Characters and Themes

Characters:

Doctors

There is in the human body a certain instinct for what is beneficial to us, as there is in the heart for what is our moral duty, an instinct which no authorization by a doctor of medicine or divinity can replace. We know that cold baths are bad for us, but we like them: we can always find a doctor to recommend them, not to prevent them from doing us harm. —The Captive 5: 242-43

Nature scarcely seems capable of giving us any but quite short illnesses. But medicine has developed the art of prolonging them. Remedies, the respite that they procure, the relapses that a temporary cessation of them provokes, produce a simulacrum of illness to which the patient grows so accustomed that he ends by making it permanent, just as children have regular fits of coughing long after they have been cured of the whooping cough. Then the remedies begin to have less effect, the doses are increased, they cease to do any good, but they have begun to do harm thanks to this lasting indisposition. Nature would not have offered them so long a tenure. It is a great wonder that medicine can almost rival nature in forcing a man to remain in bed, to continue taking some drug on pain of death. From then on, the artificially grafted illness has taken root, has become a secondary but a genuine illness, with this difference only, that natural illnesses are cured, but never those which medicine creates, for it does not know the secret of their cure. —The Captive 5: 238

Mamma

The concern that the mother shows about Marcel’s spending habits is autobiographical. Proust’s mother used this quote from Mme de Sévigné in a letter urging him to be more careful with his money:
Without referring to what distressed her most, she expressed her displeasure at my lavish expenditures: “Where on earth does all your money go? It is distressing enough that, like Charles de Sévigné, you do not know what you want and are ‘two or three people at once,’ but do try at least not to be like him in spending money so that I may never have to say to of you: ‘He has discovered how to spend and have nothing to show, how to lose without gambling and how to pay without clearing himself of debt.’ ”

—The Captive 5: 180

Vinteuil, origin of

In the manuscript of Jean Santeuil, Proust’s earlier version of what was to become In Search of Lost Time, there is a character, who is a county engineer. Jean is astounded one day when he learns that this engineer, who exhibits so many vices and vulgarities, is also an extraordinary musician. In developing this character, Proust attempts to fuse within one personage—a figure who appears to his neighbors to be an ordinary if not an inferior person—the artist and the scientist. In later drafts the naturalist was called Vington.

In In Search of Lost Time, aspects of this early character are given both to Legrandin (he is an engineer and a man of letters) and Vinteuil, who receives not only the first syllable and the initial consonant sound of the second syllable of his name (the final sound comes from the hero’s family name, Santeuil) but also a number of scientific and technological associations. These are present in the passage on Vinteuil and the real-life artist Marcel identifies most closely with him, namely, Richard Wagner. In the case of Wagner, as presented by Proust, the relationship between music and engineering is provided by aerodynamics.

Wagner’s music is frequently linked to mechanics. One of these links was first used in “Impressions de route en automobile” where the car horn reminds Proust of a scene in Tristan and Isolde (Contre Sainte-Beuve 5: 69). As we have seen and heard, this same music is used in the novel with another mechanical device, the telephone: “I suddenly heard, mechanical and sublime, like the fluttering scarf of the shepherd’s pipe in Tristan, the top-like whirr of the telephone” (Sodom and Gomorrah 4: 177). The war with Germany will further heighten the association between Wagner’s music and
airplanes, when Proust compares the German bombers to Wagner’s *Walkyrie*. In another passage on the fighter planes, Proust underscores the human quality of the wartime pilots and dissociates them from the aviator he saw at Versailles on his last outing with Albertine.

**Vinteuil’s music, effect on Mme Verdurin**

And as the friend then examines a photograph which enables him to specify the likeness, so, on top of Vinteuil’s sonata, I set up on the music-rest rest the score of *Tristan*. . . . I was struck by how much reality there is in the work of Wagner as I contemplated once more those insistent, fleeting themes which visit an act, recede only to return again and again, and, sometimes distant, dormant, almost detached, are at other moments, while remaining vague, so pressing and so close, so internal, so organic, so visceral, that they seem like the reprise not so much of a musical motif as of an attack of neuralgia. —*The Captive* 5: 205-06.

An aside here: We can see that Proust exaggerated this trait and turned it into comedy in the case of Mme Verdurin, who pretends to be so sensitive to the beauty of music that she cannot listen to it without becoming ill, without suffering from neuralgia.

**Themes:**

**Beauty**

It has been said that beauty is a promise of happiness. Conversely, the possibility of pleasure may be a beginning of beauty. —*The Captive* 5: 180

**Death**

For we talk of “death” for convenience, but there are almost as many different deaths as there are people. We do not possess a sense that would enable us to see, moving at full speed in every direction, these deaths, the active deaths aimed by destiny at this person or that. Often they are deaths that will not be entirely relieved of their duties until two or even three years later. They come in haste to plant a tumor in the side of a Swann, then
The death of others is like a journey one might oneself make, when, already sixty miles out of Paris, one remembers that one has left two dozen handkerchiefs behind, forgotten to leave a key with the cook, to say good-bye to one’s uncle, to ask the name of the town where the old fountain is that you want to see. —The Captive 5: 264

**Jealousy**

Jealousy, which is blindfold, is not merely powerless to discover anything in the darkness that enshrouds it; it is also one of those tortures where the task must be incessantly repeated, like that of the Danaides, or of Ixion. —The Captive 5: 195

**Love**

We are sculptors. We want to obtain of a woman a statue entirely different from the one she has presented to us. —The Captive 5: 182

Amorous curiosity is like the curiosity aroused in us by the names of places; perpetually disappointed, it revives and remains forever insatiable. —The Captive 5: 183-84.

**Truth and lying**

We remember the truth because it has a name, is rooted in the past, but a makeshift lie is quickly forgotten. —The Captive 5: 186