

The Diving Bell and the Butterfly Study Guide

The Diving Bell and the Butterfly by Jean-Dominique Bauby

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Plot Summary

Jean-Dominique Bauby is a lively, adventurous editor for French Elle magazine. He is in his early forties and enjoying life with his young children when he suffers a massive stroke that leaves him completely incapacitated. Jean's stroke results in a phenomenon known as locked-in syndrome. Jean is paralyzed from the neck down, although he can swivel his head from side to side. His only form of communication is code blinked out with his left eyelid. Despite the seemingly desperation of Jean's life, he brings his own story to the reader with a vitality that belies his immobile state of being.

Jean's stroke hits with a sudden ferocity. He is whisked to a clinic by his sister-in-law and slips almost immediately into a twenty day coma. When Jean finally comes to, he is in Room 119 of the Naval Hospital in Berck-sur-Mer on the French Channel coast. This is the room where Jean will spend the rest of his new life. His days are a slow monotony of baths, speech, and physical therapy, and, if he is lucky, brief trips outside. Most of Jean's time is consumed with letting his mind flutter like a butterfly. In his mind, Jean travels to Hong Kong, remembers pieces of his old life, composing books and plays, and creates elegant meals.

Jean tells of his daily life in the hospital as he undergoes physical therapy that may only bring about the tiniest bit of movement after several years. He works with a speech therapist in the hopes of regaining some control over his breathing and speech. In the meantime, the therapist has reordered the alphabet and developed a communication code especially for Jean. The code is based on the alphabet being organized according to each letter's frequency of use in the French language. Jean blinks his one working eyelid until he reaches the letter desired and then starts again for the next letter in a word. The process is laborious and exhausting and few people actually take the time to learn the code.

Jean's new life is a series of memories and brief visits from those who have not classified him as a vegetable. There is no sense of self-pity or hopelessness in Jean's story. Jean quickly adjusts himself to his new life and works to make the best of it. Jean's story is one of great courage and the power of the human mind. The reader meets Jean-Dominique Bauby, not Jean-Dominique Bauby suffering from locked-in syndrome.



Prologue, The Wheelchair

Prologue, The Wheelchair Summary and Analysis

The author has been confined to the same bed for the past six months. His former life was cut off on Friday, December sixth after suffering a massive stroke. Jean-Dominique is completely paralyzed and suffers from "locked-in" syndrome, his only form of communication is blinking his left eyelid.

Jean spent twenty days in a coma followed by several weeks in a general stupor. Although Jean cannot move, he often feels stiff and sore. Stretching just a fraction of an inch helps to relieve the sensation of being confined to a "diving bell." Jean considers himself a butterfly and composes a book in his mind to be dictated later letter by letter.

One morning Jean's room fills with people in white coats. It has not been long since he awoke from his coma and he does not comprehend the severity of the situation. Two orderlies roughly dress Jean and plop him into a wheelchair. The nurses celebrate Jean's ability to maintain himself in the chair, while Jean finds the chair a death sentence.

Jean does not sugar coat what happened to him. Jean's way of writing is as warm and open as if he were sitting across from the reader, telling his story over a cup of coffee. There is a sense of disbelief that the reader cannot put aside as quickly as Jean does. The wheelchair brings the reality of Jean's new life slamming into him, but the reader is still in a daze trying to understand how such a thing could happen. The rain drizzling outside Jean's window acts as a veil that keeps the complete truth about locked-in syndrome hidden from the reader at this point.



Prayer, Bathtime, The Alphabet

Prayer, Bathtime, The Alphabet Summary and Analysis

There are only two locked-in patients at Berck. Jean's case is not typical because he has the ability to swivel his head. There is hope that Jean's nervous system will wake up, but the progress is interminably slow. His respiratory system shows the most promise, and Jean may one day eat, breath, and talk all on his own. All over the world prayers have been offered in numerous religions on Jean's behalf. His favorite prayer is offered nightly by his daughter Céleste.

Jean has lost sixty-six pounds in the last twenty weeks, but he holds the illusion of being able to squeeze her hand. Brigitte, the physical therapist, gives Jean a facial massage at the end of each session. He has a half-smile and the beginnings of a frown that he uses to communicate his fluctuating emotions. Each day Jean is given a bath. Jean refuses to be dressed in the unattractive jog suit supplied by the hospital. He favors drooling on his own clothes even if they are cashmere.

Jean enjoys letters. Jean blinks his left eyelid, stopping at the letter he wishes to communicate and then begins again for the next letter in a word. Some people take the time to learn the code; others do not. Visitors who are nervous around him quickly give up and carry the conversation. This gives Jean the opportunity to rest. Others attempt to finish his sentences for him which results in inaccurate communication. The number of prayers for Jean speak to the love Jean inspires in other people. No matter who is praying for him, the most touching prayer comes from his eight-year old daughter.

The reader is astonished to find that Jean is able to communicate his sarcastic wit through the blink of an eye and shows Jean has not given up. Just as humorous is the description of trying to communicate with overly-anxious visitors. Finishing another person's sentence is usually viewed as rude in regular conversation, but here people assume they are helping Jean.



The Empress, Cinecittá, Tourists

The Empress, Cinecittá, Tourists Summary and Analysis

Empress Eugénie was Napoléon III's wife, is the patroness of the hospital. Jean imagines following her during her visit. The Empress reaches out and touches Jean, telling him to be patient. Together they share a secret smile whenever he passes the Empress's stain-glass window.

The Naval Hospital was first founded as a children's hospital. The hospital is a maze of hallways that patients routinely become lost in. Jean finds getting lost as an opportunity to see new things. Berck slowly moved away from the care of children to the care special needs patients. Jean lives in a dead-end corridor, home to the "broken-winged birds" who nest there. The rehabilitation room brings them all together in a gruesome and noisy gathering.

The reader may feel that Jean is suffering from a bit of dementia as he talks to pictures in stained-glass windows, but Jean has found someone like himself trapped in a state of immobility. A person enclosed in a diving bell cannot move outside the confines of the bell. Jean is trapped within his own body and within Room 119. Any tiny change in routine exhilarates Jean, like grabbing a breath of fresh air outside the diving bell.



The Sausage, Guardian Angel, The Photo

The Sausage, Guardian Angel, The Photo Summary and Analysis

A feeding test showed that Jean will need to be fed through a tube in his stomach. Jean uses his memory to feed himself a tantalizing buffet. A friend sends a recipe for sausage for Jean to use in his imaginary cooking.

Jean's speech therapist, Sandrine, established his blinking communication code. Some staff makes every attempt to decipher his blinks and the other makes a quick exit, pretending not to notice him. Speech therapy is an arduous and exhausting task; Jean finally says the entire alphabet. Sandrine calls his daughter and father and lets Jean hear their "news" regularly. Despite being in his nineties, Jean's father has retained all of his splendor. His father's apartment is cluttered with old memories.

These three chapters group nicely together because they all have a guardian angel at the heart of them. The friend who send the sausage recipe brings Jean a double delight. Sandrine helps to connect Jean with the outside world. Both of these angels give help at just the right moment in time, when Jean is struggling to maintain his positive outlook.

Jean's father reaches out to his son as only a father can. Jean's father is unable to travel to Berck to visit his son in person to help his son bear the burden of his condition. Instead, Jean's father reaches out to his son in small gestures.



Yet Another Coincidence, The Dream, Voice Offstage

Yet Another Coincidence, The Dream, Voice Offstage Summary and Analysis

Noirtier, the villain of Dumas' *The Count of Monte Cristo* is literature's only example of locked-in syndrome. Jean fancies that Noirtier wheels up and down the hall of Berck in a creaky wheelchair. Dreams from last December before his stroke are permanently marked on his brain. Perhaps he remembers them because the coma kept him from reality and left him with only dreams to live in. One dream recurs frequently and its meaning may even be prophesizing his stroke.

When Jean awoke from his coma it was to a doctor sewing his right eye shut because his eyelid is not functioning properly and is sewn shut to reduce the risk of eye damage. Jean compares his experience in the hospital with a pressure cooker and considers writing a play about his time in the hospital. The final scene will be the main character suddenly getting out of bed and walking around the stage as the offstage voice says that it was all a dream.

There is a sense of morbidity in these three chapters. In the reader's mind, Noirtier de Villefort appears as a deformed and grotesque old man and the reader has difficulty picturing Jean as a Noirtier character. Jean's vitality as he tells about his life belies his paralyzed self.

The dream is a post-apocalyptic view of his present lifestyle. The hope that Jean will one day arise from his bed and realize that everything has been a horrible dream is a fleeting one. It makes for a nice story, but the reader knows that Jean will never leave Room 119 under his own power again.



My Lucky Day, Our Very Own Madonna

My Lucky Day, Our Very Own Madonna Summary and Analysis

The day begins with the alarm on his feeding machine beeping. Sweat has caused the tape over his right eyelid to come loose and his damp eyelashes are tickling his eye. Finally his catheter is unhooked and Jean is soaked in urine. A nurse enters, switching on the television which asks, "Were you born lucky?"

Friends often joke with Jean about taking a pilgrimage to Lourdes. He replies that he and Josephine went already. The trip was fraught with arguing and tension. Jean is so infatuated with a book that he stays in the car and reads when they stop to look at interesting sights. Josephine suggests a detour to Lourdes and Jean agrees.

They pull into Lourdes tired and hot. Everywhere are reminders of the disabled and ill people seeking a miracle. Josephine finds a gaudy statue of the Madonna that Jean buys for her. That night Jean says that they need to break up and Josephine agrees. Jean goes for a walk after Josephine is asleep, and when he returns, he finds a long note saying that she loves him and asks him to be nice to her..

The short chapter about Jean's lucky day serves as a bit of comic relief after the heaviness of the preceding chapters. Josephine and the trip to Lourdes is a bit difficult for the reader to comprehend. For most of the book Jean has appeared as an easygoing man intent on his life. Here, Jean is willful in a destructive way and thoughtless to a fault. There is double meaning in the title of the book Jean reads. Jean could be viewed as a snake for his treatment of Josephine and later Sylvie. He does not appear to have strong relationships with women, which may suggest that he does not treat them properly. Also, Jean becomes a snake slithering about on his back, not belly, after his stroke. Like a snake's rapid tongue flickering to feel out its environment, Jean can only blink with the hope that someone will understand the code and fulfill his needs. There is also the realization that nothing is completely sacred. Jean purchases a Madonna statue for Josephine that is supposed to be one of a kind. When he finds an exact copy in its place later that night, Jean understands that the miraculousness surrounding Lourdes has been reduced to a tourist attraction. Similarly, the relationship between Jean and Josephine has lost its magic and there is no choice but to discontinue the illusion.



Through a Glass Darkly, Paris, The Vegetable

Through a Glass Darkly, Paris, The Vegetable Summary and Analysis

Jean's wife wheels him down the hall as his children walk beside him on Father's Day. Jean is torn between joy and fear that a crippled father is not suitable entertainment for an eight and ten year old. The family settles on a small beach where Jean and Théophile play hangman. Onlookers admire Céleste's talents as she performs a song and dance. The hospital bell tolls five o'clock and the end of visiting hours. Jean is sunburned and tired but pronounces it a good day. He sits contemplating a drawing Céleste made as the sun streams through his window.

Jean's memories of his old life are fading. Jean's first trip to Paris brought a flood of memories and sadness; his second, none. Six months after Jean comes out of his coma, he decides to write a monthly letter to friends. Jean's reports bring an influx of letters from people, many Jean only knew in passing. Many of the letters are written with depth and feeling. Jean relishes the correspondence and hopes to someday gather them together in a banner to fly high in the sky to keep the vultures away.

Together these three chapters give the reader the first real sense of loss in the entire book. It is appropriate that it is the sight of his young children that makes Jean cry since his illness began. Jean's memories are what has kept him alive thus far, and without them his future is uncertain. Jean will never succumb to vegetable status. Instead, it is likely that Jean will quietly close his one eye and go forever into the land of his mind's fantasies.



Outing, Twenty to One, The Duck Hunt

Outing, Twenty to One, The Duck Hunt Summary and Analysis

Jean and two friends make their way down to the crowded beach on a stifling hot day. Jean wanted to come to the promenade to drink in the aroma of French fries. Mithra-Grandchamp. The name belongs to a horse, and Jean has suddenly recalled a memory. One day Jean and Vincent go to a local race track and receive an almost sure bet. Their friends have given them money to bet on Mithra-Grandchamp, but Vincent and Jean spend too much time lounging never place a bet. Mithra-Grandchamp wins by forty yards. Jean sees Mithra-Grandchamp as a lost opportunity. The horse represents lost loves, failed chances, and happiness not grasped.

Jean is deaf in his right ear and the left ear distorts any sound made more than ten feet away. When the hospital staff forgets to shut his door, Jean is assaulted with a cacophony of sounds, many made by patients with dementia. When all is silent Jean listens blissfully to the butterflies in his head.

Jean chronicles Vincent's journey from Paris to Berck is to show how many opportunities visitors have to turn around and how many of them actually do. These are the same people who do not mind taking Jean out for an afternoon to smell French fries on the pier. They are the people who do not try to guess Jean's blinks before he is finished and who are not afraid to kiss him on the forehead. Jean associates Mithra-Grandchamp with lost opportunities, but the stories that make up *Outing* and *Twenty to One* contradict this comparison. Jean has not lost opportunities. He may have lost betting on a sure thing or a night with a beautiful woman, but his life has been full of amazing events. Jean has met people who love him enough to continue visiting him and who see him as the man he has always been despite his current condition. Jean is not like another patient who awakens from a coma to live in a demented state. Jean has the opportunity to let his mind fly free on butterfly wings.



Sunday, The Ladies of Hong Kong, The Message

Sunday, The Ladies of Hong Kong, The Message Summary and Analysis

Jean dreads Sundays when he gets no visitors. It is August and Jean cannot believe time is still moving swiftly in the outside world. He imagines the summer holidays of his friends and their families as they sail, paint, and enjoy picnic lunches. Jean has traveled extensively, and the memories of these trips allow him to escape the walls of his room. Jean thinks about his colleagues wandering the streets of Hong Kong. He imagines them going into the Felix Bar, where Jean's picture graces the back of one of the chairs. Jean implores his readers not to divulge his fate to the barman for fear that the superstitions of the Chinese would keep the mini-skirted women from sitting on him any more.

Time is moving on. In the outside world the cyclical nature of the year has rotated around to fall. Summer is ending, school is starting, and soon the anniversary of Jean's stroke will be upon him. No more progress has been made on his physical therapy or his speech. Jean still has his memories but the reader senses that these are not as fulfilling as they once were. At first it seems that Jean is excited to think about joining his colleagues in Hong Kong, but then the reader realizes that Jean longs for his old life. The magazine has moved on without him. Jean may still refer to himself as the editor, but undoubtedly he has been replaced. Jean's plea to the reader not to divulge the truth of his current life is a plea that he will not be forgotten. His picture on the back of a bar stool is a physical placeholder for Jean. Jean needs to remain a part of some social circle because he does not fit in at the hospital full of ill people. He hopes for a message from someone, anyone so that he knows he is not alone within the walls of Berck. Jean is searching for more to hold onto to keep his mind sharp and to keep himself alive.



At the Wax Museum, The Mythmaker

At the Wax Museum, The Mythmaker Summary and Analysis

At first Jean hated those who cared for him, but he got to know them and realized that they were doing the best they could in a difficult situation and he has come to like them. It is night and Jean blinks as the door opens and the night nurse asks if he would like his sleeping pill now.

As a young boy, Jean made friends with a boy name Olivier who loved to invent stories. Jean envies Olivier's storytelling and admits that he has been dabbling in fiction lately. Like Olivier, Jean swears all his stories are true.

The time has finally arrived to tell about the fateful day of Jean's stroke. Jean is testing a new German automobile. He brushes Florence's lips and heads out to the waiting car and driver. Jean tells the driver he will need to pick up Théophile for the weekend. Arriving at work, Jean placates clients and employees alike at work that day. He is an hour late picking up his son. Jean tries to drive but he is suddenly overcome with illness. He is sweating and seeing double. The driver takes them to his sister-in-law's house. She is a nurse and says they must go to the hospital immediately. As the driver takes off at top speed, Jean feels like he is on LSD. Jean's last thought before the coma are of the play he and Théophile were to see and wonders what has happened to his son.

Jean's first autumn in the hospital is beginning. This is his new life. Friends will soon resume their visits, full of summer news. Claude re-reads the pages it has taken them two months to amass. Jean wonders if the cosmos holds the key to release him from the diving bell.

The wax museum represents Jean's unconscious feelings about his paralysis. Jean is very much like these wax figures. There is so much more to Jean that many people do not see, just as Jean did not at first realize that the medical staff were people, too. Jean must create a story for himself, but someone else must speak his story. The reader finally learns what happened the day of Jean's stroke. There is no explanation of what could have caused the stroke. There is nothing he can do to change the situation and so he has no reason to focus on the question of why.

Although Jean says that the wheelchair helped him realize the severity of his condition, the reader feels that it is not until the change from summer to fall that the full gravity of the situation settles in. Now, Jean knows only Room 119 and that is all he will ever know again. Jean has spent the summer working on the book and now wonders if it is enough. He resigns himself to life as it is and completes the book before the opportunity passes him by.



Characters

Jean-Dominique Bauby

Jean-Dominique Bauby is the forty-three-year-old editor of French Elle magazine. He has two children and a new girlfriend. Jean drives the latest automobiles, travels the world, and spends time with very influential people. Jean's life is the pinnacle of success and what many people strive to achieve. It seems that nothing can impede Jean's fairy tale life. One day in December, as he is on his way to pick up his son for the evening, Jean suddenly falls seriously ill. After being rushed to a clinic, he falls into a coma for twenty days. When Jean awakens, he finds himself paralyzed from the neck down, his left eye sewn shut and his only means of communication is blinking his left eyelid. Jean now lives with locked-in syndrome. Jean compares the condition with being enclosed in a diving bell, where only his mind is free to flutter through memories and new fantasies.

The massive stroke that caused Jean's condition does not have an apparent cause, and locked-in syndrome is so rare that the evolution of the condition is not fully understood. Jean does not spend much time dwelling on his current condition, choosing instead to lead the reader into a world seen from only one eye. Jean's mind remains strong and his mental perception appears strengthened by the loss of his other faculties. Jean remains alive and vital because of his trips down memory lane, his constant work to compose his book and several play possibilities, and the fantasies that turn him into a chef or race car driver. Jean can become any one he chooses simply by imagining it, and this ability frees him of the diving bell.

Théophile

Théophile is Jean's ten-year-old-son. On the day of Jean's stroke, he and Théophile are scheduled to spend the evening together attending a play. Théophile is dutiful and quiet. After his father's stroke, he wipes drool from his father's lips as they walk to the beach. The motion is normal and does not suggest horror at seeing his father incapacitated. Despite his young age, Théophile appears to understand his father's condition with a perception not seen in adults. Théophile is careful to only engage Jean in activities that he knows his father can manage. Théophile patiently plays Hangman with Jean because he knows his father can communicate one letter at a time. The reader senses that because Théophile was with Jean on the day of the stroke, he has a different perspective than his younger sister. Théophile watched his father's life change dramatically and managed to assume the role of man of the house. The complete effect of Jean's condition has not failed to alter Théophile. As Jean watches his son on the beach, he realizes that Théophile is shy and reserved. At such a young age, Théophile has had to grow up and view life without the innocence a ten year old should.



Céleste

Céleste is eight at the time of her father's stroke. However, she appears almost blissfully unaware that Jean's life has changed dramatically. Céleste brings an innocence to Jean's new life that was taken away that December day. She is concerned with her pony and loves to draw fanciful pictures for Jean's hospital room. Unlike her older brother, Céleste is outgoing and loves attention. On their excursion to the beach, Céleste happily entertains her family and a small crowd with her singing and dancing. She remains Jean's little girl, showering her father with sloppy kisses and affirming his role as "her Dad".

Sandrine

Sandrine is Jean's speech therapist, but he feels she is his guardian angel. Sandrine is responsible for developing the communication code that Jean uses to "talk" to people and that is used to dictate his book. Every weekday Sandrine pokes her head into Jean's room and they work together trying to manipulate Jean's mouth into the necessary contortions for speech. On his birthday, Jean successfully says the entire alphabet almost understandably. Sandrine also helps Jean communicate with those who call on the phone. Whenever she is present, Jean makes use of her to phone friends unable to visit in person. Sandrine does her best to keep a conversation going on Jean's behalf, but mostly there is silence on Jean's end of the phone.

Florence

Florence is Jean's new mistress at the time of his stroke. It is not completely clear whether Jean and his wife, Sylvie, are divorced at the time. Jean states that he moved out of his home the July before his stroke and now lives with Florence. Florence is still part of his life as he dreams of her in the hospital and she calls him on the phone. Florence is mentioned mostly in passing and the relationship between her and Jean is not clearly defined.

Josephine

Josephine and Jean are in a relationship many years before his stroke. They have a sort of functional love-hate relationship that includes more arguing than loving conversation. Together they embark on a road trip with no destination. Jean brings along a book that he becomes engrossed with and that instigates several feuds along the road. Josephine becomes fed up with Jean's love affair with the book, and suggests a detour to Lourdes to visit the Madonna. Jean suspects that Josephine proposes the trip in hopes that the Virgin will work a miracle on their relationship. The couple's problems are not alleviated by the journey to Lourdes, and they decide to part company upon returning home.



Sylvie

Sylvie is Jean's wife and the mother of his children. Jean is not clear on the status of his relationship with Sylvie. At the time of his stroke, he has moved out of the family home and is living with a new girlfriend. Sylvie does bring Céleste and Théophile to visit Jean in the hospital. While the children are gathering their things to leave, Sylvie and Jean share a moment. Sylvie grasps Jean's hand and looks at him through her sunglasses as they reflect on their shattered lives. The reader is left to speculate whether the disruption of their life came from his leaving, his stroke, or both.

Vincent

Vincent is a long-time friend of Jean's. Together with several other young, exuberant editors, they begin a daily newspaper. Vincent and Jean spend a day at a local racetrack, where they miss the opportunity to win a large sum of money when they fail to place a bet on a sure thing. Jean recalls this event on the day that Vincent comes to visit him in the hospital. Vincent is unchanged since the day ten years before at the racetrack. He is stocky and red-haired. Vincent appears nonchalant and nonplussed by Jean's new life. He greets Jean with a kiss to the forehead after navigating the many obstacles that usually deter people from visiting Jean. From the way Jean talks about Vincent, the reader gains the impression that Vincent is a true friend that will always accept Jean for himself and not see him as a fully paralyzed shell of his former self.

Claude

Claude is the person to whom Jean is dictating the book. Claude is a young woman who Jean has known only a few weeks, but they seem to get along fairly well. Claude is only mentioned in the chapter titled "Outing". She and an old friend of Jean's wheel him to the end of the promenade so he can sniff the aroma of French fries.

Brigitte

Brigitte is Jean's physical therapist. Jean describes her as a woman of athletic figure and "an imperial Roman profile". She comes every day at eight-thirty in the morning to exercise Jean's arms and legs. Brigitte is always encouraging and hopeful. Jean tries his hardest to squeeze her fingers as tight as he can, but each week there is no improvement. At the end of their session, Brigitte massages Jean's face. Jean looks forward to these massages and feels that they are helping his facial muscles begin to resume a half-smile.

Jean's Father

Jean's father is mentioned in the chapter titled The Photo. In the week before his stroke, Jean spent an evening with his father. He went to his father's apartment because his father is ninety-three years old and his health is failing. While spending the night with his father, Jean gives his father a shave and takes notice of all the memorabilia cluttering the apartment. It is the last time that Jean and his father ever see one another. Jean's father calls on the phone when he can, but it is a one-sided conversation. His father also sends a photograph of Jean at the age of eleven, standing on a miniature golf course located near the hospital where Jean now lives.



Objects/Places

Naval Hospital at Berck-sur-Mer

Berck-sur-Mer, known throughout the book as Berck, is the hospital where Jean-Dominique lives in Room 119. It is located on the coast of the French Channel, and Jean enjoys visiting a nearby beach whenever he can.

Diving Bell

Jean says that his locked-in syndrome is like being confined to a diving bell. A diving bell was one of the first versions of a diving chamber or modern day dive suit. The device resembled a large bell that would be lowered into the water by a tether. Water pressure kept air in the bell so that people inside the bell would be able to breath. There was limited mobility since moving outside the bell would mean losing one's air supply.

Butterfly

Jean says that his mind is like a butterfly. Whenever the diving bell becomes too oppressive, Jean takes flight in his mind to visit the woman he loves, write novels, travel the world, or cook fantastic meals.

Madonna

This is an object that has a twofold meaning. The first refers to the appearance of the Virgin at Lourdes. Pilgrims journey in hopes that Madonna will appear and grant them their miracle. The second meaning refers to the gaudy, lamp statue of Madonna that Jean buys Josephine on their trip to Lourdes.

Mithra-Goldchamp

Mithra-Goldchamp is a horse that is a sure bet to win a race. Jean and his friend Vincent spend a day at the track but fail to place a bet on the horse. Mithra-Goldchamp wins by forty yards. The horse comes to represent all the lost chances, loves, and happiness in Jean's life.

The Alphabet

Jean loves letters. They comfort him when no one else is around. Sandrine, his speech therapist, rearranges the alphabet by order of common usage in the French language.

This gives Jean a code by which he can communicate with others by blinking his left eyelid.

The Photo

Jean's father sends him a photograph. The picture shows Jean as a young boy standing on a miniature golf course. The back of the picture states that it was taken at Berck-sur-Mer. This is the same place where the Naval hospital is located.

Trail of the Snake by Charles Sobraj

The Trail of the Snake is a book that tells about the adventures of a man who liked to rob people in and around Bombay. Jean becomes infatuated with the book on his trip with Josephine. Josephine is irritated by Jean's devotion to the book and they have numerous arguments about it.

French Elle

Jean is editor of the French Elle magazine. He enjoys his job and often misses jetting around the world on assignments with his colleagues.

The Beach

The Naval Hospital is located on the coast of the French Channel. The beach is near enough that Jean can be wheeled out in his wheelchair to drink in the sights, sounds, and smells of the promenade and beach.



Themes

Living Immobile

Jean-Dominique Bauby is an active, well-traveled man forty-three-year-old man whose life is dramatically changed when a massive stroke leaves him paralyzed from the waist down. Jean's vibrant life is now reduced to being strapped to a hospital bed or harnessed to a wheelchair. The reader would not be surprised if Jean talked about how lonely he feels or the depression that settles over his life as he stares through one eye at the same four walls day in and day out. However, Jean does not reveal whether he suffers from these emotions; instead, he writes in an upbeat tone that leads the reader to forget that Jean is locked in.

As Jean tells his story, his tone and affect do not reflect a man living with locked-in syndrome. The dreary walls of Room 119 come to life in Jean's imagination and he takes himself with the reader as passenger through a world of beautiful sights, flavorful tastes, and fragrant scents. Jean's inability to move has heightened his other senses, bringing a new level of intensity to his life. Before his stroke, Jean lived on the cutting edge of everything the world offered, after his stroke he is finally able to appreciate it all. Some readers may not count being confined to a hospital bed being cared for like an infant as living, but Jean manages to make a new life for himself that is every bit as vivid and exciting as his old one.

Lost Chances, Gained Opportunities

In the chapter titled *Twenty to One*, Jean talks about a day spent at a racetrack where he failed to bet on a horse sure to win. As Jean reflects on the event, he realizes that the horse now represents all the lost moments of his life. Before Jean's stroke, he did not take the time to step back and consider his life. Jean lived in the fast lane with a high paced career that took him all over the world, introducing him to influential people. The reader senses that Jean was always looking for the newest and better things in his life. On the day of his stroke, Jean awakens beside his new girlfriend and is scheduled to test drive the newest German car.

Jean's stroke forces him to stop moving so fast through life. The stroke occurs while Jean is on his way to pick up his son to spend an evening with him, but Jean is wishing that he could just go home to his girlfriend. Jean's children are still young, and yet Jean does not appear to truly appreciate the simpleness of their childhood. Once Jean has all the time in the world to lay in a hospital bed and contemplate his life, he realizes the importance of spending quality time with his children. Jean is also able to reflect on past memories and view them through a new lens.

Although Jean loses his old active lifestyle, he gains a new, contemplative life. While Jean lies in Room 119, he learns to appreciate the small moments instead of focusing



on the larger picture. There is a new comfort in his daughter's kisses, his son's thoughtful quietness, and in being cared for like an infant. Jean rarely voices a regret for the loss of his old life. There is a wistfulness to his descriptions of memories, but he maintains a positive outlook until the end.

Importance of Mind

Jean continues to live due to the strength of his mind. As Jean states, his mind is like a butterfly whose wings set him free carrying him to the outside world. In his mind, Jean travels to Hong Kong to meet his colleagues for a conference, he concocts sumptuous meals, and composes books and plays. Most importantly, Jean remembers and the memories keep him from losing hope.

Many people in the face of such a devastating personal loss immediately suffer waves of regret, anger, and hopelessness. It is difficult to remain optimistic and full of life when one cannot move, speak, eat, or breath on his own. The only faculty left intact after Jean's stroke is his mind. Because of the full life he lead prior to the stroke, Jean has a large stock of memories and experiences to draw on as he lies in Room 119. Instead of constantly lamenting what has been lost, Jean works to maintain his old life in his mind's eye. Jean does not cease referring to himself as the editor of French Elle. Jean accepts his current situation but does not accept that his life is over. He does not wallow in pity for himself, although he does wish that his friends and family did not have to deal with the pain of his paralysis.

As the reader moves through Jean's story, he finds himself struggling to remember that the book is composed by a man whose only form of communication is blinking one eye. Jean does not convey the sorrow the reader expects from someone paralyzed for life. Instead, the reader finds himself enjoying extravagant meals, savoring afternoons at the racetrack, and breathing in salty air tinged with French fries. Jean's life remains as full and exciting as it was before because of the power of his mind.

Style

Perspective

Jean-Dominique Bauby is an educated man who has experienced things in his life that most people only dream about. Jean does not claim to understand the stroke that left him paralyzed or the locked-in syndrome that confines him to a diving bell. Jean is an ordinary man who has suffered a terrible tragedy. Jean provides the reader with a real world viewpoint of his condition, leaving the reader free of medical terminology.

The reader is intrigued by Jean's story. It is difficult to imagine having life cut short and reduced to laying immobile in a bed unable to communicate with anyone. Jean draws the reader into his life so that the reader quickly forgets that Jean is blinking out the entire book letter by letter. The book is written from Jean's perspective. The reader experiences events as Jean does, with the exception that the reader does not sense that he is laying in bed alongside Jean. The reader understands that Jean is stuck inside a diving bell, but Jean allows the reader to fly with the butterfly of his mind. Jean has an amazing ability to relax the reader, provide accurate descriptions of his locked-in life, and still feel as if Jean is a walking, talking person sitting down for a cup of coffee.

Tone

The tone of the book is a mix of subjective and objective. Although Jean gives some objectivity about his condition, the prevalence of memories gives a dreamlike subjectivity to the story. Jean's story is true, and the reader should not assume that Jean is falsifying or romanticizing any portion of the book. The subjectivity in the book comes from Jean's own impressions of his life experiences. As Jean reviews certain events in his life, he changes his feelings about some of them. A day at the race track turns from a day spent enjoying the company of a good friend to a metaphor for all the missed opportunities of Jean's life. The stroke has changed Jean's frame of reference, and he now views his life from a new perspective.

There is an overall sense of wistfulness as Jean tells his story. Many of the chapters focus on memories and dreams. These symbols of a lost life show the reader exactly what Jean has lost. However, Jean does not portray a defeatist attitude. He remains sharp of mind and continues to "enjoy" travel, good food, and the company of friends. Jean is able to use his butterfly mind to make friends with the Empress in the window and search for hidden messages on blank typewriter paper. Jean's imagination continues the vital life he led before his stroke. While Jean wishes he could return to his adventurous lifestyle, he accepts his current condition, working to make the best with what he has. Jean does not allow the reader to feel sorry for him, and in fact, the reader likely feels sorry for himself that he does not live a mobile life with the same fervor that Jean leads an immobile one.

Structure

The story is told in twenty-eight chapters. The chapters are not numbered but each has a short, phrase-like title that gives the reader an idea about what the chapter focuses on. All of the chapters are very short. The reader speeds through the book because the chapters are only a few pages long.

Bauby's style of writing is clear and concise. He does not waste time on extraneous details but conveys a wealth of emotion and wit. The lack of padding to the story comes from the method Jean uses to compose the book. Jean must compose each line of the book in his head and then laboriously blink out the sentences letter by letter. This form of writing necessitates well planned words that convey Jean's entire message. The chapters do not appear to follow any type of chronological order of plot, but there is a theme of daily living that melds them together. Jean devotes each chapter to things that happen to him as they occur or as he recalls them. Although Jean is living with locked-in syndrome, he does not spend a large amount of time discussing the condition or the medical terminology that goes into his care. Jean gives the reader enough to understand how he came to be paralyzed and then conveys what his life is like through his stories.



Quotes

"My diving bell becomes less oppressive, and my mind takes flight like a butterfly."
Prologue, p. 5

"So it is likely that several years will go by before I can expect to wiggle my toes."
Prayer, p. 12

"And proof that I still want to be myself. If I must drool, I may as well drool on cashmere." Bathtime, p. 17

"ESARINTULOMDPCFBVHGJQZYXKW The jumbled appearance of my chorus line stems not from chance but from cunning calculation." The Alphabet, pp. 19-20

"I try desperately to warn them, but my dream conforms perfectly with reality. I am unable to utter a word." The Dream, p. 52

"What if someone in perfect health happened to be here when the Madonna appeared? One miracle, and he'd end up paralyzed." Our Very Own Madonna, p. 64

"Behind dark glasses that reflect a flawless sky, she softly weeps over our shattered lives." Through a Glass, Darkly, p. 74

"But I never tire of the smell of french fries." Outing, p. 88

"Today it seems to me that my whole life was nothing but a string of those small near misses: a race whose result we know beforehand but in which we fail to bet on the winner." Twenty to One, p. 94

"Note that I still say 'my magazine', despite the misleading nature of the words, as if that possessive pronoun were one of the fragile threads linking me to the living world."
The Ladies of Hong Kong, pp. 103-04

"When I awoke, a real nurse with plump arms was leaning over me, her penlight in her hand: 'Your sleeping pill. Do you want it now, or shall I come back in an hour?'" The Wax Museum, p. 113

"How can I describe waking for the last time, heedless, perhaps a little grumpy, beside the lithe, warm body of a tall, dark-haired woman?" A Day in the Life, p. 119

"I have indeed begun a new life, and that life is here, in this bed, that wheelchair, and those corridors. Nowhere else." Season of Renewal, p. 129



Topics for Discussion

How does Jean's life as a magazine editor enable him to create a new life full of adventure and vitality?

Jean does not mention his own religious beliefs, but says that he is thankful for all the prayers offered on his behalf in every religion. Do you feel that Jean uses spirituality to deal with his condition? If so, how?

Why do you suppose Jean leaves the description of the day he suffered his stroke until the end of the book? What effect does the suspension of this information have on the reader's impression of Jean?

Jean does not say that he is divorced from Sylvie, but he has taken up residence with Florence. If Jean was not divorced from his wife at the time of his stroke, how do you think his affair affects his mindset as he contemplates his new life?

Jean mentions that he sometimes enjoys being cared for like an infant. Discuss why you think a forty-five-year-old, adventurous man would make this statement?

Discuss the "coincidences" Jean mentions that seem to point to his current condition. Do you feel they were foreshadowings, or simply coincidences discovered in hindsight?

Discuss the role of Jean's dreams. Do they reflect Jean's new life or his psychological state as a locked-in patient?

Discuss how Jean's stroke affected his children. Jean notes that Théophile was with him the day he fell ill and is more withdrawn than Céleste.