

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

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PROUST, MARCEL

Marcel Proust: The Life. Marcel Proust (1871-1922) was born in Auteuil, at that time a quite rustic region of the sixteenth arrondissement of Paris. His father was a prominent physician and epidemiological researcher, who had contributed greatly to the fight against cholera in his time. His mother came from a well placed Jewish family in Alsace. (Marcel was baptized and brought up in the Catholic faith, but never practiced it.) The young Proust was born during the last two months of the Franco Prussian War, during the brutal suppression of the French Commune; an era which can be taken to mark the moment of decline of the French aristocracy, and the significant development of the new Middle Class. Marcel was hypersensitive to these surrounding events, which may well have contributed to the rapid development of his chronic asthma, and already in his teens was writing about his social and political world, work that would eventuate in his *Les Plaisirs et les jours* (1896), *Pleasures and the Day*, and his first real novel, *Jean Santeuil*, which he would later abandon, in 1899—and which would not be published until 1952. Meanwhile he was enriching his voracious interest in the upper class social milieu of Paris, profiting from several contacts he had made among the fading nobility, during his school days at the Lycée Condorcet and at University. He was also interacting increasingly with the debilitating asthmatic condition that would do much to shape his later life

Marcel Proust, the mature works. The social scene presented by the decline of the aristocracy, the growth of the middle class, and new money in the economy was of intense interest to Proust, from childhood on. (He was intimately fond of his mother, and through her of the world of finer sentiments, complex social ramifications, and emotional experimentation.) In other words this was the transition point of society that was to fascinate Marcel Proust throughout his life, and to form the material of the huge series of seven novels which was the fruit of his writing life, a life which saw little activity, but much reading, no marriage, a closeted homosexuality. Proust himself was fully prepared for this work; highly educated at the Lycée Condorcet, from early on a social climber with a fascination for the declining aristocracy, and with a suitable private income. He was able to devote his life attention to the sequence of novels making up *In Search of Times Past* (1913-1921), arguably the most powerful work of literary Modernism.

The gist of Proust's major work. *In Search of Times Past, A la recherche du temps perdu*, has as its theme the moral decadence of French society and the obliteration of class distinctions. Three strata of society are shown: the aristocracy (the Guermantes family), the bourgeoisie (Swann and his coterie), and the nouveaux riches (the Verdurin family). These strata, all interlinked by marriage, are blended in the novels by the presence of Marcel, the author and narrating persona of the novels, who moves from one scene to another. Worth noting: considerable portions of the novel are devoted to Marcel's love affairs, and his tastes in painting, music, and literature. The consequence of this narrative material and structure, is that Proust's novel is wide ranging, includes a vast material of testimony to his own age and its political/social condition, and is loose in construction. Many readers complain that the whole of this seven part fabric is too loose (and decadent) to keep their attention; others, and there are many, proclaim Proust the greatest novelist of all time.

Reading

Primary source reading

In Search of Lost Time, tr. Enright, 2003.

Secondary source reading

Green, F. C., *The Mind of Proust*, 1949.

Further reading

Deleuze, Gilles, *Proust and Signs: The Complete Text*, 2004.

Original language reading

Chardin, Phillipe, *Proust ou le Bonheur du petit personnage qui compare*, 2004.

Suggested paper topics

Compare Marcel Proust, as an analyst of society, with, say, Emile Zola or the Goncourt brothers. Has Proust, like the others, any interest in making a scientific survey of the society (even the upper class society) of his time? Or does he simply look for interesting studies and situations, to feed his narrative?

Certain great French novelists write in a style, and in a narrative structure, which their critics have called loose, not sharply focused. (Flaubert, for instance, scorns Balzac's style.) What do you think of the huge range of Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*? Does it hold together? Does it keep making points? Does it hold your interest?

Excerpt

<http://www.fisheaters.com/proust.html>

I feel that there is much to be said for the Celtic belief that the souls of those whom we have lost are held captive in some inferior being, in an animal, in a plant, in some inanimate object, and so effectively lost to us until the day (which to many never comes) when we happen to pass by the tree or to obtain possession of the object which forms their prison. Then they start and tremble, they call us by our name, and as soon as we have recognised their voice the spell is broken. We have delivered them: they have overcome death and return to share our life.

And so it is with our own past. It is a labour in vain to attempt to recapture it: all the efforts of our intellect must prove futile. The past is hidden somewhere outside the realm, beyond the reach of intellect, in some material object (in the sensation which that material object will give us) which we do not suspect. And as for that object, it depends on chance whether we come upon it or not before we ourselves must die.

Many years had elapsed during which nothing of Combray, save what was comprised in the theatre and the drama of my going to bed there, had any existence for me, when one day in winter, as I came home, my mother, seeing that I was cold, offered me some tea, a thing I did not ordinarily take. I declined at first, and then, for no particular reason, changed my mind. She sent out for one of those short, plump little cakes called 'petites madeleines,' which look as though they had been moulded in the fluted scallop of a pilgrim's shell. And soon, mechanically, weary after a dull day with the prospect of a depressing morrow, I raised to my lips a spoonful of the tea in which I had soaked a morsel of the cake. No sooner had the warm liquid, and the crumbs with it, touched my palate, a shudder ran through my whole body, and I stopped, intent upon the extraordinary changes that were taking place. An exquisite pleasure had invaded my senses, but individual, detached, with no suggestion of its origin. And at once the vicissitudes of life had become indifferent to me, its disasters innocuous, its brevity illusory--this new sensation having had on me the effect which love has of filling me with a precious essence; or rather this essence was not in me, it was myself. I had ceased now to feel mediocre, accidental, mortal. Whence could it have come to me, this all-powerful joy? I was conscious that it was connected with the taste of tea and cake, but that it infinitely transcended those savours, could not, indeed, be of the same nature as theirs. Whence did it come? What did it signify? How could I seize upon and define it?

I drink a second mouthful, in which I find nothing more than in the first, a third, which gives me rather less than the second. It is time to stop; the potion is losing its magic. It is plain that the object of my quest, the truth, lies not in the cup but in myself. The tea has called up in me, but does not itself understand, and

can only repeat indefinitely with a gradual loss of strength, the same testimony; which I, too, cannot interpret, though I hope at least to be able to call upon the tea for it again and to find it there presently, intact and at my disposal, for my final enlightenment. I put down my cup and examine my own mind. It is for it to discover the truth. But how? What an abyss of uncertainty whenever the mind feels that some part of it has strayed beyond its own borders; when it, the seeker, is at once the dark region through which it must go seeking, where all its equipment will avail it nothing. Seek? More than that: create. It is face to face with something which does not so far exist, to which it alone can give reality and substance, which it alone can bring into the light of day.