

PROUST ONLINE FOLDER

Lecture 30

Characters and Themes

Characters:

Berma

. . . Berma was . . . head and shoulders above Rachel, and Time, when simultaneously it turned Rachel into a star and Elstir into a famous painter, had inflated the reputation of a mediocrity as well as consecrated a genius. ML 6: 462-63

See **Matricide**.

Duchesse de Guermantes

Our final glimpse of Oriane is not a flattering one: It is clear that she despises Gilberte. According to the duchesse, Saint-Loup went to war to get himself killed in order to escape Gilberte who was unfaithful to him.

“Do you think she felt any grief? Not a scrap, she even astonished me by the extraordinary cynicism with which she displayed her indifference, and this distressed me very much, because I was really extremely fond of poor Robert. [...] in my opinion,” the Duchess concluded, “she’s a bitch.”

Such an expression on the lips of the duchesse de Guermantes was rendered possible by the downward path which she was following, from the polished society of the Guermantes to that of her new actress friends . . . —*Time Regained* 6: 499-500

Although Marcel says that she is no longer witty, she does make clever use of a line of poetry from Victor Hugo’s *Les Contemplations* in reference to her husband’s habit of leaving her stuck socially with his ex-mistresses:

“Take away the happiness and leave the boredom to *me*.”

Naturally—you remember how the poem goes on—“I entered smiling none the less,” but it really was not fair, he ought to have left me the right to be inconstant, for in the end I

accumulated so many of his discards that I had not a single afternoon to myself. —*Time Regained* 6: 467

The lines in French are:

Emporte le bonheur et laisse-moi l'ennui.

J'entrai tout de même avec un sourire.

Françoise

Céleste Albaret's system, which she proposed to Proust, of gluing the pieces of onto his manuscript, is the source of Françoise's work with his "paperies." Proust had expressed to Céleste his despair over his inability to keep track of all the loose pieces of paper on which he had written passages that he wanted to insert into his manuscript. In the novel, it is Marcel who does this task: "These 'paperies,' as Françoise called the pages of my writing, it was my habit to stick together with paste, and sometimes in this process they became torn." —*Time Regained* 6: 510 (For a description of Proust's delight when Céleste found the solution to his dilemma, see her memoirs, *Monsieur Proust*.)

Marcel

So that I should not ask them to praise me or to censure me, but simply to tell me whether "it really is like that," I should ask them whether the words that they read within themselves are the same as those which I have written (though a discrepancy in this respect need not always be the consequence of an error on my part, since the explanation could also be that the reader had eyes for which my book was not a suitable instrument). —*Time Regained* 6: 507-08

Themes:

Art

Here is a fragment from the passage quoted in the lecture when Marcel envisions the work necessary to create his book. [He must] vanquish it like an obstacle, win it like a friendship, cosset it like a little child, create it like a new world without neglecting those

mysteries whose explanation is to be found probably only in worlds other than our own and the presentiment of which is the thing that moves us most deeply in life and in art.

—*Time Regained* 6: 507-08

For a fuller understanding of what Proust means by those “mysteries,” it is helpful to re-read the scene of Bergotte’s death in *The Captive* 5: 238-46

Habit

. . . our habits enable us to a large degree, enable even the organs of our bodies, to adapt themselves to an existence which at first sight would appear to be utterly impossible.

—*Time Regained* 6: 452

Love—dangers of women who are not our type

We are not wary of women who are “not our type,” we let them love us, and if, subsequently, we come to love them we love them a hundred times more than we love other women, without even enjoying in their arms the satisfaction of assuaged desire. For these reasons and for many others the fact that our greatest unhappinesses come to us from women who are “not our type” is not simply an instance of that mockery of fate which never grants our wishes except in the form which pleases us least. A woman who is “our type” is seldom dangerous, she is not interested in us, she gives us a limited contentment and then quickly leaves us without establishing herself in our life, and what on the contrary, in love, is dangerous and prolific of suffering is not a woman herself but her presence beside us every day and our curiosity about what she is doing every minute: not the beloved woman, but habit. —*Time Regained* 6: 491

Matricide

Berma, although extremely ill, continues to perform in order to support her daughter and son-in-law. They abandon her when they rush to the Prince de Guermantes’s party where they beg to be allowed in to hear Rachel recite. Rachel’s later disclosure of this to Berma proves a mortal blow. This is another example of filial ingratitude and matricide. —*Time Regained* 6: 450-56

See **Berma**.

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Music, see Snobs.

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Readers: see Marcel

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Snobs, their vanity, their ignorance

. . . the Kreutzer Sonata was now being played, but having lost his place in the programme the young man thought that it was a piece by Ravel, which he had been told was as beautiful as Palestrina but difficult to understand. In his haste to move to another seat, he bumped violently against an escritoire which he had not seen in the half-dark, and the noise had the effect of skewing round the heads of several people, for whom the trifling physical exertion of looking over their shoulder was a welcome interruption to the torture of listening “religiously” to the Kreutzer Sonata. —*Time Regained* 6: 496

There is a lovely passage on the theme of names, the cycle of life, and the theme of time in the portrait that Proust gives of the pregnant Mme de Sainte-Euverte, wife of a great nephew of the society hostess. As she reclines on an Empire style chaise longue, she evokes the famous portrait of Mme Récamier by François Gérard.

She could not know that for me she was giving birth to a new efflorescence of the name of Sainte-Euverte, which recurring thus after so long an interval marked both the distance travelled by Time and its continuity. Time was the infant that she cradled in her cockle-shell, where the red fuchsias of her silk dress gave an autumnal flowering to the name of Sainte-Euverte and to the Empire style. . . . I saw her, in this room full of symbolic attributes, as a nymph cradling the Infant Time. —See *Time Regained* 6: 494-96