Characters and Themes

Characters:

Albertine’s intelligence

For no doubt, if I returned with tender emotion to her intelligence and her sweetness to me, it was not because they had been any greater than those of other persons whom I had known; had not Mme de Cambremer said to me at Balbec: “What! You could be spending your days with Elstir, who is a genius, and you spend them with your cousin!” Albertine’s intelligence pleased me because, by association, it reminded me of what I called her sweetness, as we call the sweetness of a fruit a certain sensation which exists only in our palate. And in fact, when I thought of Albertine’s intelligence, my lips instinctively protruded and savored a memory of which I preferred that the reality should remain external to me and should consist in the objective superiority of a person.

—The Fugitive 5: 668-69

Marcel and Albertine and the little band of girls

But after we have reached a certain age our loves, our mistresses, are begotten of our anguish; our past, and the physical lesions in which it is recorded, determine our future. In the case of Albertine in particular, the fact that it was not necessarily she that I was predestined to love was inscribed, even without those circumambient loves, in the history of my love for her, that is to say for herself and her friends. For it was not even a love like my love for Gilberte, but was created by division among a number of girls.

—The Fugitive 5: 681

Themes:

Desire
One desires more the woman who has yet to give herself to us; hope anticipates possession; regret is an amplifier of desire. —*The Fugitive* 5: 680

Here’s another observation about the extinction of desire:

We believe that we can change the things around us in accordance with our desires—we believe it because otherwise we can see no favorable outcome. We do not think of the outcome which generally comes to pass and is also favorable; we do not succeed in changing things in accordance with our desire, but gradually our desires change. The situation that we hoped to change because it was intolerable becomes unimportant to us. We have failed to surmount the obstacle, as we were absolutely determined to do, but life has taken us round it, led us past, we can barely see it, so imperceptible has it become. —*The Fugitive* 5: 609

**Habit**

One of Proust’s major themes is the role of habit in our lives. Albertine’s flight has made him see suddenly a new aspect of Habit. Proust underscores the importance of this by writing habit, in the next sentence, with a capital H:

I was so much in the habit of having Albertine with me, and now I suddenly saw a new aspect of Habit. Hitherto I had regarded it chiefly as an annihilating force which suppresses the originality and even the awareness of one’s perceptions; now I saw it as a dread deity, so riveted to one’s being, its insignificant face so incrusted in one’s heart, that if it detaches itself, if it turns away from one, this deity that one had barely distinguished inflicts on one sufferings more terrible than any other and is then as cruel as death itself. —*The Fugitive* 5: 564-65

**How we fall in love:**

Proust maintains that we tend to fall in love with the same type over and over again. Here is one quote to that effect from *The Fugitive:*
There was still time then, and it would have been upon Mlle de Stermaaria that I would have directed that activity of the imagination which makes us extract from a woman so special a notion of individuality that she appears to us unique in herself and predestined and necessary for us. At the most, adopting an almost physiological point of view, I could say that I might have been able to feel that same exclusive love for another woman but not for any other woman. For Albertine, plump and dark, did not resemble Gilberte, slim and fair, and yet they were fashioned of the same healthy stuff, and above the same sensual cheeks there was a look in the eyes of both whose meaning was difficult to grasp. They were women of a sort that would not attract the attention of men who for their part would go mad about other women who “meant nothing” to me. A man has almost always the same way of catching a cold, of falling ill; that is to say, he requires for it to happen a particular combination of circumstances; it is natural that when he falls in love he should love a certain type of woman, a type which for that matter is very widespread. —The Fugitive 5: 677

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This comment, although Proust uses the first person plural, seems to me to fit better those who like Marcel, suffer from separation anxiety. This was, as we well know by now, the case of the child Marcel at Combray, whose anxiety was mirrored by that of Swann on the evening when he did not find Odette waiting for him at the Verdurins’. 

For very often, in order that we may discover that we are in love, perhaps indeed in order that we may fall in love, the day of separation must first have come. —The Fugitive 5: 683

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Why love disappoints:

. . . how little there is of a person in a letter [from Albertine]. [...] it is still a thought of some kind that we are confronted with. But even so, in the person, the thought is not apparent to us until it has been diffused through the corolla of the face opened up like a water lily. This modifies it considerably after all. And it is perhaps one of the causes of
our perpetual disappointments in love, this perpetual displacement whereby, in response to our expectation of the ideal person whom we love, each meeting provides us with a person in flesh and blood who yet contains so little trace of our dream. —The Fugitive 5: 611-12

**Jealousy**

Jean Racine’s *Phèdre* and jealousy:

This play is the French equivalent of *Hamlet*, in that it is the most famous tragedy in the French repertory. We have seen Proust make references to it throughout the novel. In *The Fugitive*, Marcel finds parallels between his jealous obsession with Albertine and Phèdre’s with Hippolyte. This passages comes just before the tragedy precipitated by Marcel’s anxieties and the lies he told to Albertine. Here are some quotes:

I opened the newspaper. It announced a performance by Berma. Then I remembered the two different ways in which I had listened to *Phèdre*, and it was now in a third way that I thought of the declaration scene. . . . I saw this scene, as a sort of prophecy of the amorous episodes in my life. —*The Fugitive* 5: 617, 620

There are things in our hearts to which we do not realize how strongly we are attached. But let a sudden departure remove the unwanted person from us, and we can no longer bear to live. They say a prompt departure takes you from us. —*The Fugitive* 5: 618 This last sentence is a line from *Phèdre*.

Jealousy is the primary motivation that precipitates the tragic climax of Racine’s *Phèdre*: Phèdre would have forgiven Hippolyte . . . had she not learned that Hippolyte was in love with Aricie. For jealousy, which in love is equivalent to the loss of all happiness, outweighs mere loss of reputation. [In her rage] she sends the man [Hippolyte] who will have none of her to a fate the calamities of which are moreover no consolation to herself, since her own suicide follows immediately upon the death of Hippolyte. . . . I saw this scene as a sort of prophecy of the amorous episodes of my own life. —*The Fugitive* 5: 619-20

**Oblivion**
And now she no longer existed anywhere; I could have scoured the earth from pole to pole without finding Albertine; the reality which had closed over her was once more unbroken, had obliterated every trace of the being who had sunk without trace. She was now no more than a name. —The Fugitive 5: 688

**Obsessions and will**

Whatever our social position, however wise our precautions, when the truth is confessed we have no hold over the life of another person. Why had she not said to me: “I have those tastes”? I would have yielded, would have allowed her to gratify them. [...] What was the good of all these futile miseries? But I saw now that we are not free to refrain from forging the chains of our own misery, and that however well we may know our own will, other people do not obey it. —The Fugitive 5: 683-84

**The role of intelligence**

Proust makes this interesting comment on the role of intelligence in our lives. It is a topic to which Proust will return in the closing pages of *Time Regained*:

... the fact that our intelligence is not the subtlest, most powerful, most appropriate instrument for grasping the truth is only one reason the more for beginning with the intelligence, and not with an unconscious intuition, a ready-made faith in presentiments. It is life that little by little, case by case, enables us to observe that what is most important to our hearts or to our minds is taught us not by reasoning but by other powers. And then it is the intelligence itself which, acknowledging their superiority, abdicates to them through reasoning and consents to become their collaborator and their servant. —The Fugitive 5: 569

**A kept woman**

A kept woman: a woman whom we are keeping does not seem to us to be a kept woman as long as we are unaware that she is being kept by other men. —The Fugitive 5: 625-26