Characters and Themes

Characters:

Bloch

[We note again here Proust’s frequent use of atavism in creating his characters. We also see here an analogy from zoology and at the end of the passage the theme of the vanity of all things.]

Bloch had come bounding into the room like a hyena. “He is at home now,” I thought, “in drawing-rooms into which twenty years ago he would never have been able to penetrate.”

But he was also twenty years older. He was nearer to death. What did this profit him: At close quarters, in the translucency of a face in which, at a greater distance or in a bad light, I saw only youthful gaiety (whether because it survived there or because I with my recollections evoked it), I could detect another face, almost frightening, racked with anxiety, the face of an old Shylock, waiting in the wings, with his make-up prepared, for the moment when he would make his entry on to the stage and already reciting his first line under his breath. In ten years, in drawing-rooms like this which their own feebleness of spirit would allow him to dominate, he would enter on crutches to be greeted as “the Master” for whom a visit to the La Trémoïlles was merely a tedious obligation. And what would this profit him? —Time Regained 6: 406-07

Marcel

[The way a young man addresses Marcel in a letter is another indication that he had become an old man.]

The letter of this imagined comrade ended thus: “With the respectful wishes of your young friend, Létourville.” “Young friend!” That was how in the past I had written to men thirty years older than myself, to Legrandin, for example. [...] I was separated it seemed, by an arc traced by an invisible compass whose existence I had not suspected, which removed me so far from the boyish second lieutenant that in the eyes of this “young friend” I was an old gentleman. —Time Regained 6: 347
Themes:

**Ageing**

[At the conclusion of the novel, Proust will equate old age with high altitudes. The analogy is given an early statement in this passage.]

As in a snowy landscape, the degree of whiteness attained by a person’s hair seemed in general to be an indication of the depth of time through which he or she had lived, just as in a range of mountains the higher peaks, even though they appear to the eye to be on the same level as the rest, nevertheless reveal their greater altitude by the intensity of their snowy whiteness. [...] Some of the old men whose features had changed tried nevertheless to preserved, fixed upon them in a state of permanency, one of those fugitive expressions which one assumes for a second when posing for a photograph, either in order to show off some good point in one’s appearance to the best effect or to conceal a deformity; they seemed to have become, once and for all, snapshots of themselves insusceptible of change. — *Time Regained* 6: 368

**Atavism: see Bloch**

**Memory**

A name: that very often is all that remains for us of a human being, not only when he is dead, but sometimes even in his lifetime. And our notions about him are so vague or so bizarre and correspond so little to those that he has of us that we have entirely forgotten that we once nearly fought a duel with him but remember that, when he was a child, he used to wear curious yellow gaiters in the Champs-Élysées, where he, on the contrary, in spite of our assurances, has no recollection of ever having played with us. — *Time Regained* 6: 406 [This quote can be compared to the next two.]

. . . two people with an equal endowment of memory do not remember the same things. — *Time Regained* 6: 414

And it was to an earlier occasion of this kind that the manners of Legrandin adverted in his new civility towards Bloch, whether because he had lost the recollection of a particular past or because he thought it was to be deliberately eschewed, from a mixture
of forgiveness and forgetfulness and that indifference which is another effect of Time. And then, as we have seen, the memories which two people preserve of each other, even in love, are not the same. —*Time Regained* 6: 419

**Time**

Time has . . . special express trains which bring their passengers swiftly to a premature old age. But on the parallel track trains almost as rapid may be moving in the opposite direction. I took M. de Courgivaux for his son, for he looked the younger of the two—though he must have been more than fifty, he seemed younger than he had when he was thirty. He had found an intelligent doctor and given up alcohol and salt, and the result was that he had returned to his early thirties and on this particular day looked even younger still, for the reason that, that very morning, he had had his hair cut. —*Time Regained* 6: 371-72

. . . it was not merely what had become of the young men of my own youth but what would one day become of those of today that impressed upon me with such force the sensation of Time. —*Time Regained* 6: 373

For although we know that the years pass, that youth gives way to old age, that fortunes and thrones crumble (even the most solid among them) and that fame is transitory, the manner in which—by means of a sort of snapshot—we take cognizance of this moving universe whirled along by Time, has the contrary effect of immobilizing it. And the result is that we see as always young the men and women whom we have known young, that those whom we have known old we retrospectively endow in the past with the virtues of old age, that we trust unreservedly in the credit of a millionaire and the influence of a reigning monarch, knowing with our reason, though we do not actually believe, that tomorrow both the one or the other may be fugitives stripped of all power. —*Time Regained* 6: 402

* See **Memory** also.

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Vanity: see Bloch