembers one night in particular when this occurred, and he sent a note through one of the housekeepers to his Mother. He also remembers the fear he felt when his father learned of the note. It all turned out well, though, as his father sent his mother to spend the entire night in the Narrator's room.

Some of his best memories are of when he was a child and his family would take their summers in Combray, a small town in the French countryside. The various members of the Narrator's family are introduced: Mamma, his Father, Grandmother, Grandfather, Aunts and Uncles. He remembers crying during some of the dramas of interaction between his family members, seemingly innocent and calm, but disturbing to the young boy who is very sensitive and protective of his family members.

The Narrator describes how he is surrounded by adults, as he is an only child. His life as a boy is full of adult intrigue, as he is overhearing conversations between his mother and father, his parents and grandparents, and his family's visitors.

The Narrator introduces Charles Swann, a distinguished gentleman who was a friend of the family and who visited often until Swann's unfortunate choice of a wife makes him an unwanted visitor in the Narrator's home. The Narrator's family is intrigued with Charles Swann, sharing tidbits of information about his reputation, his wardrobe, his art collection. The Narrator's grandmother especially enjoys taking an attitude towards Swann that is out of place in their social standing—she is upper-middle class and

Swann is obviously a high-class gentleman, yet she orders him about, demanding he bring the family fruit and special wine each time he appears for a visit.

The connection between Swann and the family is through the Grandfather, but it soon becomes obvious that his visits are a source of entertainment for the entire family.

The Narrator hints that Swann's story and the narrator's own would become similar and intertwined in the coming chapters. As an adult, the Narrator has tea with his mother; the taste of the tea and a cake woke strong memories of Combray in him. He analyzes the sensations and recalls the time he spent there as a child.

Overture Analysis

The reader is enticed into the memories and disturbing emotions of a troubled child whose nighttime fears and upsets are governed by the extent of his mother's good night kisses. The author delves deeply into the descriptions of every piece of furniture in the room, every thought process and childhood terror of the boy, relating it all to dreaming, awakening and sleeping. The urgency of the boy's yearnings for his mother's touch and kiss is indicative of a very sensitive and easily bruised childish ego. His family members are rigidly outlined characters.

His mother is sweet and endearing, allowing him to express every emotion, however inappropriate. His Grandmother and Great Aunt are merely shadows of the mother figure. His father is imposing and strong. His Uncle Adolphe and the famous Charles Swann are mighty men brought to their knees by their desire to be manipulated and used by women.

The author's detailed and minute descriptions are his way of conveying the impact one's surroundings and imagination have on reality. His theme of the meaning of love in this chapter relates to the consuming and obsessive love the young boy has for his mother. The Narrator and Swann have a tendency to become obsessed with the object of their affection, and in this chapter, the young Narrator's evening is a procession of frustration, anticipation, desire and fear, all related to whether or not his mother will kiss him goodnight, and if so, will she linger by his bedside longer, be pulled away by a late caller, or be encouraged away by his father. When she leaves, will he be able to sleep; can he manipulate her into returning, and what will his dreams become for that night?

Woven between this obsession with his mother, the Narrator introduces the members of the family, and brings the subject of the novel, M. Charles Swann, into the chapter for a brief introduction with veiled hints towards more details about Swann's unfortunate marriage.

Combray

Combray Summary

The narrator remembers arriving at Combray, a town in France, just before Easter one year. The family regularly travels there to visit his great aunt, who lives alone with her servants, in a large home. The family arrives by train and enters the small town, which is old and dark and dominated by a large church, and the streets are all named after Saints.

The Great Aunt is always suffering from imaginary ailments and never leaves her house. The Narrator describes in considerable detail his days in Combray, the long walks with his father or alone, his Aunt's chatter and gossip with her friend Eulalie, and the interaction of his Aunt and her cook, Francoise. The Narrator tells of his Aunt's established and rigid routines of the day; how the routine never varies except for dinner taking place an hour earlier on Saturdays, and how this is a huge joke between his parents. The Narrator's Aunt has chosen to confine herself to two rooms in the big house, one of which has a large window from which she can, and does, view the comings and goings of the town.

Francoise, the head maid to the Great Aunt is a servant but has become more of an untiring companion. She welcomes the Narrator's family because they are kind to her and offer somewhat of a respite from the Great Aunt's constant obsessions with the townsfolk. The Narrator's mother is especially sweet to Francoise, asking about her family and treating her as a longtime family friend rather than as a servant.

The Narrator clearly enjoys Combray, and the summers there are examined and described in full detail: going to church, visiting with the village people, the smells, sounds and colors of the village and the walks with his parents. The walks are ritualistic following certain named routes, such as the Guermantes Way, Swann's Way, and the Meseglise Way. It is on one such walk that the Narrator is alone and suddenly sees Gilberte Swann, Charles' daughter. The Narrator is enraptured of Gilberte and begins living his life in a shadow parallel to his imagined life for her.

The Narrator remembers falling in love with the theatre, the novelist Bergotte, actresses, and spending time with his much-admired Uncle Adolphe. When he is forbidden to spend time with Adolphe anymore because his uncle entertains courtesans at his home, the Narrator begins spending all his time reading or contemplating art. He imagines the woman he will marry and loses track of the hours as he reads and thinks. At one point, Swann finds him reading Bergotte, and they talk about the writer.

As the Narrator learns more about art, he begins comparing the people of Combray and the landscape and churches with his favorite art works. He decides he will be a writer when he gets older.

Combray Analysis

Combray represents a happy time for a child who is otherwise moody and depressed in his hometown of Paris. In Combray the family is away from the Parisian society and endless dinner parties, instead spending their evenings on long leisurely walks with the Narrator and interactions with common folk. Reminders of Paris abound with Charles Swann's property nearby, though, and it is here that the Narrator catches his first glimpse of Gilberte.

In Combray and on the walks he takes each evening, the Narrator is allowed to expand his considerable imagination to include every level of existence, from river water plants to ancient ruins of castles and battlements. The Narrator is atypical of a boy who loves warrior stories and army scenes, choosing instead to relish varieties of flowers, art and literature.

The theme of the Meaning of Love in this chapter moves from family love to that of art and writing. The narrator finds a writer he likes and reads everything published by that author. The narrator discusses his readings with his family, with his friends, with total strangers, seeking to learn and glean everything he can from everyone around him about the object of his obsession. When the narrator discovers the theatre, he again researches all he can and allows himself long flights of fancy about the play, the actors, the set design and the program, even though he is not allowed to attend a performance until he is much older. The narrator does not love lightly; he throws himself completely into whatever has taken his fancy and realizes he has a sensitivity and perception that will serve him well as a writer.

Swann In Love

Swann In Love Summary

The Narrator tells the story of Charles Swann and Odette. Charles Swann is a Parisian, middle-aged man of high society who spends his time going to the opera, theatre, dinner parties and seducing women. He is busy with all these activities but bored. He meets Odette, a younger woman whose occupation appears to be serving as a companion and lover to wealthy gentlemen.

Odette invites Charles Swann to accompany her to a dinner party at the home of the Verdurins. The Verdurins are middle-aged couple in Paris who are moderately wealthy and have chosen to gather a group of eclectic friends to have dinner, go to the theatre, travel Europe and provide intrigue and entertainment for them each evening. The Verdurins call their collection "the little nucleus" and their lives are devoted to manipulating this group and observing their behaviors. Individuals are favored and added, then rejected and ignored by the group, all to the whims of M. and Mme Verdurin.

Swann is accepted into the little group by way of Odette's endorsement and becomes a regular visitor. Initially, Swann does not find Odette desirable, but she pursues and manipulates him until he believes himself to be in love with her. Swann, like the narrator, falls into love more as an obsession than a true emotion. Swann is devastated when another suitor woos Odette away and she rejects him.

Her rejection of him alienates the Verdurins, and they stop inviting him to the "little group" events. Odette's rejection drives Swann mad, and he becomes obsessed with her time and thoughts. He stops seeing all other women so he can concentrate on getting back into her favor.

Swann's obsession in getting Odette back as his lover becomes the first priority in his life and affects his health and well being. To win her back, Swann gives Odette money, gifts, and stays away from her so as not to incur her wrath. Odette plays with Swann, allowing him to see her just long enough to keep him interested but continuing to have other lovers. He has spies following her and one night spends hours in the rain watching her window, imagining her with another man, only to find out that was not her window at all.

Swann is going through bad and good thoughts about Odette, so when she asks for money to take a trip by herself he refuses. This angers her and she turns away from him, which in turn makes him want her even more. He wishes he did not love her; she has become self assured and confident. She spends time with everyone but him; he confronts her finally to ask if she has taken women as lovers.

When Odette hints that perhaps she did sleep with women, he realizes she has been lying to him and manipulating him all along. Yet, he does not stop loving her or pursuing her, or trying to regain his position as first in her life. He decides that marrying her would be the best way to resolve this situation.

Swann In Love Analysis

In this chapter, the author has the Narrator step back from his own memories to tell the story of Swann and Odette. This is not a happy story, even though the Narrator states the two eventually marry and have a daughter. The story in this chapter is the tale of the beginning of Swann's obsession with Odette.

Although at the beginning, Swann's lifestyle indicates that he is not desperate either for woman companionship or with a desire to marry, Swann is ripe and ready for the manipulative tactics of a woman like Odette. Swann is not initially attracted to Odette, but he has an unwavering desire to see real people through the eyes of an artist; therefore, Swann allows a resemblance of Odette to Jethro's daughter in a Boticelli frieze to take flight in his imagination and subsequently to fall in love with Odette.

This absurd turn of events causes the man to literally lose himself in a dream of Odette, a courtesan with limited intelligence and even less in common with Swann, as the perfect life partner for him. Initially she is eager to be in his company and seduce him, but when he falls out of favor with the Verdurins, she begins to avoid him.

This makes Swann want her even more, which is paramount to the absurdity of being in love with her in the first place. The chapter immerses the reader in Swann's obsession for Odette, his entreaties, her rejections, his accusations and her lies. The title of the novel, Swann's Way, may refer that this is his way of dealing with the lack of love and purpose in his life, which is solved by his decision to settle on Odette for his wife.

The author does not reveal in this chapter how the couple return to a state where a marriage proposal would be accepted, so the reader is left to wonder how two people who have so little in common and who are such dull characters finally become a married couple with a child.

Place-Names: The Name

Place-Names: The Name Summary

The Narrator speaks of Balbec and of his room at the Grand Hotel de la Plage. Speaking of this room brings forth a flood of memories of his childhood. The Narrator again compares the dreaming of these rooms and that time with the reality of the place and the days of his childhood. The Narrator recalls discussing Balbec with M. Swann and of being astounded that his friend's memories compared so differently with his own about the place.

The Narrator speaks of the wild and tempestuous history of the Balbec region, which brings out his long-held feelings that he wants to travel about the earth by rail, choosing no destination, just getting on the rail carand allowing life to come to him. He thinks of the images in his mind of the towns he would visit, wondering if the reality of those towns could ever compare to his dreams of them.

The Narrator describes what he would do in each town, if allowed to abandon his routine and take this rail journey. What colors would he see in each town, what would the people be doing, how would his morning coffee taste, and upon what fantastic art and architecture would he be gazing?

He remembers that he has often had such flights of fancy and has conjured pictures in his mind about a place and become enchanted with these pictures only to actually arrive and be disappointed with the reality of the town—how it not only is not as his dreams but does not live up to its picturesque name. The Narrator contemplates the substance of dreams and anticipation, comparing it with the physical senses of touch and smell. It is, the Narrator decides, safer to keep dreaming than to indulge in reality. These thoughts bring the Narrator to memories of an especially painful and poignant time in his life when he was boy in Paris after the Great Aunt has passed away and the family is living in Paris.

Francoise has become his governess. The reliable old servant accompanies the Narrator on long walks on the Champs-Ely sees, and they routinely stop at a beautiful park area. It is at this park where the Narrator again sees Gilberte Swann, the daughter of M. Charles Swann and Odette, playing with other girls. The Narrator falls hopelessly in love with Gilberte. As he has previously obsessed about plays and writers, he obsesses about this young woman.

He convinces Francoise to take him back to the park again and again; finally Gilberte notices him and makes him part of the play. For some time they play together every day, and he learns all he can about her—her name, her father's name, and the street on which she lives. He drives his own family mad with questions about her and her father.

In the months that follow, the Narrator and Gilberte grow closer and she begins to call him by his first name, which thrills him completely. He begins to dream of a life with her at his side, not a lover yet not just a friend, but a delicious union of their minds and futures.

One day she responds to his question about seeing her the following day by saying she won't be coming back to the park to play; she needs to go on visits with her mother. The Narrator is devastated to realize he has placed far more importance on their friendship than Odette has, and he does not believe she will not be there the next day. Yet the Narrator and Francoise go to the park at the usual time for many days after that conversation, and Gilberte is never there. The Narrator questions the other girls to determine her new schedule. He places himself on the routes he knows Gilberte and Odette will be taking to go on visits, but although he does occasionally see Odette, he fails to see Gilberte.

The Narrator returns to the present and says that there is no elegance left, and he is left with his memories of things past.

Place-Names: The Name Analysis

Like his older acquaintance, Swann, the Narrator seems destined for a life pursuing art, participating in Parisian high society's machinations, and being supported by old money. And as Swann did, the Narrator chooses a woman completely unlike himself upon whom to bestow his affections and obsessions.

It is interesting to note that Gilberte is allowed to call the Narrator by his first name but does not extend that courtesy to the reader.

Obsession is love for the characters of Swann and the Narrator, and these men fall into love as one does a deep pit, with no hope of having that love returned or ever escaping from it. Rather than becoming bitter and disappointed, the men embellish their dreams and fantasies and enjoy their chosen misery.

These men live as shadows of life on the edges of reality, preferring their dreams and visions of what life should be like, rather than participating in the real world with real relationships and experiences. They live their lives as statues, as art, in the world but not part of it.

The novel ends as it began, in mid-stream with the Narrator concocting another elaborate, depressing dream that replaces life and reality.

Characters

Narrator

The narrator is a man of undetermined age who is recalling his youth as a member of an upper- middle class family in France. The family has a home in Paris and spends their summers in Combray. The Narrator never reveals his name or his physical description to the reader, speaking in first person throughout three of the four chapters of the book, devoting one chapter exclusively to the description of Charles Swann's pursuit and unhappy love affair with Odette. The Narrator is a sickly child who dwells on details and uses metaphors to describe his surroundings, the people he meets and the places he visits. When he finds something he likes, he likes it immensely, pouring himself into the tiniest fragments of its existence. He obsesses about people, such as actresses, and then specific individuals, as in the writer Bergotte, and in the person of Gilberte. The Narrator is not the hero of his story, per se, but mostly an observer. When he is the unwitting cause of a rift between his family and his Uncle Adolphe, it is not out of manipulation, but because of his dogged pursuit of one of his obsessions and from his naivete. The Narrator is a lover of life and beauty.

In Swann's Way, the Narrator tells the reader of his boyhood fears of the dark, and of being abandoned by his mother, who he adores more than most boys love their mothers. His memories of the family's summer trips to Combray, of his interaction with his aunt, her cook, the villagers, and the long walks in the French countryside are relayed in the first two chapters of the book. In the last chapter, the Narrator as a young boy finally becomes acquainted and quite enamored with Gilberte, Charles Swann's daughter, and spends several months meeting her in a park and playing games. Gilberte is blissfully unaware of the Narrator's obsession and stops coming to the park as she begins the process of becoming a young woman of society. The Narrator continues his adoration of her from afar.

Mamma

The Narrator's mother is referred to as "Mamma" throughout the book, and even when being spoken to by other characters, is not otherwise named. She is described at length by the Narrator, referring to her beautiful and sweet voice and as being an admirable reader. She values generosity and moral distinction above all other qualities in life. Mamma is kind to Francoise, the great aunt's cook, and this kindness extends to Mamma inviting Francois to live with the family in Paris when the great aunt dies. Mamma is described as having long black hair, usually worn elaborately built up, but there are no other descriptions of her physical traits in the novel.

Mamma is a continuing, soothing presence in the Narrator's life; she is a loving wife and mother, and an able manager of the household. Mamma holds a prominent place in the past and present for the Narrator.

Narrator's Father

The father is an imposing figure and is never referred to as Pappa, as mother is referred to as Mamma. Father is interested in meteorology and does not appear to have an occupation, although the family is wealthy. Father is brusque with the Narrator as a young boy, but his actions show a deep caring and concern: Father sends Mamma to spend the night with the boy some evenings, and spends many hours on walks with the boy when the family is in Combray. Father does not allow the narrator to do things that are normally allowed by the more forgiving and lenient mother and grandmother, and is therefore some resented.

Father's role in the story is to be the rock of the family, the anchor and rescuer, seen by the Narrator as the one person who can solve any problem, sort out any issues. The Narrator is acutely aware of his father's high expectations of him, and the Narrator is always thinking about those expectations compared to whatever reality he is able to provide. Father is a strong family man, loves his wife and is devoted to his only child.

Bathilde Amedee, Grandmother to Narrator

The Narrator's Grandmother is a prominent figure because the grandparents reside and travel with Father and Mamma and the Narrator. Bathilde is a brisk and vigorous woman; the rest of the family thinks she is not completely sane. Her after-dinner walks in Combray ended with an entreaty by the great aunt to "come into the house and stop your husband from drinking," which never failed to exasperate the grandmother. Grandmother is a gentle and sweet soul, who shows her love by bestowing numerous kisses and hugs on all her family.

Grandmother's role in the story is to reinforce the feminine presence in the Narrator's life, as a woman who is funny and eclectic but lovable and steadfast.

Leonie Amedee

Leonie Amedee is the Great Aunt whose home in Combray is used by the Narrator's family as their summer retreat from Paris. Leonie is widowed, although the husband is seldom mentioned. She is a long-suffering hypochondriac and judges everyone by their reaction to her imagined illnesses. She talks to herself, follows very strict routines, loves gossip, and watches the townspeople as they walk by her window. She does not leave the house and eventually dies there. Leonie considers herself and her family to be far above Swann socially, although the exact opposite is true. She speaks down to Swann and sees him only as useful to bring her things. Her cook and companion, Francoise, is at her beck and call and never truly appreciated by Leonie.

Francoise

Francoise is the Great Aunt's personal maid, cook and constant companion. The relationship between the two women sometimes seems adversarial, but when Leonie dies, Francoise is devastated and inconsolable. Francoise waits on the Great Aunt tirelessly, coming up the stairs for every bell ring, even when she is older and not able to make the effort without pain. Francoise is a stern woman who is very good at her job as domestic help and highly valued by Mamma. When the great aunt dies, Francoise is brought to Paris to continue her service with the family. Francoise has a cruel streak which surprises the Narrator when he discovers it.

Charles Swann

Charles Swann is a man of Parisian society, spending his evenings at the theater, dining with friends, playing cards with the aristocracy or royalty, and seducing women from all walks of life. He has a home in Paris and in Combray, and seems to know everyone of importance in the city. His father was a stockbroker, which is where the family's wealth derives, although Charles Swann does not have employment. His days are spent preparing for the evenings of societal obligations and pleasures.

Swann has had many mistresses and lovers, but these pursuits end when he meets Odette. At first he finds her common and not attractive, but when he begins to compare her to a piece of art he admires, he finds himself in love with her. They become lovers when the two of them frequent the same home for a series of dinner engagements; however, the romance sours when Swann manages to anger the host and hostess. The Verudins conspire then to keep Swann and Odette apart, and Odette's passion towards Swann cools considerably. Although the novel does not go into detail as to the marriage itself, several references are made to Swann and Odette being married, so it is assumed they finally recover from this rift in the affair, marry and have a child, Gilberte.

Charles is a vain man whose life is consumed with society manipulations, travel, art and how he looks to other people. He is described as having stiff red hair and bold green eyes. He is a snob, but a friendly one, and has all the manners and refinement of a successful Parisian gentleman.

Odette de Crecy

Odette is Swann's mistress. She has large beautiful eyes, a sharp profile, delicate skin, and is not very intelligent. She is extremely capable, however, of manipulating the men in her life. Eventually Swann is obsessed with her every movement and thought. It is implied that she is a professional courtesan because she extracts money, gifts and even carriages from the men who admire and sleep with her. She dresses exquisitely and provocatively, with her purpose in life being the seduction and entertainment of men.

She admits to Swann that she has also been the lover of several women in her life, but this does not dissuade him for continuing his pursuit. After her initial entrapment of Swann, she begins to treat him terribly, ignoring him and leaving his side to attend other functions. She is a shallow woman, interested only in herself and the betterment of her personal situation without regard for the man who loves her.

Verdurins

M. and Mme Verdurin are a married couple who open their home to a select group for dinner every evening or plan an outing for the same group in Paris. They are the host and hostess for these soirees, choosing and rejecting the members of the group as whim guides them. Odette is a part of the group, who then receives permission from the Vedurins to bring Charles Swann into the group. The Verdurins enjoy hearing about and instigating intrigue within their group; they enjoy matchmaking and then tearing asunder the matched couple. The Verdurins are proud of the diversity and the openness of their group and promote the evenings as liberal and full of hilarity. Mme Verdurin, did in fact, once dislocate her jaw from laughing too much. The Verdurins both have mannerisms that are exaggerated and theatrical. The couple are extremely wealthy, do not have occupations, and spend their days and nights with friends, eating, drinking and gossiping.

Comte de Forcheville

Forcheville is a new arrival to the Verdurins' group and is especially welcomed by the host and hostess as a potential new suitor for Odette after Swann has upset them. Forcheville is a snob who pretends to know everything about art, theatre and society, but who actually knows very little. Swann finds him extremely irritating and envisions Odette with Forcheville long after Odette was tired of Forcheville and has moved on to other lovers.

Uncle Adolphe

Adolphe is the Narrator's uncle, who is dear to the family and admiring of the Narrator until an incident occurs which places Adolphe in disfavor with the Narrator's parents. Adolphe is much like Swann, a man who is engaged in society and who seduces women from every occupation and economic strata of France.

Eulalie

A townsperson of Combray, Eulalie is a regular and faithful visitor to Great Aunt Leonie, telling her of every movement of the townspeople and all the gossip. She visits on the same day every week, and at the end of the stay, is rewarded for her loyalty by receiving coins from Leonie, much to the chagrin of Francoise.

Gilberte

Gilberte is the daughter of Charles and Odette Swann. She is an independent child who is confident and self assured. The Narrator sees her once in Combray as a child and is struck with love that apparently lasts most of his childhood. He carries a picture of her in his mind, and when the two children actually begin to spend time playing together in Paris, he is completely taken with her, much like Swann was with Odette. Gilberte gives up playing at the field where she and the Narrator used to meet, saying she would be spending her time going on visits with her mother, entering society as a young woman should.

Objects/Places

Magic Lantern

In the Narrator's bedroom, there is a lampshade decorated with various scenes of historical and mythical creatures. The Narrator despises this intrusion to a place that is barely tolerable to him anyway. The scenes are meant to distract him and to help him sleep, but the lantern instead causes him to spend hours analyzing every detail and become aggravated by its depictions of stories.

Narrator's Bedroom

The Narrator does not enjoy going to bed because he cannot sleep well and it means separation from his Mamma. He resists going to his bedroom and finds all furnishings, even the drapes, to have hostile intentions for him. He finds the bed and surroundings extremely uncomfortable and is unable to find rest.

Combray

A town in France, Combray is where the Narrator's family spend their summers. The Narrator goes into considerable detail describing the town, its people, the walls, the church, and the landscape. The family takes a train to and from the town and spends every evening while staying in Combray, taking walks around various parts of the countryside. There are several walks around the town, departing from the Great Aunt's home and returning to it, that have a specified route known to the family. Whether the walk is alone or with the rest of the family, the members tend to follow the routes faithfully and report back to the family what happened on the walk. One of the walks is the "Guermantes Way" which does not take the walker to Guermantes, but in that general direction; this is the Narrator's favorite walk during one summer. He daydreams about the family of Guermantes, and envisions himself one day fishing with the Duchess or meeting some unknown woman along the walk. When he does finally meet the Duchess in church one Sunday, he is surprised by how normal and common she appears, so unlike his imagination.

Great Aunt's Outer Room

The Narrator's Great Aunt has confined herself over the years and because of imagined ailments to two rooms of her house and has not left them in years. For this reason, the room that is not her bedroom is where she receives visitors, and most importantly, from whose windows she observes the town people as they walk by during the day and early evening. It is her window to the world. The Narrator describes the room in all its rich detail, from the velvet armchairs to the patterned wallpaper.

Verdurins Dinner Party

The home of the Verdurins lends itself well to the dinner parties and the extended socializing that takes place after dinner. To be invited to a Verdurin Evening is indicative that one has found favor with the Verdurins and is a candidate for their select group or nucleus. When the invitations stopped coming, one is barred and out of favor. There was no set program for the evening, and people could speak about what they chose without fear of being too liberal or breaking protocol.

Champs-Elyees

This is an avenue that borders a park in Paris, where the Narrator and Francoise go every afternoon and see Gilberte. It is a broad lawn of grass with a statue and fountain. This location becomes symbolic to the Narrator because it is where he and Gilberte become friends and playmates for a short while.

Vivonne River

The river that runs along the path of the Guermantes Way. The Narrator is enchanted with this river and of the water plants in it, comparing the root-bound lilies to prisoners straining to break their chains. The Narrator remembers seeing the river in many shades of blue and green, and all manner of flowers—a kaleidoscope of movement and color that fascinated him.

Combray Church

The Narrator loves the church in the town of Combray, where he and his family attend services during their holidays in the town. The Narrator can still picture it in his mind as an adult. The Abbotts of Combray are buried beneath its weathered stones, and the church is filled with rich painted glass that catch the light and enchant the young Narrator when he was a child

Travel

There are many cities and countries mentioned in the novel, each lovingly referred to by the Narrator as places that he knows or he believes he knows, based upon either his travel there or from what he has heard. Imagining not only the city itself and its people, the Narrator extends his thoughts about a city or town to include his method of travel to arrive there, what he will have for lunch, and how he thinks the air might smell. Much of the Narrator's time is spent wondering about distant towns, and if their reality will be as attractive to him as the picture he has in his mind about the town.

Sleep and Dreams

The Narrator has devoted much of the chapter titled "Overture" to the concept of dreams and their meaning. A good night's sleep generally evades him as a young man; his nights are almost unbearable because of his imagination and his yearning for his mother to come kiss him goodnight.

Bergotte's Writings

Bergotte's books represent one of the Narrator's early obsessions. He reads the words with an enthusiasm that borders on love and feels that reading this author's work has brought him to experience a deeper, vaster, and more integral part of himself. The Narrator speaks about the writings to everyone he meets, and the books inspire the Narrator to expect more from himself than he did before he read Bergotte

Cattleya

These are the type of flowers Odette was wearing on her bodice the night she and Swann first kissed and made love. After that evening, the two lovers would refer to "doing a cattleya" as their signal that one of them wished to have sex.

Social Sensitivity

Primarily interested in the world of art, symbolism, and memory, Proust nevertheless considers the social aspects of his society in the many volumes of his work. He writes of the prewar years (1900-1914) and the strik ing social mobility that characterizes this period. At this point, the old aristocracy was collapsing, to be replaced by the bourgeoisie and several Jewish and American families. The glimpse into Mme. Verdurin's salon at the beginning of the "Swann in Love" shows a bourgeois salon, replacing the old aristocracy so popular in French history. Odette de Crecy, the object of Swann's love, is a member of this circle, and her daughter Gilberte will follow the same evolution in the society of her times. Painter states that Proust wrote the great obituary of the French nobility whom he had loved all his life.

Proust writes of a very circumscribed society during the prewar years, yet he gives vivid portraits of French society at the time, perhaps the best that exist. The provincial bourgeoisie come to life in the portraits of Combray, especially of his Aunt Leonie and her curiosity about her village and all that happens there. The servant class is ably portrayed in Francoise, the faithful family servant who is in reality a composite of many figures, with her devotion to duty and to the family, her peasant good sense and ruse, and her cruelty and intolerance. As Wallace Fowlie states, "Out of a detailed analysis of French traits in two social classes and a few portraits of servants and members of the lower classes, Proust created a recognizable humanity with the abiding features of goodness and wickedness."

Thsmss Proust forever will be known as the poet of memory, "the whole universe in a cup of tea." Early in the first volume of Remembrance of Things Past, the author dips a little cake called a madeleine into a cup of tea, and with the familiar taste of his childhood, recalls his days in Combray. The experience of involuntary memory will return about eight times in the course of the novel, and represents for Proust the conquest of time and the attainment of a certain kind of eternity through memory. In this way Proust joins his contemporaries Freud and Jung in their discovery of the world of the subconscious and of esoteric myths and symbols.

The problem of the oversensitive child, extremely attached to his mother and frightened by his father, appears in the opening pages and throughout "Combray," the first major section of Swann's Way. With delicate humor and graphic symbols of death, the author describes his compelling need to kiss his mother good-night, even when she is engaged in a dinner party. Both mother and father give in to the nervous whim of their son, and he realizes that he will never be free of dependence during his lifetime.

Swann's Way is dominated by the themes of love and sensuality. Proust traces the entire gamut of this emotion, and evokes all of its excesses and inversions. In a beautiful May-time scene, the author first sees little Gilberte Swann against a hawthorn bush, and she will forever remain as he first saw her, a love idealized. On the other hand, the voyeuristic author observes the lesbian actions of Mlle. Vinteuil and her friend in front of her father's portrait, and thereby makes the acquaintance of the world of evil.

Proust, himself a homosexual, although the narrator of the story is not, places great emphasis on this type of love. He describes it overtly with sadistic overtones, usually expressing it tragically and painfully, unlike Gide's triumphant confessions.

The second major part of Volume I, "Swann in Love," is totally devoted to the theme of passion and jealousy.

Swann is hopelessly enamored of the unfaithful and coquettish Odette de Crecy, and soon recognizes her inability to maintain a commitment. With ruthless jealousy and suspicion he pursues her every move. Unable to live with her, he cannot exist without her, and pursues her with morbid curiosity and passionate desire. He also shows the tenderness of a lover, evoking a musical phrase (la petite phrase de Vinteuil) that is the symbol of their love, and the cattleyas, flowers that evoke their first night together. Swann eventually marries Odette, realizing a certain self-destruction, but at the same time the redeeming force of memory and art.

Proust the artist dominates the entire work, particularly the first section, "Combray." Delicate nature imagery evokes lilacs, hawthorns, and water lilies, in which he sees both the beauty of the Virgin Mary and the gates of hell. The church at Combray, not a masterpiece of cathedral architecture, nevertheless becomes a memorial to history and to Proust's own ancestry.

Literature as a form of art also occupies a prominent role in the novel. The author's idol and inspiration, Bergotte, recreates the past in his work and brings the author and the reader into immediate contact with his innermost and otherwise inaccessible self.

Techniques

Although Proust uses a great many psychological elements in his work, particularly in regard to the role of memory and dreams, his greatest originality lies not in his psychology nor in his observations on art, but in his form and style. His sentences and paragraphs, lengthy and complex, are musical, leading the reader where memory and inspiration freely carry the author.

His details are exhaustive, yet his elaborate use of metaphors and symbols suggests another reality. His descriptions of people and places are so exact that they come alive. Illiers-Combray appears in the distance as the train approaches it, and the reader sees every detail as the narrator saw it some hundred years ago. The jeweled stained glass windows of the parish church sparkle as precious gems through the pages of the narrative.

In Proust's work, nothing really happens, but for him the most important events in life are those that one has forgotten, that will return one day through involuntary memory. It is not plot that is important; there is in fact hardly any sense of intrigue. It is rather the internal mirror of the author's spirit, and by extension, that of every person. Valery calls Proust's style "prismatic," and states that Proust believed that only metaphor could give eternity to his style. Completely narrated in the first person, except for "Swann in Love," Proust makes the world of the artist and the inner world of sensibility a reality for the reader, far better than his equally famous contemporaries Valery, Gide, and Claudel. Another of his successful techniques as a novelist is his ability to present several themes at the same time, without losing the thread of any.

He is able, better than Balzac or Stendhal, to weave imperceptibly the drama both of the individual and of society.

Themes

Imagination vs Reality

The author contends that each person has a concept, a preconceived notion of someone or someplace they have heard of, that is changed when that someone is met in person or that someplace is encountered in reality. In this novel, the Narrator and Swann both perceive reality as an insult and great disappointment to what they had dreamed, whether it be a work of art, a play, a new-found love, or a destination. The Narrator does not necessarily adjust his preconception to match the reality, preferring to cling to his dream and make the dream a part of the reality. Both men prefer their original concept over truth. Swann originally believes Odette to be unattractive and undesirable until he notices a pose of hers that reminds him of a woman in a work of art. This image of Odette persists, surpassing his own actual experiences with the woman, and his obsession for her grows more from his dream of her rather than reality.

The Narrator exhibits the same doggedness when it comes to his idea of something, as in his pursuit of information about actors and actresses. Although he has never been to the theater, he creates intricate ideas and conceptions in his mind of how the actors must appear and behave. When the Narrator meets an actress, he is overwhelmed that she is an ordinary person, not the demi-goddess he has created in his thoughts.

The theme of the intoxicating pull of imagination versus the mundane reality is replayed again and again in this novel, as if the author is entreating us all to lapse into his fantasy world of women who appear from nowhere, incomplete and resembling flowers, rather than real life, which he sees as depressing, boring and common.

Importance of Art in Life

The author uses examples of art in the form of paintings, sculpture, literature and architecture to illustrate almost every landscape, structure, and person in the novel. Women are compared to, and attributed with, the characteristics of a figure in a painting or sculpture. Landscapes are described using famous artworks, and writers are utilized to explain feelings. Everything is once removed from the reader by a reference to a famous piece of art, or by using another artist's rendering to describe an emotion.

It is obvious art in every form is important to the author. His characters go to plays and admire actresses and actors. Their dialogue centers around their opinions of authors, and their artistic choices define their character as good, evil or boring. Many paragraphs and pages are devoted to the author's interpretation of the meaning of a sculpture, the significance of a painting, and the appearance of a character to historic works of art.

Art is, of course, appreciated by all people; however, in the time of this novel, only the upper class of society had the time and resources to purchase books and art, and to spend their vast amounts of leisure time pursuing the arts. This class of society was

also able to travel to where other art was displayed or stored and expand their knowledge of a subject.

Meaning of Love

In this novel, there are several forms of love. The Narrator's love for his mother, Swann's love for Odette, and the Narrator's love for Gilberte.

Swann finds love to become the driving force of his life, which has been up to this point, meaningless and unsatisfying. Although the love he feels for Odette is based upon a fantasy, it consumes his every moment and results in a marriage and a child. Swann chooses Odette for his wife, though it results in his being ostracized from the high society of Paris which was a large part of his lifestyle.

The Narrator is obsessed with his mother, spending his days looking forward to her goodnight kiss, and his nights agonizing over how he can make her nighttime presence last longer next time. As he falls in love with actresses, visions of himself fishing with the Duchess, and finally Gilberte, it appears that the meaning of love for the Narrator is a process of living for a very sensitive and tactile man who is destined to love things and people who either do not exist or can never truly belong to him.

Style

Point of View

In Swann's Way, the point of view is through the eyes of the narrator, an unnamed French man who is remembering in detail his childhood in Paris and in Combray, France. The memories mix with the present, but the majority of the story is descriptions of the child's surroundings, experiences and emotions of the past.

In the chapter entitled "Swann in Love," the Narrator tells a long story of M. Charles Swann, a person who is associated by friendship to the Narrator's family and whose life has been a subject of discussion over the years. In this chapter, the point of view changes to that of Charles Swann, during the time he is courting his wife Odette. Towards the end of the chapter, The Narrator takes back the point of view, referring to "my grandfather" to notify the reader the book is about the memories of the Narrator, and this story about Charles and Odette is just a diversion from the real story.

The eyes of the Narrator take in everything, and full descriptions, emotions and senses are provided through this point of view. Rather than just describing what he himself has seen, the Narrator takes the reader through conversations with others regarding his subject or place.

Although the reader is dwelling in the mind and experiences of the Narrator, seeing unlimited details regarding furnishings, smells, movement, comparisons to art, and even the boy's thoughts regarding the lilies in the river, the author withholds several critical facts about the Narrator: his name, his physical description, his occupation or marital state in the present, what happened before readers begin reading about him, or what happens after.

Setting

The story is set in France, sometime in the late 1800's or early 1900's, during the author's lifetime. Travel is by carriage or train or on foot. A Victorian lifestyle and attitude seems to prevail, and the Narrator's family is upper-middle class. His parents do not appear to have gainful employment but are able to live sumptuously in both Paris and Combray and take extended holidays. The characters interact at dinner parties, while traveling and during elaborate and constructed visits with one another. Most of the action takes place in Combray or Paris, although the Narrator alludes to many other cities and towns in France. The story begins in Paris, moves to Combray in the second chapter, and back to Paris for the final two chapters.

Each setting, whether it be a room or a walk along the river, is replete with descriptions of the way the flowers smell, how the light through the windows or the trees appears, the wardrobe of passers-by, and the weather.

The descriptions of settings, and the Narrator's reactions to the surroundings, is a large part of the novel. The author uses these places and objects to convey the depth of the Narrator's memories to the readers, to create for the readers, if it is possible, the feeling that they, too, were in that church in Combray or seeing Gilberte for the first time. The author appears to have an almost pathological need to express the tiniest details, as if a general description itself was insufficient, and it needs comparison to a famous piece of art, or the reaction of someone besides himself to accurately portray the object or place to the reader.

Language and Meaning

The original novel was written in French and translated into English; however, the translators claim to be very true to the original. The vocabulary is extensive to the point of being ponderous to read. The sentences are longer than used in modern writing, sometimes extending for the entire paragraph.

The author uses adjectives and adverbs like water, and liberally sprinkles them throughout the text, at the expense of dialogue.

The author appears to use lengthy descriptions to transport the reader back into the author's memories as completely as possible, so that the reader not only knows the color of the drapes in his childhood bedroom, but feels exactly the level of discomfort and unhappiness he felt when gazing upon them. Yet as the author pulls the reader into the minute details of the wallpaper or flowers or the food being consumed, he maintains a distance from the characters of the novel.

Although the Narrator had a good childhood without poverty, upheaval or violence, the overall tone and vocabulary of the novel reflects a person who sees beauty and love all around but lives a life of quiet despair and unmet expectations. The Narrator is in a state of constant surprise at the sharp contrast between what he dreamed and what is reality.

Structure

Swann's Way is part of a larger piece of work called Remembrance of Things Past, by Marcel Proust. This translation is 462 pages long and consists of four parts: "Overture," "Combray," "Swann in Love," and "Place-Names: The Name."

Most novels have a beginning, a middle and an end, but this novel is a series of memories. The writer drifts from one thought and extensive descriptions of settings to another, with no apparent timeline or structure. In the middle of these memories is a story about a love affair, not between the Narrator who began the story, but two people who had been discussed in his presence as a child.

The novel begins with "Overture," a lengthy memory of the Narrator's difficulty in sleeping as a child; there is some self-analysis as to his obsession with his mother. In

"Combray," the next chapter, a town in France is described down to its cobblestones, and some attention to character development and the Narrator's interactions with his family. This interest ends abruptly with the story of "Swann In Love," which isn't about the Narrator or his family at all. In "Place Names," the Narrator is back in charge of the story during a time not fully explained to the reader. The reader is left in the middle of the Narrator's pursuit of Swann's daughter.

Quotes

Narrator, Page 49
"What an abyss of uncertainty, whenever the mind feels overtaken by itself; when it, the seeker, is at the same time the dark region through which it must go seeking and where all its equipment will avail it nothing."

Narrator, Page 62
"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."

M. Legrandin, to Narrator, Page 73
"'You have a soul in you of rare quality, an artist's nature; never let it starve for lack of what it needs.'"

Narrator, Page 93
"Had my parents allowed me, when I read a book, to pay a visit to the region it described, I should have felt that I was making an enormous advance towards the ultimate conquest of truth."

Narrator, Page 101
"One of these passages of Bergotte, the third or fourth which I had detached from the rest, filled me with a joy to which the meager joy I had tasted in the first passage bore no comparison, a joy that I felt I was experiencing in a deeper, vaster, more integral part of myself, from which all obstacles and partitions seemed to have been swept away."

Narrator, Page 107
"We say rather originality, charm, delicacy, strength; and then one day we realize that it is precisely all this that adds up to talent."

Narrator's Grandfather, Page 155
"'Poor Swann, what a life they are leading him - sending him so far away so that she can be alone with her Charlus - for it was he, I recognized him at once!'"

Narrator, Page 172
"Indeed, that pleasure does not even exist, isolated, distinct, formulated in the consciousness, as the ultimate aim for which one seeks a woman's company, or as the cause of the preliminary perturbation that one feels."

Narrator, Page 189
"But at other times, while my parents were growing impatient at seeing me loiter behind instead of following them, my present life, instead of seeming an artificial creation of my father's which he could modify as he chose, appeared, on the contrary, to be comprised in a larger reality which had not been created for my benefit, from whose judgments

there was no appeal, within which I had no friend or ally, and beyond which no further possibilities lay concealed."

Narrator, Page 200
"And so it was from the Guermantes way that I learned to distinguish between these states which reign alternately within me, during certain periods, going so far as to divide each day between them, the one returning to dispossess the other with the regularity of a fever; contagious, and yet so foreign to one another, so devoid of means of communication, that I can no longer understand, or even picture to myself, in one state what I have desired or dreaded or accomplished in the other."

Swann In Love, Page 209
"And Swann, who behaved simply and casually with a duchess, would tremble for fear of being despised, and would instantly begin to pose, when in the presence of a housemaid."

Odette, in a note to Swann, Page 242
"'If only,' she wrote, 'you had also forgotten your heart! I should never have let you have that back.'"

"Swann In Love," Page 261
"For Swann was once more finding in things, since he had falling in love, the charm that he had found when, in his adolescence, he had fancied himself an artist; with this difference, that the charm that lay in them now was conferred by Odette alone."

M. Verdurin, to Mme Verdurin, referring to Swann, Page 290
"'Didn't I say so?' retorted her husband. 'He's simply a failure, one of those small-minded individuals who are envious of anything that's at all big.'"

Swann, Page 312
"I inhabit a plane so infinitely far above the sewers in which these filthy vermin sprawl and crawl and bawl their cheap obscenities, that I cannot possible be spattered by the witticisms of a Verdurin!"

Narrator, Page 422
"Doubtless whatever it was that my imagination aspired to, that my senses took in only completely and without any immediate pleasure, I had committed to the safe custody of names; doubtless because I had accumulated there a store of dreams, those names now magnetized my desires; but names themselves are not very comprehensive; the most I could do was to include in each of them two or three of the principal "curiosities" of the town, which would lie there side by side, without intermediary; in the name of Balbec, as in the magnifying glasses set in those penholders which one buys at sea-side places, I could distinguish waves surging around a church built in the Persian style."

Adaptations

In 1962, Producer Nicole Stephane acquired all film rights to the novel from Proust's niece. After several abortive attempts, including the cooperation of Harold Pinter who wrote a brilliant screenplay which was never to be filmed, Stephane turned to Peter Brooks. He did not complete the task, which was finally assumed by Volker Schlondorff. The film was produced in Paris in 1984, with Jeremy Irons, an Englishman, as Swann, and Ornella Muti, an Italian, as Odette. Entitled Swann in Love, and based primarily on the material in the "Swann in Love" section of Swann's Way, the film attempts to show twenty-four hours in the life of Swann. To many viewers, Irons proved disappointing. Odette was slightly more convincing. Although Schlondorff did not attempt to recreate Proust, but rather to create a new genre for film, the final result is vastly inferior to Proust's panorama of the end of an age and of a tormented and jealous love.

Sister Irma M. Kashuba, S.S.J.

Topics for Discussion

Why does the Narrator exclude his name from the novel? How does this affect the story?

Describe the relationship between Odette and Swann. Were they really in love?

What sort of family life did the Narrator have?

Do you think the Narrator and Gilberte ever meet again? Explain the possible circumstances of their meeting or explain why you do not think they meet again.

Why does the Narrator's family care so much for Swann?

What kind of person was the Great Aunt, and how did she affect the Narrator's life?

What is the importance of the Narrator's problems with sleeping and waking? How did this affect his life?

What was the impact of the landscape and history of the town of Combray on its townspeople? On the Narrator?

Describe how Swann and the Narrator are similar in their choice of women and their devotion to art.

What are examples of obsessive compulsive behaviors exhibited by the Narrator?

Literary Precedents

Although Proust's novel was a new form of literature, analogous to James Joyce's "stream of consciousness/' he is a true product of his times. In the tradition of Baudelaire, whom, with Vigny, he considered the greatest poet of the nineteenth century, his work abounds in symbols and correspondences between the senses, and between objects and ideas. Endowed like Baudelaire with deeper powers of perceptiveness, he is able to express greater insights into the mysterious inner world of the spirit. There are also literary echoes of Mallarme and of Nerval, particularly in the role of dreams, which Nerval sees as a second life, and whose opening of Sylvie (1853) recalls the beginning of "Combray." The idea of a "roman-fleuve," popular at the turn of the century, recalls Balzac's Human Comedy (1895-1896, 1911), and the techniques of Balzac in portraying the individual and society are apparent in Proust. The philosophical ideas pertaining to time are most closely allied to Bergson, and the artistic theories are those of John Ruskin, to whom Proust was particularly attracted.

Related Titles

Remembrance of Things Past is composed of seven volumes, all related and depending on the initial idea of the search for remembrance and revitalization of things past. With the exception of the last volume, The Past Recaptured (1931; Le Temps retrouve, 1927), they are less known and read than the first volume, Swann's Way. The theme of the two ways, Swann's way, and Guermantes' way, which appeared in the first volume, represented in the child's imagination the two roads leading from the family home, as irreconcilable as east and west, and will be repeated in the succeeding volumes. The two ways will finally be reconciled in the last volume, when Gilberte Swann marries Robert de Saint-Loup.

Within a Budding Grove, (1919; 1924), Part II of the novel, which Proust reworked for six years after the publication of Swann's Way, is longer and more complex, and corresponds roughly to the narrator's adolescence. In the first part, "Madame Swann at Home," Marcel is introduced to Swann's Paris apartment. He has left Combray and the security of the family home, and he finds himself in the world of Paris society. The second part, entitled "Place-Names: The Place," finds the narrator at Balbec, a place which is mentioned in passing in Swann's Way.

Here he meets three members of the Guermantes clan: Mlle, de Villeparisis, Robert de Saint-Loup, and the baron de Charlus. The highlights of the first part are Marcel's meeting with Gilberte, his transitory and intense love for her, and the acquaintance of his literary idol, Bergotte. Yet both loves are tinged with reality; neither is the idealized person of his dreams. His growing independence, yet difficulty in finding his inner self characterize this volume.

The second part, with Balbec, its trees, and the ocean, as a background, contains many intricate developments.

Among the most significant is the meeting and subsequent attraction to Albertine, and his association with the painter Elstir, and thus his initiation into the world of art. Proust addresses the question of incommunicability and misunderstanding throughout this complex volume, as well as the need of solitude for literary and artistic creation.

Part III, The Guermantes Way (1925; Les Cote des Guermantes, 1920-1921), is also divided into two parts, one at the Paris home of Mme. de Villeparisis, and the second at a dinner party in Paris at Mme. de Guermantes' residence. This selection is a study of society's forms, and false perceptions of it that individuals cultivate. The duchess of Guermantes, Oriane, is one of Proust's best developed characters. At the same time, the end of the Guermantes line marks the dissolution of the French aristocracy. As Marcel dispels the illusions he has had about the Guermantes in the first volume of the novel, he analyzes the limitations that isolate human beings from one another, and make them mysteries even to themselves. In presenting the characters as they meet in the Paris salon of Mme. de Guermantes, Proust inserts comic and ironic overtones in his portrait of ambition in high society.

In contrast, the second part opens on a note of sadness with the death of Marcel's beloved grandmother. Along with scenes of love and sensuality, Proust explores delicately the theme of friendship, especially that of Marcel and Robert de Saint-Loup. The death of Swann at the end of the volume explores the whole mystery of life and its ending, along with the end of friendship. The introduction of the puzzling Charlus opens the way for succeeding volumes, especially Part IV, Cities of the Plain (1927; Sodome et Gomorrhe, 1922), where Proust will treat in a somewhat tragic although overt manner the question of homosexuality, an important subject of his novel. Not handled in a moralistic sense, sexual inversion is nevertheless allied for Proust to the suffering and social ostracism it entails.

After The Captive (1929; La Prisonniere, 1925) and The Sweet Cheat Gone (1930; Albertinedisparue, 1925), volumes which discuss the disintegration of love, Proust completes the lengthy novel with The Past Recaptured. This final volume, implicitly based on France during and right after the war, is the triumph of Swann's way over Guermantes, or a new bourgeois society over the old aristocracy. Many characters return: Gilberte, unhappily married to Robert de Saint-Loup, who has died in the war; Franchise, the aging servant, a mixture of gentleness and cruelty, morality and ignorance; Charlus, degraded yet with a patriotic sense of justice and a vast culture; Jupien in his hotel or male brothel.

More than anything, this final volume is the victory of art, and Proust's acceptance of his literary vocation. On his way to the matinee at the Princesse de Guermantes, Marcel has three experiences similar to the madeleine in Part I. He strikes his foot against some uneven flagstones, and the flagstones of Venice return to his consciousness.

In the library of the Guermantes' residence, a servant strikes a spoon against a plate, and he relives the hammer of a train wheel at Combray. Finally, a starched napkin brings him back to the hotel at Balbec. Marcel now sees the role of the artist, the effective communication of such moments of ecstasy.

He has realized the true essence of time, the ability to resurrect the past into a kind of eternity through involuntary memory. With this realization come the constraints imposed upon the artist: solitude, and subject matter which he cannot choose, but which will be imposed on him through his own life and vocation. He will become a great writer, and Part I, Swann's Way, is about to begin.

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Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for fiction, nonfiction, and biographies written for young adults.
Includes a short biography for the author of each analyzed work.
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