

Lecture 9

Characters and Themes

Characters:

Albertine Simonet

Albertine and her family take pride in their name being spelled correctly, which leads Marcel to make this observation about snobbery:

I was barely conscious of who Albertine Simonet was. She had certainly no conception of what she was one day to mean to me. Even the name, Simonet, which I had already heard spoken on the beach, I should have spelled with a double “n” had I been asked to write it down, never dreaming of the importance which this family attached to there being only one. The further we descend the social scale the more we find that snobbery fastens on to mere trifles which are perhaps no more null than the distinctions observed by the aristocracy, but, being more obscure, more peculiar to each individual, surprise us more. —*Within a Budding Grove* 2: 579

If it rained, although the weather had no power to daunt Albertine, who was often to be seen in her raincoat spinning on her bicycle through the showers, we would spend the day in the Casino, where on such days it would have seemed to me impossible not to go. —*Within a Budding Grove* 2: 645

Her Candor

And perhaps this impression was to have serious and vexatious consequences for me later on, for it was around it that there began to form that feeling almost of brotherly intimacy, that moral core which was always to remain at the heart of my love for Albertine. Such a feeling may be the cause of the greatest suffering. For in order really to suffer at the hands of a woman one must have believed in her completely. —*Within a Budding Grove* 2: 713

Elstir and possible posthumous fame

Men who believe that their works will last—as was the case with Elstir—form the habit of placing them in a period when they themselves will have crumbled into dust. And thus, by obliging them to reflect on their own extinction, the idea of fame saddens them because it is inseparable from the idea of death. —*Within a Budding Grove 2: 576*

Grandmother

Marcel compares his own character to his grandmother's and finds his own inferior:

“My grandmother's nature, a nature that was the exact opposite of my complete egoism. . .” —*Within a Budding Grove 2: 589*

Mlle Léa

Mlle Léa, whose talent as an actress M. Bloch senior rated very high, but whose tastes were understood not to be primarily directed towards gentlemen.” —*Within a Budding Grove 2: 660*

Themes:

Art produces joy

The intellectual pleasures which I was enjoying in this studio did not in the least prevent me from being aware, although they enveloped us as it were in spite of ourselves, of the warm glazes, the sparkling penumbra of the room itself and, through the little window framed with honeysuckle, in the rustic avenue, the resilient dryness of the sun-parched earth, veiled only by the diaphanous gauze woven of distance and the shade of the trees. Perhaps the unconscious well-being induced by this summer day came like a tributary to swell the flood of joy that had surged in me at the sight of Elstir's *Carquethuit Harbor*. —*Within a Budding Grove 2: 573-76*

Genius

Here is a fine analysis and one that moves us because it describes the decline of artistic genius:

Only, after that rising tide of genius which sweeps over and submerges an artist's

life, when the brain begins to tire, gradually the balance is disturbed and, like a river that resumes its course after the counterflow of a spring tide, it is life that once more takes the upper hand. But, while the first period lasted, the artist has gradually evolved the law, the formula of his unconscious gift. He knows what situations, if he is a novelist, what scenes, if a painter, provide him with the material, unimportant in itself but essential to his researches, as a laboratory might be or a workshop. He knows that he has created his masterpieces out of effects of attenuated light, out of the action of remorse upon consciousness of guilt, out of women posed beneath trees or half-immersed in water, like statues. A day will come when, owing to the erosion of his brain, he will no longer have the strength, faced with those materials which his genius was wont to use, to make the intellectual effort which alone can produce his work, and yet will continue to seek them out, happy to be near them, because of the spiritual pleasure, the allurements to work that they arouse in him; and, surrounding them besides with an aura of superstition as if they were superior to all things else, as if there dwelt in them already a great part of the work of art which they might be said to carry within them ready-made, he will confine himself to the company, to the adoration of his models. He will hold endless conversations with the repentant criminals whose remorse and regeneration once formed the subject of his novels; he will buy a house in a countryside where mists attenuate the light, he will spend long hours looking at women bathing; he will collect sumptuous stuffs. And thus the beauty of life, an expression somehow devoid of meaning, a stage this side of art at which I had seen Swann come to rest, was that also which, by a slackening of creative ardor, idolatry of the forms which had inspired it, a tendency to take the line of least resistance, must gradually undermine an Elstir's progress. —*Within a Budding Grove* 2: 588-89

Girls in Bloom

I was lying on the grass among these girls, the plenitude of what I felt infinitely outweighed the paucity, the infrequency of our speech, and brimmed over from my immobility and silence in waves of happiness that rippled up to die at the feet of these young roses.

For a convalescent who rests all day long in a flower-garden or an orchard, a scent of flowers or fruit does not more completely pervade the thousand trifles that compose

his idle hours than did for me that color, that fragrance in search of which my eyes kept straying towards the girls, and the sweetness of which finally became incorporated in me. So it is that grapes sweeten in the sun. And by their slow continuity these simple little games had gradually wrought in me also, as in those who do nothing else all day but lie outstretched by the sea, breathing the salt air and sunning themselves, a relaxation, a blissful smile, a vague dazzlement that had spread from brain to eyes. —*Within a Budding Grove 2: 669*

Heredity

. . . we take from our family, as the papilionaceae take the form of their seed, as well the ideas by which we live as the malady from which we shall die. —*Within a Budding Grove 2: 644*

The features of our face are hardly more than gestures which force of habit has made permanent. Nature, like the destruction of Pompeii, like the metamorphosis of a nymph, has arrested us in an accustomed movement. Similarly, our intonation embodies our philosophy of life, what a person invariably says to himself about things. No doubt these characteristics did not belong only to these girls. They were those of their parents. The individual is steeped in something more general than himself. By this reckoning, our parents furnish us not only with those habitual gestures which are the outlines of our face and voice, but also with certain mannerisms of speech, certain favorite expressions, which, almost as unconscious as our intonation, almost as profound, indicate likewise a definite point of view towards life. —*Within a Budding Grove 2: 667*

Love

How is it that the women or men one chooses to love resemble each other? . . . a certain similarity exists, although the type evolves, between all the women we successively love, a similarity that is due to the fixity of our own temperament, which chooses them, eliminating all those who would not be at once our opposite and our complement, apt, that is to say, to gratify our senses and to wring our hearts. They are, these women, a product of our temperament, an image, an inverted projection, a negative of our sensibility. —*Within a Budding Grove 2: 647*

Loving helps us to discern, to discriminate. The bird-lover in a wood at once distinguishes the twittering of the different species, which to ordinary people sound the same. The bird-lover in a wood at once distinguishes the twittering of the different species, which to ordinary people sound the same. The devotee of girls knows that human voices vary even more. —*Within a Budding Grove 2: 666*

At the start of a new love as at its ending, we are not exclusively attached to the object of that love, but rather the desire to love from which it will presently arise (and, later on, the memory it leaves behind) wanders voluptuously through a zone of interchangeable charms—simply natural charms, it may be, gratification of appetite, enjoyment of one's surroundings—which are harmonious enough for it not to feel at a loss in the presence of any one of them. Besides, as my perception of them was not yet dulled by familiarity, I still had the faculty of seeing them, that is to say of feeling a profound astonishment every time that I found myself in their presence. —*Within a Budding Grove 2: 676-77*

Love is born; we wish to remain, for the one we love, the unknown person whom she may love in turn, but we need her, we need to make contact not so much with her body as with her attention, her heart. presence. —*Within a Budding Grove 2: 692*

Memory

Proust often uses photography as an analogy to illustrate how our memory functions:

But so far as the pleasure was concerned, I was naturally not conscious of it until some time later, when, back at the hotel, and in my room alone, I had become myself again. Pleasure in this respect is like photography. What we take, in the presence of the beloved object, is merely a negative, which we develop later, when we are back at home, and have once again found at our disposal that inner darkroom the entrance to which is barred to us so long as we are with other people. —*Within a Budding Grove 2: 616-17*

And then, since memory begins at once to record photographs independent of one another, eliminates every link, any kind of sequence between the scenes portrayed in the collection which it exposes to our view, the most recent does not necessarily destroy or cancel those that came before. —*Within a Budding Grove 2: 621-22*

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Our memory is like one of those shops in the window of which is exposed now one, now another photograph of the same person. And as a rule the most recent exhibit remains for some time the only one to be seen. —*Within a Budding Grove 2: 642*

The Unknowable Other

I had talked to Albertine without being any more conscious of where my words were falling, of what became of them, than if I were dropping pebbles into a bottomless pit. That our words are, as a general rule, filled by the people to whom we address them with a meaning which those people derive from their own substance, a meaning widely different from that which we had put into the same words when we uttered them, is a fact that is perpetually demonstrated in daily life. But if in addition we find ourselves in the company of a person whose education (as Albertine's was to me) is inconceivable, her taste, her reading, her principles unknown to us, we cannot tell whether our words have aroused in her anything that resembles their meaning, any more than in an animal to which we had to make ourselves understood. —*Within a Budding Grove 2: 630*

Finally, I was embarrassed by some of her looks and her smiles. They might equally well signify a laxity of morals and the rather silly merriment of a high-spirited girl who was at heart thoroughly respectable. A single expression of face or speech, being susceptible of Sundry interpretations, I wavered like a schoolboy faced by the difficulties of a piece of Greek prose. —*Within a Budding Grove 2: 631*

We understand the characters of people to whom we are indifferent, but how can we ever grasp that of a person who is an intimate part of our existence, whom after a while we no longer distinguish from ourselves, whose motives provide us with an inexhaustible source of anxious hypotheses, continually revised? Springing from somewhere beyond our intellect, our curiosity about the woman we love overleaps the bounds of that woman's character, at which, even if we could stop we probably never would. The object of our anxious investigation is something more basic than those details of character comparable to the tiny particles of epidermis whose varied combinations form the florid originality of human flesh. Our intuitive radiography pierces them, and the images that it brings back, far from being those of a particular face, present rather the joyless universality of a skeleton. —*Within a Budding Grove* 2: 648

As soon as she joined us I became conscious of the impish tip of her nose, which I had omitted from my mental picture of her during the last few days; beneath her dark hair the vertical line of her forehead controverted—and not for the first time—the blurred image that I had preserved of her, while its whiteness made a vivid splash in my field of vision; emerging from the dust of memory, Albertine was built up afresh before my eyes. —*Within a Budding Grove* 2: 695-96