

PROUST: SWANN'S WAY

Coordinator: Sharon Girard

Proust called his multi-volume novel, *In Search of Lost Time*, a cathedral. Its architectonic is both a grand epic of the French Third Republic and an intimate quest for fulfillment through art. The cathedral's exteriors -- politics, art, architecture, social hierarchies -- are inseparable from its interior chapels of heart, mind and spirit. *Swann's Way* (the first volume), introduces major themes -- memory, reading, writing, love as jealousy, homosexuality, the lure of solitude and contains the scenes of Mama's goodnight kiss and the madeleine dipped in tea. We read the novel at home but then, together, mark big ideas, audacities of style and truths of savage or tender psychological insight. Some scenes may provoke sadness, shock or recognition; others, belly-gripping humour that render us helpless.

Reading: Marcel Proust, *Swann's Way*, translated by Lydia Davis; Penguin Group, 2003, ISBN 0142437964, \$12.65. NB: we use only this edition (paper or hardback.) Because of page number variance, Kindle (or other ebook) versions are not user-friendly for reading Proust in a group.

Sharon has led Proust reading groups at home, New York Public Library, Meetup. Proust Advisory Board member at the Mercantile Library. She coordinates IRP philosophy and literature groups.

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An excellent beginner's resource is the website www.tempsperdu.com. To widen your Proust universe, this site is all you need to move beyond beginner. It contains lists of: books by Proust, books about Proust's life, books about Proust's work, major referenced paintings, chronology of Proust's life, chronologies of the Search itself (several), movies and more.

Sessions and sample questions

Questions are used to guide discussion; the following sample question set is a "work-in progress."

Sessions 1 and 2: Combray 1 (pp 3-48)

What is happening, when and where?

What are some details of the narrator's going to sleep? Awakening? What does the furniture do? How do positions of his drowsy body matter?

Compare the views and personality of my Grandmother to my Great-Aunt.
What was Swann's "unsuspected social life"?
What was "the theatre and the drama of my going to bed ..."?

Sessions 3 and 4: Combray 2 - through planning for a holiday at Balbec. (pp 49-135).

What terms are used to portray Aunt Léonie as priest/God, her room as church?
What does Bergotte mean to the narrator?
Is Grandfather antisemitic?
Why does Legrandin not want to introduce us to his sister?

Sessions 5 and 6: Combray 2: the two ways to end of Combray 2. (pp 135-191)

How does the narrator view the name "Gilberte" ? (pp 145)
The narrator, in rapture, exclaims "Damn, damn, damn!" (page 159) - Why? What then causes him to go from rapture to rage?
What do the steeples of Martinville look like to the narrator? What makes him so happy?
How is the closing of Combray 2 related to Combray 1?

Session 7 and 8: beginning of *Swann in Love* through Swann's disgust with the Verdurins. (pp 193-296)

What kind of woman does Swann prefer? what is his "type"? What effect does the painting of Zipporah have upon Swann's love?
What effect did the Vinteuil sonata – its "little phrase" - have on Swann when he first heard it? Then, when he heard it again at Mme Verdurin's?
How is Mme Verdurin a "Grand Inquisitor?" page 296

Session 9 and 10: *Swann in Love* - Swann's exclusion to end of *Swann in Love*. (296-396)

Is Swann's jealousy an uninterrupted crescendo of pain and anguish? Or, a pendulum lashing back and forth between two extremes?
At Mme de Euverte's gathering, how does Swann view the servants? The guests?
What does "perhaps two or three times" refer to?
How does the past topple "stone by stone"?

Session 11 and 12: *Place-Names: The Name* (pp 399-445)

Is the narrator's fixation on Gilberte similar to Swann's obsession with Odette? Is there a common thread between the anguish of the goodnight kiss, Swann's love for Odette and Marcel's love for Gilberte? Does Marcel resemble Swann?

As *Swann's Way* ends, what aspects of the “theme” of Time have sounded (disregarding the later novels if you have already read them.) ?

If “recovery of the past” through memory, art or any other way is the grand project of the Search (as understood by many readers), what is the prospect for success of that project as *Swann's Way* closes?