

French novels: proust



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

MARCEL PROUST

“ We don’t receive wisdom; we must discover it for ourselves after a journey that no one can take for us or spare us.”

– Marcel Proust

INTRODUCTION

The concept of ‘ novel’ had become extremely well defined towards the end of the nineteenth century. Along with other languages, French novels were also slowly becoming extremely popular. One of the chief pioneers of French novels was Marcel Proust. In a time of literary resurgence in the continent of Europe, Marcel Proust played a vital role in bringing about a rise in French literature’s constant value on the literary market.

Marcel Proust was a prolific writer who succeeded in grasping France’s cultural and its gigantic literary significance. Coming from a wealthy Jewish bourgeois family, he had to face a lot of personal losses which became a central theme in his writings. Having become a chronic invalid at a very young age, he was confined to lead a morose, depressing life.

Despite these odds he managed to keep up with his social and literary acquaintances. Most people who met him or spoke with him thought him to be eccentric. Most of his literary works were a representation of his memories. He converted the treasure-house of his gloomy and haunting memories into a composition of classy literature. When it came to writing, he thought of himself to be the sole creator, a God who brought the very richness of his enchanted stream of memory to life by penning it on a piece

of paper. So what made Marcel Proust a legend in the field of literature? What were the obstacles he had to face before becoming the famous author the world knows today? Let us go back in time and witness the making of Marcel Proust.

A GENIUS IS BORN

In the beautiful city of Paris, France, Adrien and Jeanne Proust welcomed a beautiful baby boy into their prosperous household on 10th July 1871. The baby was named Marcel Proust by his parents. Marcel's father, Adrien was a renowned physician and his wife, Jeanne was from a wealthy Jewish family.

Marcel was a sickly child as he kept falling sick at regular intervals. In 1880 at the tender age of 9, he suffered from a strange but severe state of breathlessness. Worried, his father used his medical skills on his son and realised that Marcel was asthmatic. Medicine wasn't as advanced as it is today and so his medication did not allow him to play with the other children like a normal child. Upon exerting too much energy he would suffer from breathlessness at regular intervals. Thus he spent most of his time at home and as a result Marcel suffered from depression.

In order to rid Marcel of his depression his parents would often send him to Auteuil on holidays or at seaside resorts in Normandy where his maternal grandmother lived. While on vacation, Marcel would spend much of his time reading and trying to write his own thoughts in the form of a short story or poems.

EARLY YEARS

He attended a school called ‘ Lycée Condorcet’ and wrote various articles for class magazines. However, as fate would have it, his education was disrupted due to him falling ill frequently. Marcel was very fond of his mother, Jeanne and was attached to her. Jeanne saw the passion her son had towards writing. She herself was well read and literate and would often write letters which demonstrated a well developed sense of humour. She also had a very strong command over the English language and guided Marcel in translations. She wanted Marcel to finish his graduation and so she also helped him with his studies and Marcel finally graduated in 1890 at the age of 19.

In spite of poor health, 19 years old Marcel decided to enter the military. He was enlisted in the French army and was stationed at the Coligny Barracks in Orlèans. This proved to be quite an experience for Marcel as he learnt the importance of discipline and comradeship. Before joining the army, Marcel was often considered to be a snob due to his lavish lifestyle but after returning from the army in 1893 at the age of 22, Marcel was a changed man. He was more disciplined and social towards people. Upon his return from the army he studied at the School of Political Sciences and acquired licenses in law in 1893 and literature in 1895.

In the beginning of 1895, Marcel spent several years reading and researching the works of art critic and patron, John Ruskin. This helped Marcel in refining his own theories of art and philosophy. Marcel then set out to translate two of Ruskin’s works into French but he constantly faced problems since English wasn’t his first language. So, to overcome this obstacle he made his translations a group affair. He took the help of his

friend Reynaldo Hahn and his cousin who was British and got his translation polished.

Marcel would often visit Madame Straus' bourgeois get-togethers and would observe the behaviour of people. Madame Straus was Marcel's mother's friend, and so she had no problems with Marcel attending her private parties. These visits proved fruitful as Marcel treated the people at these parties as character subjects who would later serve as sources of inspiration in Marcel's short stories. In 1896 at the age of 25, Marcel published ' Pleasures and Days' which was a collection of short stories he had written during his stint in the army.

In 1897, French society and politics were split by the movement to liberate Jewish army officer Alfred Dreyfus who was unjustly imprisoned as a spy. 26 years old Marcel knew this was false and having a Jewish background, he decided to revolt against the government and fight for Dreyfus' freedom. Marcel helped by assisting Dreyfus' lawyer in organizing petitions asking for Dreyfus to be freed. Many of his friends warned him that his actions would lead to social banishment but Marcel defied the risk of ostracism courageously. This experience provided a sense of clarity and Marcel's impression of the aristocratic society was shattered which became very visible in the short stories that he had written. Through these experiences Marcel was gradually evolving from an egotistical ignorant youngster to a mature prolific writer.

TROUBLED ROAD TO SUCCESS

Marcel led a very depressing childhood due to constant illness and asthma. However, he never gave up hope and continued to pursue literature. But, the early 1900s proved to be very difficult for Marcel personally. In February 1903 when Marcel was 32 years old, his brother, Robert Proust married and left the family home. Following Robert's departure, his father died in November of the same year. This was very difficult for Marcel as he was the only person responsible for the family's well being. However, things took a turn for the worse when Marcel's beloved mother died in September 1905. Marcel's emotional armour was smashed and his courage crushed. Marcel went into severe depression following Jeanne's death. His health continued to deteriorate and Marcel knew that the only way he could get over his mother's death was if he involved himself completely into the field of writing. A year later in 1906 35 years old Marcel went on to publish the translated version of Ruskin's philosophies. The book was named ' Sesame and Lilies' and was well appreciated by the French masses. The critics lauded Marcel's skill of translating the language and yet staying true to the philosophies of Ruskin.

Marcel developed a hauntingly brooding personality after his mother's death. In spite of the success of his translated works, he had forgotten what it meant to smile. The loss of his loved ones had left him grief stricken and alone but financially independent to attempt his novel. The year 1908 was a pivotal year for Marcel as a writer. He published his views and ideologies and imitations of other writers in various journals. Imitating other writers' works helped Marcel in solidifying his own style. Inspired, Marcel began penning a novel which he thought would be his best work. He was unable to rest or

sleep as he would spend entire days writing the novel. He wanted to get over his personal loss and so writing became a sort of drug for Marcel.

This obsession resulted in a novel which focused on a protagonist who has a problem sleeping as he remembers waiting as a child for his mother to come to him in the morning. The story was obviously based on Marcel's own feeling of depression caused due to his mother's loss. Upon finishing the novel, Marcel went to various publishers to have his book published but to no avail. Every publisher rejected his book stating that it was too morose and lacked substance. Tired of being rejected, he shifted his work to a substantially different project which also contained many of the same themes and elements. In 1909, at the age of 38 he began work on another novel titled 'À la recherche du temps perdu'.

Marcel decided to divide the novel into several volumes and published the first volume called 'Swann's Way' in 1913. The first book focussed mainly on the theme of involuntary memory. After finishing the book, Marcel went to many publication houses to get his work published but was faced with rejection once again. He went to one of the most famous magazine companies in France at the time called New French Review (NRF). Famous author Andre Gide was given the book to proof read to advise NRF on its publication. However, after going through a seemingly endless collection of depressing memories and melancholic episodes, Gide came across a few syntactic mistakes and decided to reject it. Not losing hope, Marcel managed to meet with another publisher called Grasset and eventually got his book published. The novel became a bestseller and it compelled Marcel to begin writing its respective sequels.

While writing the second volume titled ' In the Shadow of Young Girls in Flower' in 1913, Marcel faced a lot of problems due to the First World War. Marcel's publisher, Grasset closed down his publication firm and joined the military. Marcel then decided to go to another publisher and got his novel published in 1914. The novel was such a huge success that Marcel was awarded the ' Prix Goncourt' award in 1919 at the age of 48.

FINAL YEARS

In 1920, 49 years old Marcel developed a strange illness which could not be detected by most of the top doctors at the time. The sickness slowed down his work but Marcel continued to write the third and fourth book in the series titled ' The Guermantes Way' and ' Sodom and Gomorrah'. Marcel finished both the books by 1921 and managed to get them published a few weeks before his 50th birthday. Success followed Marcel like wildfire. His name was everywhere in the media and he had become a literary figure in the eyes of the French masses. Soon, other European countries got hold of his books and Marcel soon became an iconic figure in Literature all over the world. Marcel's books were published in French, English, Italian and other languages.

Even though success embraced Marcel in his 50s, he continued to live in misery and illness. Marcel cared less about fame and more about his contribution to French literature. He confided in his estranged brother Robert and told him to finish and publish his work if he were to die. Robert saw the condition Marcel was in and could not help but feel sorry for him. After all, Marcel was his brother and agreed to help him.

Marcel spent the entire year of 1922 confined to his cork-lined bedroom. He slept during the day and worked at night to complete the fifth book in his series titled ' The Prisoner'. On 18th November 1922, Marcel finally succumbed to this mysterious illness at the age of 51. He was buried by his brother in the Père Lachaise Cemetery in Paris.

TRIBUTE

After Marcel's death, the remaining volumes of his novel which he had written but not completely revised were published by his brother Robert. Robert took the help of Jacques Riviere and Jean Paulhan who were the directors of New French Review. The books published were ' The Prisoner' in the year 1923, ' The Fugitive' in the year 1925 and ' Time Regained' in the year 1927.

The merit of Marcel's novel was that its brilliance was perceived as being one of the major literary works of the Western canon. Legendary playwright and literary critic Graham Greene called Marcel the greatest novelist of the 20th century. Today the book is being read by billions all over the world. Famous publishing company ' Penguin' undertook a fresh translation in 1995 based on the latest and authoritative French text. Marcel's projection of snobbism, vanity and cruelty in his novels were a mere reflection of his own personal experiences. His insight into women and the love men have for women remain unimpaired.

Today, Marcel is considered to be one of the greatest novelists of Romance.

The entire climate of the 20th century was affected by his series of books

which collectively came under the title of ' In Search of Lost Time'. His books are considered to be supreme achievements of modern fiction. Marcel's style is considered to be one of the most original in all literature till date and is unique in its union of precision, force, enchantment classicism and symbolism. There is no doubt that Marcel Proust is and will always remain as one of the greatest legends in the field of literature the world has ever seen.