

The dual nature of love



The classical love story, the timeless tale of pairs whose only destinies are to be together, is an abhorred notion to Proust in *In Search of Lost Time*. Love stories in this Roman-fleuve are not be all, end all events; rather, they are temporary and all-too-human episodes. It is the dream of many little girls to meet their respective Prince Charmings, idealized men who will whisk them away to spectacular weddings in a carriage drawn by the most majestic stallions; and vice-versa, men hold their own romanticized conceptions of true love. Perhaps the beauty of Proust's literature is that he captures the realism of life. The dismal truth of life is that many people do not live the classical love story. Love is as episodic as Proust writes it to be, and consequently results in perpetual emotional turmoil. Proustian love is a never-ending quest driven by the desire of both carnal pleasure and emotional satisfaction; Proustian love, like many themes in *In Search of Lost Time*, involves a juxtaposition of both natural science and psychology. Proust wrote *In Search of Lost Time* during a period of rapid change in the scientific world. The advent of various mechanical inventions complemented the publication of new theories on bodily processes. Because his father was a doctor, and because of his scholarly interest in both the sciences and humanities, Proust became exposed to a variety of important contemporary thinkers of his day. *In Search Lost Time* adopts a decidedly psychological study of its narrator and its characters, akin to the voyeuristic approach of the novel; psychology is as introspective a science as literature is an ocular art. Many have tried to bridge Proust to Freud; while it is not certain that Proust had ever been influenced by Freud's assertions on human consciousness and unconsciousness, one can use Freud's theories to further explore the characters' psyches. However, Proust does not fail to account for

strict biological interpretations of human life. *In Search of Lost Time* is an overwhelmingly Darwinian creation, with blatant references to *The Origin of Species*. The work can be dissected into strata and substrata, such geological layers in which the farther down you delve, the richer the material becomes. When reading Proust we find layers of intricate and vivid imagery, often relating to triggers of involuntary memory, in which continual provocation of a trigger, such as a madeleine, will immerse us further into the substrata of the memory. The gaps between the memories are time, but time also acts as a bridge between the memories. Darwinian thought is comparable to this literary tactic because in Darwin's world, all living things are connected by time. The evolution of species over time graduates all species into one another, just as there is an amalgam of memories in our minds. The danger of Darwin (and even of Freudian ideas) is the challenge presented to permanent classifications of thought we have established. In classical love stories, or any classical fiction for that matter, there is a definite sense of closure; on the contrary, the episodes described in *In Search of Lost Time* leave the reader with a feeling of uncertainty due to the semi-permanence of love. In this case the quest for certainty is coupled with the quest for love, and the characters continually look for evidence of evolution through memory, and evidence of what is to come based upon this history. Another danger is that because all living things are related, all share the same basic instincts. The idea that a human can be so greatly reduced to an animal and to primal emotions is indubitably controversial. As animals, the most basic need is to survive. In Darwinian terms survival is accomplished through the prosperity of the species; Proust says, '...it is the preservation of the species which guides our individual preferences in love...'

(Within in Budding Grove, 418), thus implying that love is a habit, or a primal instinct that we actively pursue all our lives (Within in Budding Grove, 418). And in keeping with Darwinian thought, it is a game of survival of the fittest, in which the more attractive partners are the greatest objects of desire. Desire, in Proustian love, is equivalent to foreplay. For it is desire that precludes fulfillment, and in the case of many of the characters once the fulfillment is reached, the desire ceases. And at the ending of a love, ' 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' (Within in Budding Grove p. 676). The best example of this is seen in Marcel's loves. In Freudian terms, Marcel was spoiled as a ' sexual object in the nursing period.' The scene we are drawn into in Swann's Way, in which Marcel anxiously awaits his mother's kiss with an eerily sensual greed, indicates the irresponsible nursing of the mother during this vulnerable age of sexual maturity. Marcel, who at the time is 11 or 12, should really have been weaned off such behavior, but instead the mother, to the father's encouragement, appeases his desire to receive her kiss. According to Freud, ' Excessive parental tenderness surely becomes harmful, because it accelerates sexual maturity, and also because it ' spoils' the child and makes him unfit to renounce love temporarily, or to be satisfied with a smaller amount of love in life.' (p. 571) Marcel (the character) is, indeed, both sexually and emotionally precocious, and consequently develops a keen interest in attaining sexual fulfillment, but also acquiring a

deep, idealized concept of love he has created. It is reasonable to say that Marcel is in love with his idea of being in love. For example, when he happens upon a peer on the street as she emerges from church, he utters, 'But it was not only to her body that I should have liked to attain; it was also the person that lived inside it, and with which there is but one form of contact, namely to attract its attention, but one sort of penetration, to awaken an idea in it. (Within in Budding Grove, p. 402) Marcel is preoccupied with engaging in a seduction of both the hormones and the mind. The physical interpretation of love is sex, and after he interpolates his love for Gilberte and Albertine and fulfills himself, he recedes from this sexual aggression because it did not adequately match what his concept of love should be. That he is left unsatisfied with his image of how that love would transpire keeps him brimming with desire. What is interesting is that the girls that he loves, when he is pleased by them, do not get pleased themselves, and thus remain attached to Marcel. This is a tempo with Proustian fashion; their desires have not been fulfilled yet. Proust describes his physical desire and his concept of beauty through the use of flower symbolism. Flower symbolism, as Freud analyzed it, although as it is fairly obvious to note, is generally representative of female genitalia. Proust uses flower symbolism to describe many of the partners in his amorous affairs, e. g. on Albertine and her friends: 'As in a nursery plantation where the flowers mature at different seasons, I had seen them, in the form of old ladies, on this Balbec shore, those shriveled seed-pods, those flabby tubers, which my new friends would one day be' (Within in Budding Grove, p. 644). Notice that in this example, Proust recognizes the impermanence of superficial beauty through biological terms. An interesting prospect arises in the

hermaphroditic quality of some flowers, which could interplay with the sexual experimentation that Proust describes in *In Search of Lost Time*. Though the series is not meant to be an autobiography, there is scholarly opinion that many events occurring in the book were based on actual moments in Proust's life. There is further speculation that the early sexual experiences of the narrator were based on those Proust had had with men. The choice in names gives way to such theory, since they are merely feminine versions of their masculine counterparts. To continue with the biological imagery, there is conspicuous phallic reference in the tet-a-tet with Gilberte on the Champs-Elysees: '...I held her gripped between my legs like a young tree which I was trying to climb' (Within in Budding Grove, p. 90). To avoid hyperspeculation of the symbolism, the author will simply conclude that the botanical symbolism is a potent metaphor for the sexual desire Marcel feels. To further emphasize this point, it should be noted the colors he chooses for the flowers-bright pinks-are the colors of the flesh. The science of love is similarly displayed in early scenes from *Sodom and Gomorrah*, when in the garden, Jupien and Charlus enact a type of mating ritual that would normally occur between the bee and an insect. The purely sexual terms Proust poetically expresses refer to a search for the traditional beauty that Darwinism says is the key to preserving the species. Despite the narrator's efforts to explore the inner mind of his attractions, the mystique of the body of the organism and the extent of its aestheticism are initial attractions for potential mates. This facet of love that Proust presents the reader is the concept of beauty. What is beautiful? For Marcel and Charlus, it is 'traditional' beauty that initially attracts them, but for Marcel, Charlus, and Swann, 'to love Odette, Gilberte, and Albertine is to assert a belief in the

physical existence of human individuality which coincides with a particular human body' (Bree, p. 135). Although the narrator additionally develops what one would call a deeper concept of beauty, when Proust describes this, one cannot help but think it is merely another eroticism. Odette is not a particularly beautiful woman, but her mannerisms and her style, even if she is a lowly coquette, are admired by high, or at least middle class, society and she is thus allowed to pass for beautiful. When Swann sees her, he is not impressed, but she is instantaneously attracted to him and pursues him. Swann, because his concept of beauty is Darwinian, rejects her, but slowly he falls in love with her because her face reminds him of that in a painting he loves. The association of the face to a pleasant memory is enough to make her beautiful in his eyes. But there is also another side to her beauty, and that is the beauty he sees in her taste; his love is perpetuated by his vanity, because he develops an interest in her simply since she has developed one in him. Based on this episode, there are clearly psychological factors involved in finding love. In fact, what Freud has to say on the concept of beauty is that 'it is rooted in the soul of sexual stimulation and signified originally that which is sexually exciting. The more remarkable, therefore, is the fact that the genitals, the sight of which provokes the greatest sexual excitement, can really never be considered 'beautiful' (Freud, p, 536).

Swann's love for Odette gradually becomes more intense. It is built upon the vanity he originally felt when she originally showed interest in him. Of course it is the desire of anyone to be seen as great in the eyes of others; Swann wishes to preserve that as Odette. Swann becomes dangerously jealous, but persists in loving her Bree's essay on love in *In Search of Lost Time* states it is 'multiplicity of oneself that constitutes happiness' (Bree p. 153). As Swann

loses this so-called multiplicity, or erotic projection of the self, his desire grows exponentially and he will stop at nothing to keep Odette. Hence, the concept of masochism is introduced, on which Freud says, 'Certain perverted tendencies regularly appearing in contrasting pairs, which in view of the material to be produced later, if of great theoretical value' (Freud, p. 537). In other words, the intense love Swann felt for Odette was coupled by the intense pain he inflicted upon himself by letting Odette take advantage of his affection while she hustled France. What perpetuates this masochism? Every pain contains within it the possibility of a pleasurable sensation, and that is what the love thrives on. Love is a disease, Proust says, it is 'a permanent strain of suffering which happiness neutralizes, makes potential only, postpones, but which may at any moment become, what it would long since have been had we not obtained what we wanted, excruciating' (Within in Budding Grove, p. 214). It feeds on the desire of the lover to be accepted by his or her lover. It is the annihilation of the self, and the desire to completely devote oneself to a cause that will ideally return the favor. In Swann's love, he made a fatal pact that destroyed his life and his standing in society so that he could be with a woman who satiated his vanity. It was a superficial goodness that he could attain with anybody, but he chooses Odette to devote all of himself to because she had initially presented that feeling to him. In contrast to portions of the narrator's love, Swann's love is hardly driven by sexual desire, and almost wholly instigated by strong, primal sentiments of vanity and envy, which are, interestingly enough, two of the seven deadly sins. When Swann finally realizes that his love for Odette was a 'false scent', he utters one of the most powerful lines in love stories: 'To think that I've wasted years of my life, that I've longed to die, that I've

experienced my greatest love, for a woman who didn't appeal to me, who wasn't even my type!' (Shattuck, p. 81; Swann's Way, p. 543) When each love episode ends, the most emotionally involved person is somehow altered; the actual experience of love has been obliterated little by little until it is almost entirely forgotten. (Bree, p. 133). The only traces of the episode, no matter how consumed the lover has been by the affair during its course, are forgotten entirely except in a few images. The self is preserved, though slightly altered. To put it in terms of evolution, the lover has acquired characteristics from the love. This presents an inherent contradiction within the Proustian love story. While it seems absolutely more plausible to live a life of episodic loves than to have the one love of your life that you fill every photo album and journal you will ever purchase with pictures of, I do not believe in the total annihilation of the self during a love, and do not believe that love can only occur when there is such an annihilation of the self. While Proust tends to have a more pessimistic outlook on love, I feel the reason why none of the characters have been particularly successful at love is because they are obsessed with either annihilating the one they are with (as in the case of the narrator), or annihilating themselves (as in the case of Swann). The classical love story describes a mutual respect for one another, which none of the characters seem to have, or have only a very limited amount of it for something completely meaningless, e. g. Swann's association of Odette to art, Marcel's fascination by Albertine's presence on the beach. A love story need not be classical to contain feelings of reciprocal adoration for significant things. The human reality of love is not entirely as unfortunate as Proust makes it out to be, and while he accurately describes the biological nature of love, his emotional and psychological interpretations

of love leave me unsatisfied. Perhaps a tragic experience in his love life, regardless of his insistence on distorting the autobiography of *In Search of Lost Time*, has tainted his own insights and those of his characters. Work Cited

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