Characters and Themes

Characters:

Céleste Albaret

Céleste and her sister appear again, as they will in *The Captive*:

Moreover I should have to struggle against similar entreaties, in the hotel first of all, where the eyes of Marie Gineste and Céleste Albaret were red. (Marie indeed was giving vent to the swift flowing tears of a mountain stream; Céleste, who was gentler, urged her to be calm; but, Marie having murmured the only line of poetry that she knew: “Here below the lilacs die,” Céleste could contain herself no longer, and a flood of tears spilled over her lilac-hued face; I dare say they had forgotten my existence by that evening.)—*Sodome and Gomorrah* 4: 716

Brichot

Professor Brichot remains an assiduous member of the little clan, but his erudition and wit are no longer appreciated:

As for what was called his wit, it was exactly the same as had at one time been so highly appreciated by the little clan. He talked with the same irritating fluency, but his words no longer struck a chord, having to overcome a hostile silence or disagreeable echoes; what had changed was not what he said but the acoustics of the rooms and the attitude of his audience. —*Sodom and Gomorrah* 4: 475

Charlus

Charlus brings a footman to dinner. Charlus, who prefers mature, virile men is not tempted by the young page-boys at the hotel: “. . . for these young people had not yet reached the age at which sex is completely developed and which appealed to M. de Charlus. —*Sodom and Gomorrah* 4: 525
During the war years, we will see Charlus’s sexual preferences evolve. His vain quest for a virile man will provide a bit of humor in a scene of black comedy in Time Regained: Here the footman offers to introduce Charlus to his brother, the Prince de Guermantes! —Sodom and Gomorrah 4: 526

Lamenting the end of the monarchy and the decline of the nobility, Charlus remarks: “The only kings that we have left, in France . . . are the kings in packs of cards. . . .” —Sodom and Gomorrah 4: 485

The scene in the brothel and its aftermath when Morel sees Charlus’s family pictures in the prince’s suite are comic. The passage concludes with an image of Charlus as a kind of Mount Rushmore of violent emotions:

In any case Morel, whatever objection might be made, reserved certain evening hours, whether for algebra or for the violin. On one occasion it was for neither, but for the Prince de Guermantes who, having come down for a few days to that part of the coast to pay the Princesse de Luxembourg a visit, met the musician without knowing who he was or being known to him either, and offered him fifty francs to spend the night with him in the brothel at Maineville; a twofold pleasure for Morel, in the remuneration received from M. de Guermantes and in the delight of being surrounded by women who would flaunt their tawny breasts uncovered. In some way or other M. de Charlus got wind of what had occurred and of the place appointed, but did not discover the name of the seducer. Mad with jealousy, and in the hope of identifying the latter, he telegraphed to Jupien, who arrived two days later, and when, early in the following week, Morel announced that he would again be absent, the Baron asked Jupien if he would undertake to bribe the woman who kept the establishment to hide them in some place where they could witness what occurred. “That’s all right, I’ll see to it, dearie,” Jupien assured the Baron. It is hard to imagine the extent to which this anxiety agitated the Baron’s mind, and by the very fact of doing so had momentarily enriched it. Love can thus be responsible for veritable geological upheavals of the mind. In that of M. de Charlus, which a few days earlier had resembled a plain so uniform that as far as the eye could reach it would have been impossible to make out an idea rising above the level surface,
there had suddenly sprung into being, hard as stone, a range of mountains, but mountains as elaborately carved as if some sculptor, instead of quarrying and carting away the marble, had chiseled it on the spot, in which there writhed in vast titanic groups Fury, Jealousy, Curiosity, Envy, Hatred, Suffering, Pride, Terror and Love. —*Sodom and Gomorrah* 4: 650-51

For more about Charlus, see Mme Verdurin below.

**Marcel**

Marcel, who continues to give us fascinating detail and brilliant psychological analyses, still insists that he does not “have an observant mind.” —*Sodom and Gomorrah* 4: 473

This is, of course, a manifestation of Proust’s clever narrative strategy.

**Madame Verdurin**

As we have said, many of the most comic scenes occur when Mme Verdurin is on the stage: Here are her attempts to discourage the Norwegian philosopher from dining at the Tour d’Argent. As we know, she cannot tolerate any sort of competition that might lure one of her guests away even for a single evening. We begin with the humorous description of the Norwegian philosopher’s less than perfect knowledge of French and how to pronounce it:

[The] Norwegian philosopher . . . spoke French very well but very slowly, for the twofold reason that, in the first place, having learned the language only recently and not wishing to make mistakes (though he did make a few), he referred each word to a sort of mental dictionary, and secondly, being a metaphysician, he always thought of what he intended to say while he was saying it, which, even in a Frenchman, is a cause of slowness.

“My dear—colleague,” he said to Brichot, after deliberating in his mind whether colleague was the correct term, “I have a sort of—desire to know whether there are other trees in the—nomenclature of your beautiful French—Latin—Norman tongue. Madame” (he meant Mme Verdurin, although he dared not look at her) “has told me that you know everything. Is not this precisely the moment?”
“No, it’s the moment for eating,” interrupted Mme Verdurin, who saw the dinner becoming interminable.

“Very well,” the Scandinavian replied, bowing his head over his plate with a resigned and sorrowful smile. “But I must point out to Madame that if I have permitted myself this questionnaire—pardon me, this question—it is because I have to return tomorrow to Paris to dine at the Tour d’Argent or at the Hôtel Meurice. My French—confrère—M. Boutroux is to address us there about certain séances of spiritualism—pardon me, certain spirituous evocations—which he has verified.”

“The Tour d’Argent is not nearly as good as they make out,” said Mme Verdurin sourly. “In fact, I’ve had some disgusting dinners there.”

“But am I mistaken, is not the food that one consumes at Madame’s table an example of the finest French cookery?”

“Well, it’s not positively bad,” replied Mme Verdurin, mollified. “And if you come next Wednesday, it will be better.” —*Sodom and Gomorrah* 4: 447-48

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Mme Verdurin, who is anti-clerical, struggles to hide her hatred of the clergy in hopes that she can recruit Charlus to become a member of her little clan. Charlus, whose patron saint is the Archangel Michael cannot help but let his insolent manner break through from time to time:

“Do you intend to remain long on the coast?” Mme Verdurin asked M. de Charlus, in whom she foresaw an addition to the faithful and trembled lest he should be returning too soon to Paris.

“Good Lord, one never knows,” replied M. de Charlus in a nasal drawl. “I should like to stay here until the end of September.”

“You are quite right,” said Mme Verdurin; “that’s when we get splendid storms at sea.”

“To tell you the truth, that is not what would influence me. I have for some time past unduly neglected the Archangel Saint Michael, my patron saint, and I should like to make amends to him by staying for his feast, on the 29th of September, at the Abbey on the Mount.”
“You take an interest in all that sort of thing?” asked Mme Verdurin, who might perhaps have succeeded in hushing the voice of her outraged anti-clericalism, had she not been afraid that so long an expedition might make the violinist and the Baron ‘defect’ for forty-eight hours.

“You are perhaps afflicted with intermittent deafness,” M. de Charlus replied insolently. “I have told you that Saint Michael is one of my glorious patrons.” Then, smiling with a benevolent ecstasy, his eyes gazing into the distance, his voice reinforced by an exaltation which seemed now to be not merely aesthetic but religious: “It is so beautiful at the Offertory when Michael stands erect by the altar, in a white robe, swinging a golden censer heaped so high with perfumes that the fragrance of them mounts up to God.”

“We might go there in a party,” suggested Mme Verdurin, notwithstanding her horror of the clergy.

“At that moment, when the Offertory begins,” went on M. de Charlus who, for other reasons but in the same manner as good speakers in Parliament, never replied to an interruption and would pretend not to have heard it, “it would be wonderful to see our young friend Palestrinising and even performing an aria by Bach. The worthy Abbot, too, would be wild with joy, and it is the greatest homage, at least the greatest public homage that I can pay to my Holy Patron. What an edification for the faithful! We must mention it presently to the young Angelico of music, a warrior like Saint Michael.” —Sodom and Gomorrah 4: 484-85

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Mme Verdurin on Cottard, whom she idolizes:

“You know, he’s charming,” said Mme Verdurin, “he has such a delightfully sardonic good nature. And then, he snatched my husband from the jaws of death when the whole medical profession had given him up. He spent three nights by his bedside, without ever lying down. And so for me, you know,” she went on in a grave and almost menacing tone, raising her hand to the twin spheres, shrouded in white tresses, of her musical temples, and as though we had threatened to assault the Doctor, “Cottard is sacred! He could ask me for anything in the world! As it is, I don’t call him Doctor
Cottard, I call him Doctor God! And even in saying that I am slandering him, for this God does everything in his power to remedy some of the disasters for which the other is responsible.” —*Sodom and Gomorrah* 4: 492

Cottard is based in part on Dr. Samuel Pozzi, a friend of the Proust family. Pozzi, whose good looks can be admired in his portrait by John Singer Sargent, was exceedingly vain about his appearance. Léon Daudet once remarked that he would not let Pozzi operate on him if there was a mirror in the room. Because Pozzi was such a ladies’ man, he was known as “Doctor Love,” “L’Amour-médecin.”

**Themes:**

**Memory, body memory**

Some incantatory gesture having resuscitated as I put on my dinner-jacket, the alert and frivolous self that was mine when I used to go with Saint-Loup to dine at Rivebelle and on the evening when I thought to take Mlle de Stermaria on the island in the Bois, I began unconsciously to hum the same tune as I had hummed then; and it was only when I realized this that by the song I recognized the sporadic singer, who indeed knew no other tune. The first time I had sung it, I was beginning to fall in love with Albertine, but I imagined that I would never get to know her. Later, in Paris, it was when I had ceased to love her and some days after I had enjoyed her for the first time. Now it was when I was going out to dinner with her. . . —*Sodom and Gomorrah* 4: 590