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The Bell Jar

by

Sylvia Plath

London-1963/U.S.-1970



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KEY LITERARY ELEMENTS

SETTING

The Bell Jar is set during a six month period in the life of the protagonist. The year is 1953, ten years prior to the British publication date. The narrator announces at the beginning of the novel that it is set during the summer in which the Rosenbergs were executed in New York. That was 1953. Eisenhower was president at.....

CHARACTERS

Major Characters

Esther Greenwood - a nineteen year old writer who has yet to receive serious encouragement for her writing. She writes the winning essay in a contest whose prize is the chance to work as an editor for a women's fashion magazine in New York for a summer. She along with twelve other young women are.....

Minor Characters

Mrs. Greenwood - Esther's well-meaning but misguided mother, who urges her to learn

Buddy Willard - the young man who Esther dates for a time and then begins to feel repulsed by. He is a medical student. He contracts tuberculosis (TB) and spends most of.....

Mrs. Nelly Willard - Buddy Willard's mother. She is Esther's worst nightmare of what it.....

Doreen - Doreen is one of the recipients of the prize to New York. She is from a society women's college in....

Jay Cee - the editor on the fashion magazine which sponsored the prizes for the twelve women. She is a

Betsy - one of the recipients of the prize to New York. She comes from Kansas and wants

Lenny Shepard - a disc jockey of country music in New York who dates Doreen and

Frankie - a man Lenny hires to be with Esther while he is with Doreen the first.....

Hilda - one of the recipients of the prize to New York. She is a specialist in hats and.....

Mr. Manzi - Esther's physics and chemistry professor.

Philomena Guinea - a writer of potboiler romances who sponsors Esther's scholarship at college and her stay in the psychiatric ward.

Many additional minor characters are outlined in the complete MonkeyNotes study guide.

SHORT PLOT/CHAPTER SUMMARY (Synopsis)

The Bell Jar begins at the Amazon, a women's hotel in New York. Esther Greenwood is one of twelve young women who has won a prize to live in New York and write for a women's fashion magazine. Esther does not fit into the world of high fashion. She is from a small town in the suburbs of Boston and her family has been relatively poor. She becomes friends with another outcast sort named Doreen. She and Doreen exist on the fringes of the fashion magazine activities. One night, Esther and Doreen go to a bar with a man who is attracted to Doreen. Esther ends up getting drunk and walking home alone. When Doreen comes home, Esther realizes she does not want to be her friend any more. Esther's supervisor, the fiction editor of the magazine, tries to encourage Esther to apply more energy to her career, but Esther finds it impossible to do very much. She begins to feel as if she does not have a direction in her life. What she has always wanted to do, go to graduate school and then become a professor who also writes poetry, is no longer attractive to her. She knows she wants to be a writer, but she can see no way to do it in her society.

Esther is also in conflict over her relation to men. She has been dating one man from her home town, Buddy Willard, but no longer even likes him. She feels the need to be with men, but gets little pleasure out of their company and feels as if no one really sees her for who she is. On the last night of her.....

THEMES

Main Theme - The main theme of *The Bell Jar* is a feminist one. Its protagonist suffers under the constricted roles available for the women of her time and the subordination of women to men. The novel is a.....

Minor Theme - One of the minor themes of the novel is its treatment of the experience of being insane while surrounded by people who are sane. The protagonist begins to have her breakdown months before she.....

MOOD

The mood is often meditative. Esther is a very introspective character. However, she has a strongly sardonic humor. She is enough on the outside of her society that she can see its foibles with bemused irony. The people around her often come.....

BACKGROUND INFORMATION - BIOGRAPHY

Sylvia Plath was born on October 27, 1932 in Jamaica Plain, Massachusetts (part of Boston). Her mother, Aurelia Plath, and her father, Otto, were well-educated people. He was a professor of German and zoology at Boston University and was a well-known authority on bees.

Plath lived in Winthrop, Massachusetts during her early childhood. Winthrop is a seaside town, the fictional equivalent of which is the town Esther visits when she walks along the beach and contemplates suicide by drowning. Plath's father died when she was eight years old in 1940. He had been ill for four years before his death from untreated diabetes mellitus. His leg was amputated. Her grandparents moved in with the Plaths to help take care of the children. They all moved to Wellesley, a suburb of Boston, so Aurelia could take a job as a teacher at Boston University. Sylvia's mother taught secretarial students at Boston University. Her grandmother took care of the children and the household and her grandfather worked as a maitre d'hotel at a country club and lived there during the week.

By the age of seventeen, Plath was already serious about her writing. She wrote many short stories and poems and she also drew. In 1950, Plath went to Smith College on a scholarship endowed by Olive Higgins Prouty, who wrote the romance novel *Stella Dallas*. She was a dedicated writer and excelled in her studies. However, Plath was like many women of the 1950s. She found a great contradiction between the.....

LITERARY/HISTORICAL INFORMATION

Plath opens the novel with Esther's obsession with the Rosenberg trials and the news of the impending execution. While this is clearly intended as a parallel to Esther's own eventual electroshock therapy, it is also a parallel to something more significant--the intolerance of the society and the danger one risks by going against the grain of the norm. Historians are still divided on whether Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were really spies for the Russians as they were accused of being. They were immigrants and they were Jewish and they were politically left wing. None of these things fit into the norm of 1950s America. The Rosenbergs, a couple, encountered the tyranny of the norm. They were executed amidst enormous media sensation. Their trial and execution were treated in the lurid detail of the raunchiest scandal magazine.

The parallel between the Rosenberg executions and the feminist movement is not as far-fetched as it might seem at first sight. The Rosenbergs encountered the brutality of the society's backlash against....

CHAPTER SUMMARIES WITH NOTES

CHAPTER 1

Summary

"It was a queer, sultry summer, the summer they electrocuted the Rosenbergs, and I didn't know what I was doing in New York." Thus begins the novel, written in the voice of an as yet unnamed first-person narrator. She adds that she is stupid about executions. She is made sick by the thought of it. She cannot stop imagining "being burned alive all along your nerves." Yet she can go nowhere without seeing headlines and hearing talk of the execution.

She is living in New York and does not like it. She dislikes the weather and the dirt in the air. The ever-presence of the Rosenberg news reminds her of the way she felt after she saw a cadaver for the first time. She couldn't get the image of it out of her mind for weeks afterward. She felt like she was carrying it around with her on a string like a black balloon stinking of vinegar.

She feels sure something is wrong with her based on the fact that she cannot stop thinking of the Rosenbergs. She also thinks she is stupid for having bought so many expensive clothes. She feels as though all her successes at school mean nothing in New York. All the while, she is supposed to be having "the time of her life." She is shown in magazines, along with the other eleven college women in her group, dressed fashionably and being courted by young men hired for the photograph. She is being used as proof that the American Dream is true. She has gone from being a small town person who cannot even afford to buy a fashion magazine, who then wins a scholarship to college and a prize to live in New York for the summer.

The contrast between the advertized image of her and her real life is stark. She feels directionless. She sees the other women reacting with excitement, but she says, "I couldn't get myself to react. I felt very still and very empty, the way the eye of a tornado must feel, moving dully along in the middle of the surrounding hullabaloo."

Twelve women live at the hotel. They've all won a fashion magazine contest by writing. They will live in New York for one month of all expenses paid and many bonus gifts and for chances to meet the top professionals in their fields of interest. At some point she realizes the piles of free gifts served the companies who donated them as advertisements. She relates that she kept these gifts for a long time hidden away. Later, when she was "right again," she got them out and placed them around the house. Last week, she cut the starfish off the sunglasses case so her baby could play with it.

The twelve women live on the same wing of a hotel for women only called the Amazon. The hotel is full of young women Esther's age whose parents pay for them to stay there and go to posh secretarial schools like Kathy Gibbs. Others had just graduated from Kathy Gibbs and were hanging around New York waiting to get married. They all look bored. They spend all their time taking care of their looks. They are the bored rich, bored to be yachting and jet setting.

Esther feels sick with jealousy of them. She had never been out of New England all her life. This is her first chance to travel and she feels guilty for letting it go without benefiting from it properly. Doreen is one of these women. She comes from a society woman's school in the south. She goes around with a perpetual sneer on her face as if to say all the people around her are silly. Doreen singles out Esther from the beginning. Esther enjoys her humor, but feels as though Doreen was one of her troubles that summer. Doreen sits next to Esther during conferences with visiting celebrities and makes snide remarks.

Doreen tells Esther about the fashion consciousness of the women in her college. They have matching pocketbooks for each of their outfits, so they have to change pocketbooks with every change of clothes. Esther is fascinated with this image of a decadent world she has always been excluded from. Doreen scolds Esther for working so hard on her job as an editor's assistant. She tells Esther "old Jay Cee" won't care if the copy is there in the morning or on Monday. She adds a comment on Jay Cee's ugliness. Esther likes Jay Cee very much. Jay Cee is different from the "fashion magazine gushers with fake eyelashes and giddy jewelry." She is intelligent

and knows her business very well. She knows Jay Cee wants to teach her something, but suddenly she doesn't want to learn anything. She closes her typewriter to Doreen's approval.

Betsy knocks and comes in. She asks if they will come to the party. Betsy comes from Kansas. Esther remembers Betsy going on nostalgically about corn in a television producer's office. Betsy later became a cover girl and Esther still sees her in advertisements. Betsy asks Esther to do things with her and the others, but she never asks Doreen. Doreen calls her Pollyanna Cowgirl. Betsy leaves and Doreen tells Esther they should go to the party only until they get bored. Doreen hates the parties staged by the magazine. They always invite young men from Yale, whom Doreen thinks are stupid. Esther thinks of Buddy Willard, who goes to Yale, and decides he is stupid. Unlike Doreen, he has no intuition.

They are stuck in traffic in the back of a taxi that evening when a man strolls over and speaks to them through the window. Esther knows he has come for Doreen. He asks them to join him for drinks. He says he has friends waiting and nods at some men slouching outside a building. They laugh and Esther thinks it should have warned her, but she wants to take the chance to see something of New York outside of the carefully planned outings. The two get out of the cab and the man calls his friend, Frankie to come on. Frankie is short and "scrunty," the kind of man Esther cannot stand. She hates to be with short men because she feels that she must slump. She hopes for a second that the tall man will be with her, but he doesn't even glance at her.

In the bar, Esther feels invisible compared to the dazzling Doreen: "I felt myself melting into the shadows like the negative of a person I'd ever seen before in my life." When the man asks for their drink orders, Esther feels at a loss since she doesn't know alcohol. She orders a vodka straight, because she remembers an advertisement which featured a glass of vodka with nothing in it. Doreen sits silently and the man who picked them up stares at her "the way people stare at the great white macaw in the zoo, waiting for it to say something human."

Esther finds out the man is a disc jockey. His name is Lenny Shepard. Esther notices Lenny give Frankie a long look as if to prompt him to get Esther's attention away from him so he can concentrate solely on Doreen. Esther tells him her name is Elly Higgenbottom and that she is from Chicago. She doesn't want anyone to know her real name or that she came from Boston. Frankie asks her to dance and she can only think of how bad he looks in his clothes, especially his blue sports coat. She turns her back to him and moves her chair closer to Doreen and Lenny, who are engrossed in each other. She drinks her vodka and feels it go down easily, making her feel powerful and godlike.

Frankie leaves, but not before getting money from Lenny. Lenny tells him to shut up and scam. Doreen says she won't come unless Elly (Esther) comes. She agrees to come because she wants to see as much as she can. She likes to look on at people in crucial situations. When she sees anything bizarre or upsetting, she always acts as if she is not surprised.

Notes

The narrator reveals her age by her language before she says she is nineteen. She thinks many things are stupid. For instance, she says, "I'm stupid about executions." Perhaps this sounds like the language of a teenager since teenagers tend to express themselves very directly and simply. Esther is hungry for experiences in New York, enough so that she will get out of a cab at night in New York and join a man she doesn't know for drinks.

Esther is also easily led. Doreen is a controlling person. She uses Esther as a side kick. Esther is easily impressed, mistaking sarcasm for intelligent critique. However, Doreen plays an important role as a foil for Esther. While Esther is an outsider and from that position can see the pettiness and exploitativeness of the New York scene, she is also not the empty-souled person that Doreen is. Her age and her vulnerability make her attach herself to the strong-willed Doreen, but she is not fulfilled in this relationship.

This chapter actually doesn't name the narrator yet. She will not be fully named until chapter five. The first name the reader hears is a fake name, Elly Higgenbottom, along with a fake hometown, Chicago instead of

Boston. It's clear Esther isn't comfortable with herself as she is and wants to reinvent herself in order to sound more worldly perhaps.....

OVERALL ANALYSES

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Esther Greenwood - Plath signals her protagonist's problems with her sense of identity in her several roles and names. She renames herself Ellie Higginbottom when she wants to be worldly and grown-up and relocates herself as a native of Chicago and detaches herself from all family by saying she's an orphan. She fantasizes that she is Ee Gee, sharp-witted editor of New York. Her novel of two sentences features herself in disguise as Elaine. Esther Greenwood is a woman of great talent who has many painful issues to deal with before she can continue with her life. These issues seem to have their roots in her relationship to her parents. She realizes... the day before her suicide attempt that she never cried for her father who died when she was a child. It's clear

Mrs. Greenwood - Plath doesn't draw out this character very fully. She is quite disempowered when it comes to expressing her emotions. She is angry at her daughter for getting sick in such a

Buddy Willard - He is a sort of caricature. He is not fully drawn, but perhaps there are people like Buddy who just don't have much depth to them. He is Mr. Ambition until he gets TB. Then he realizes the weakness his body and the arbitrariness of his fate and gets a little humility. Buddy is probably drawn to his opposite in Esther because that part of his own life has been so thoroughly stifled. In Buddy's parents, Plath gives Buddy's reason for being. Mr. Willard is of the opinion that sickness is a failure of.....

PLOT STRUCTURE ANALYSIS

Plath plots *The Bell Jar* based on the moves that her protagonist makes. She first travels to New York, where she enters a world which from home seemed glamorous and wonderful, but from New York seems empty and exploitative. Next, she travels back home to her mother's house, located in a suburb of Boston. There she is situated squarely in the middle of normative American life in all its boredom and.....

THEMES - THEME ANALYSIS

The primary theme of the novel is a feminist one, but it is closely related to the theme of madness and sanity. *The Bell Jar* focuses on the crazy making society of its protagonist. If a woman is ambitious and talented, she will find no place in the society of the 1950s. The norm is tyrannical. The norm is represented by Mrs. Willard, a woman who preaches the idea that a woman's place is in service to a man. Since the narrator can find no man suitable to her in sentiment or goals, she begins to feel as if she has no place in her society. She begins to question her goal of being a poet and she has an emotional breakdown. Plath links the two themes--women's self-determination and sanity--in Esther's steady work on regaining her emotional health.

There are many kinds of feminism. Plath is writing at the beginning of what's called the second wave of feminism, the first wave being during the struggle for the vote in the early 1900s. It's hard for people today to realize what kinds of things were normal back in the 50s. For instance, women were not allowed to.....

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Who are some of the figures of madness in the novel? Name the various characters who signal different kinds of mental illness and analyze how they are represented.
2. Examine the mother figures in *The Bell Jar*. What is the ideal mother and the worst sort of mother?.....

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