



THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA
Department of French, Hispanic & Italian Studies

RMST 202

Romance Studies,
Modernism to the Present

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**“Combray”:
Marcel Proust and
the Modernist Novel**

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with Jon Beasley-Murray

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Even though the text looks backwards, to the past, it makes that past new by reflecting on it via a modernist sensibility for which the representation of a thing has a life of its own.

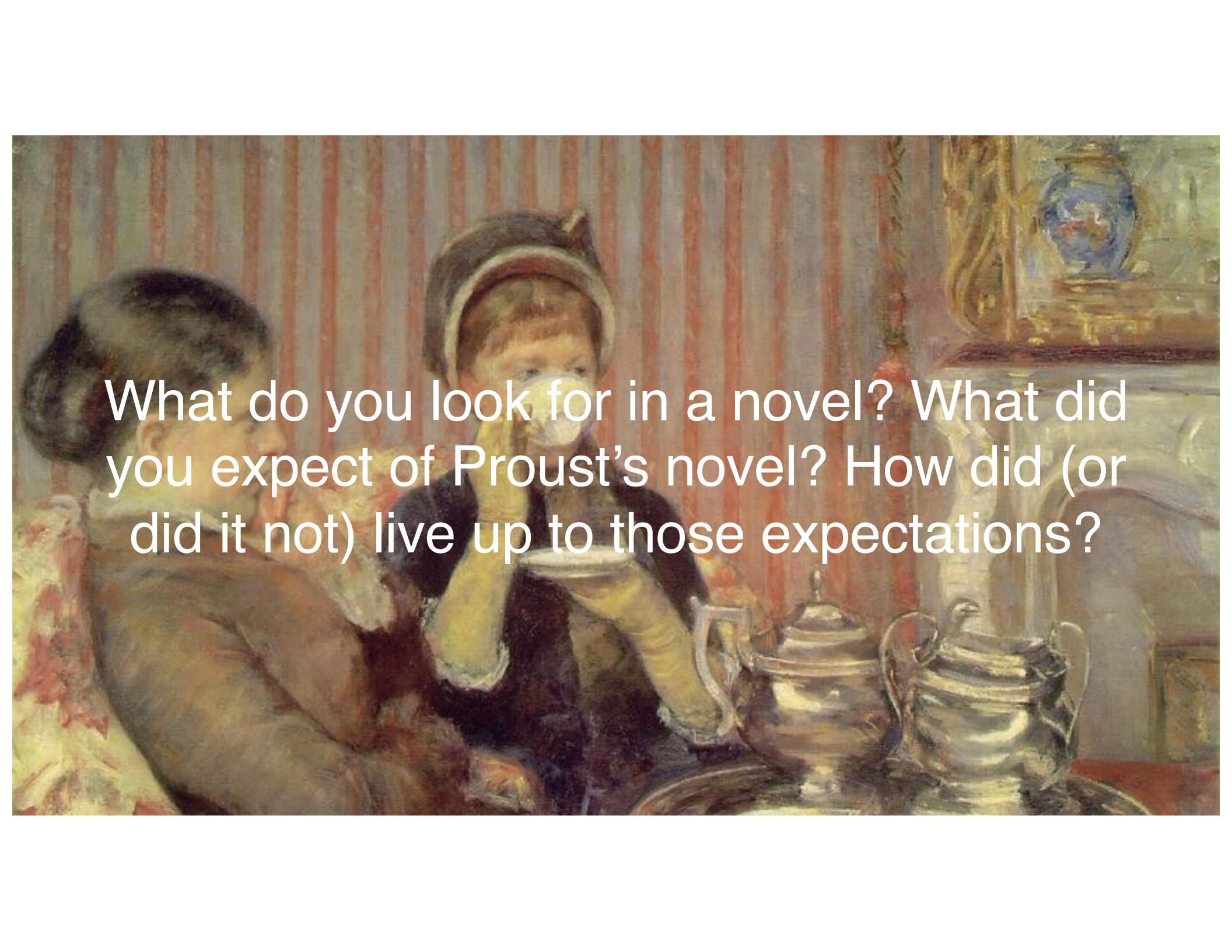
Proust's novel opens up to a multiplicity of perspectives that may make reading it difficult, but that also teaches us how to read in new ways.



MODERNISM AND THE NOVEL

Modernism is a series of ruptures and changes within the arts, from the late nineteenth century to the middle of the twentieth century, that challenged our assumptions and expectations as to the nature of a work of art, and the relationship between representation and the “real.”

What do you look for in a novel? What did you expect of Proust's novel? How did (or did it not) live up to those expectations?



What do you look for in a novel? What did you expect of Proust's novel? How did (or did it not) live up to those expectations?

“I had not ceased while sleeping to form reflections on what I had just read, but these reflections had taken a rather peculiar turn” (3).

Such self-reflectiveness and this “peculiar turn” are part and parcel of the changes instigated in modernist art and culture.

Modernism asks us to think again about the relationship between art and life.

It questions the notion that the central characteristic of the visual arts should be resemblance. It makes us reconsider what is meant by resemblance and what separates an object from its representation.



Ceci n'est pas une pipe.

René Magritte, *The Treachery of Images*

Magritte



Vincent Van Gogh, Self-Portrait with Grey Felt Hat (1887)

Modernist texts remind us that literature is never simply a transparent window onto the world: we need to learn to see the window itself, and its framing, to recognize how it shapes what and how we see.



WINDOWS ONTO REALITY



Reconstruction of Proust's Bedroom

“Even if I had had to throw myself out
of the window five minutes later,
I still preferred this.” (34)

MAISON DE M^r & M^l^{le} J. AMIOT TANTE LÉONIE
SOUVENIR DE MARCEL PROUST

The Maison de tante Léonie

“She had the street there before her eyes and on it from morning to night, to divert her melancholy, like the Persian princes, would read the daily but immemorial chronicle of Combray.” (53)

The novel reminds us that our view of the world is shaped by particular institutions and experiences, and that it is always partial. Proust's narrator tells us that vision and understanding (or misunderstanding) are embedded in specific practices and assumptions, even if these come to be taken for granted.



**MULTIPLE
PERSPECTIVES,
DEFAMILIARIZATION,
AND DIFFICULTY**

Modernism outlines a fragmented world, with multiple viewpoints that do not easily cohere into a unified whole.



**Pablo Picasso, *Girl with a Mandolin*
(*Fanny Tellier*) (1910)**

THE
WASTE LAND

By
T. S. ELIOT

Winner of The Dial's 1922
Award.

This prize of two thousand
dollars is given annually to
a young American writer in
recognition of his service
to letters.

“When nothing subsists of an old past, [. . .] smell and taste still remain for a long time, like souls, remembering, waiting, hoping, upon the ruins of all the rest, bearing without giving way, on their almost impalpable droplet, the immense edifice of memory.” (47)

The novel's narrative logic consists in putting the pieces together again, assembling a mosaic that might convey something of a past that is otherwise lost.

The passage of time opens up a distance within the narrative “I.” Memory offers a glimpse of the other within the self. It enacts a dislocation or displacement manifested in the narrator’s initial confusion about where he is. More disturbingly, he can no longer even be sure *who* he is.

A doubled or split consciousness haunts the entire project as scenes from the narrator's past are recollected and seen anew.

Seeing or reviewing (seeing again) the world through the eyes of a child opens up new vistas, in the gap between the event and its belated meaningfulness.

MAKE

IT

NEW

BY EZRA POUND

YALE UNIVERSITY PRESS
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“The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects ‘unfamiliar,’ to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception.”

(Viktor Shklovsky)


We are reminded that transparency is not necessarily a virtue; we are made aware of the text as a window that is as much a barrier separating us from the world outside as it is an opening that we are somehow to see through.

Modernist literature places expectations upon the reader. It aims to shake us out of our habits, and to become more active readers, and better readers, by ensuring we recognize both our own limits and the limits inherent to representation itself.



MUSIC

Pianochocolate,
“Romance”



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