

The Bell Jar Study Guide

The Bell Jar by Sylvia Plath

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Plot Summary

The Bell Jar by Sylvia Plath is the story of a young college student who struggles with college life and her successes. It leads her to have a nervous breakdown. The novel is a journey through the mind of Esther Greenwood and her slow descent into madness. It is an intriguing look at how the mind works or in Esther case turns against her.

Esther is a college student who has had much success in her young life. She has achieved many awards and at the beginning of the novel is in New York City for a month having won an internship at a fashion magazine. She and ten other girls work on the magazine and attend parties and events around town. Esther is excited about being in the city and is anxious to explore every inch.

At the end of her trip, Esther is assaulted by a man and he wipes his blood on her face. After getting back to her hotel, takes the clothes that she has acquired in New York and one by one releases off the roof of her hotel. This to her signifies the end of her journey and her return to her normal life. Unfortunately, she neglects to keep clothing to wear for her return home. One of the other girls kindly gives her a skirt and blouse. Esther leaves the man's blood on her face as a relic.

She learns that she is not accepted in the writing program at her college that she was looking forward to taking over the summer. This rejection makes her question herself as a writer. It leaves her in limbo of what to do with herself over the summer. Staying with her mother is difficult for her because the two do not get along. Esther comes up with the plan of writing a novel. She feels that this will show everyone that she is good enough for any writing class. She finds the task difficult and soon gives it up. Left in limbo her mind leaps from one idea to the next and she soon feels desperate. She cannot sleep or eat.

Esther wears the same skirt and blouse that she wore home from New York not washing the clothes or her hair because she sees no need in it. The thought of washing everyday leaves her tired. Esther spirals into depression and contemplates different methods of suicide. She tries to kill herself in many different occasions, finally almost succeeding, which lands her in the hospital. Her benefactress pays for her to move to a private hospital so she will receive better treatment.

Esther goes through many lows before she slowly recovers. She must learn to be a confident woman who believes in herself and her abilities. It is a slow and difficult road, but she overcomes the obstacles and re-emerges into society and starts her life where she left off.

Plath leads the reader on an intense journey that takes them through the suspicious, dark mind of insanity and allows them to surface on the other side with hope for Esther's future. It is a powerful journey that shows the intensity of insanity and the numbness of feelings. Plath weaves such a brilliant story that the reader joins Esther in her descent and rejoices in her recovery.



Chapter 1 and Chapter 2

Summary

Chapter 1

Esther Greenwood is in New York City. She and eleven other girls have won a fashion magazine contest by writing essays, stories, poems, or fashion blurbs. Their reward is a job in New York City for a month with all of their expenses paid. The girls all live together at a hotel called The Amazon. Esther is meant to be having the time of her life and enjoying this once in a lifetime opportunity, but she cannot bring herself to do so. She realizes that there is something wrong with her and all she can think about are the Rosenbergs who were about to be executed by electrocution.

One of the girls that Esther befriends is Doreen. She is an attractive blonde from the South. She berates Esther for completing her writing assignments on time. The other girls, mainly Betsy from Kansas, try to get Esther to spend time with them, but she prefers to be with Doreen instead, whom the girls do not like. They are all going to a party arranged for them, but their cabs get stuck in traffic. Doreen and Esther are together when a strange man dressed approaches their cab and coaxes them out of it and into a bar. The other girls go on to the party without them.

The man's name is Lenny Shepherd, and he is a disc jockey. He is obviously attracted to Doreen, but he provides a male companion for Esther as well. The man's name is Frankie. Esther, however, is not attracted to Frankie since he is shorter than she is and chooses to ignore him. He soon realizes she is not interested and leaves. Lenny wants Doreen to leave the bar with him, but she refuses unless Esther, who has given her name as Elly Higgenbottom, goes with her. Esther agrees to accompany them and is sure she will learn something from the experience.

Chapter 2

Esther and Doreen go back to Lenny's apartment with him. His apartment is reminiscent of a ranch complete with bearskins, pine paneling and antlers hung on the wall. Lenny gives the girl alcoholic drinks, and he and Doreen begin to dance. Esther drinks and begins to feel the effects of the alcohol. She becomes more and more depressed at being the third wheel to Doreen and Lenny as they enjoy themselves dancing and she just sits and watches. Doreen bites Lenny's ear, and the two begin to tussle. They seem to be enjoying themselves. Before the couple begins to have sex, Esther lets herself out of the apartment, unwilling to witness the next stage in Doreen and Lenny's relationship. Slightly drunk, Esther walks back to The Amazon rather than take a cab. By the time she gets there, she has sobered up. Upon catching her reflection, she sees herself as a wrinkled Chinese woman who looks tired.



Esther takes a hot bath to wash away the mental and physical dirt of the evening. She stays in the water until she feels that she is once again pure. Esther goes to bed and is awakened at some point in the night by someone knocking on her door. Doreen wants Esther to let her in. When Esther opens the door she finds a very drunk Doreen, who is on the verge of passing out. She is accompanied by the night maid. Instead of letting her into her room or dragging her to her own room, Esther lays Doreen down in the hallway floor and closes her door. She returns to bed. The next morning Doreen is no longer in the hallway.

Analysis

Esther should be happy to be in New York interning at a fashion magazine, but she is not. She sees the trip as the beginning of the end. She thinks that all of her success is in the past. Esther looks at the girls with her in the hotel and groups them as whether they are sexually active or virgins.

Doreen fascinates her because she is sexually active. This fascinates and repulses Esther. She wants to be sexually active, but she is scared to lose her virginity. She views sex as violent and links Doreen and Lenny's making out to rape. It makes her feel dirty just watching it, and she goes to the hotel and washes away the filth of the evening.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss Esther's outlook on life. How does she feel about New York and the people around her?

Discussion Question 2

Who are the Rosenbergs and why are they being executed? Why do you think their upcoming execution interests Esther so much?

Discussion Question 3

Why do you think Esther leaves her friend Doreen out in the hallway rather than helping her? How do her feelings about Doreen change after that night?

Vocabulary

Hullabaloo, oblong, cynical, perpetual, decadence, intuition, shantung, gawky, morbid, aesthetic, crucial, demoralizing, fazed, sanatorium, meditate, verdant.



Chapter 3 and Chapter 4

Summary

Chapter 3

Esther goes to a luncheon provided by the Food Testing Kitchens for Ladies' Day, the magazine for which all of the girls work. The lunch was in honor of the twelve girls, but only eleven showed up since Doreen was spending the day with Lenny. Esther is excited about the lunch because she loves food and makes a habit of ordering an array of expensive items when the girls are taken out to lunch on someone's expense account. Esther, who loves caviar, keeps a bowl all to herself refusing to share with anyone else. She eats the entire bowl before she feels it is safe to turn to chat to Betsy, who is sitting next to her.

Esther recalls the meeting she had with her boss, Jay Cee, that morning. Esther has always succeeded at school and done very well with her grades, but she knew she was not doing her best while in New York. Jay Cee tries to get Esther motivated since she knows the girl has the potential of a bright future. She asks Esther what she wants to do. Esther usually has a ready answer about the different things she would like to do after college, such as go to graduate school and become a professor or an editor. But, she surprises herself when she tells Jay Cee that she does not know what she wants to do. She is even more surprised when she realizes it is the truth.

Jay Cee tells her she will not get far with that attitude and that she needs to learn a few languages in order to make herself stand out from the rest of the girls who all wanted to be editors. Esther tries to please Jay Cee by producing some interest in her proposal and vowing to learn some languages once she returns to school. She knows that the Dean of her school will allow her to add whatever she wishes to her schedule. Esther remembers when she thought about being a botanist and decided to take physics. Although she hated the class, she got an A; thus, when she needed to take chemistry, the Dean allowed her sit in on the class without taking any exams since it was expected that she would receive an A anyway.

Chapter 4

Esther is given work to do by Jay Cee. Once it is complete, she is allowed to go to the Ladies' Day lunch. Esther wishes that Jay Cee was her mother, since her own mother is less than supportive. Mrs. Greenwood encourages Esther to learn shorthand after college so that she will have a practical skill to go along with her college degree. Her mother actually taught shorthand and typing to support Esther and her brother after their father had died.

As Esther dips her fingers into her finger-bowl she remembers a time when she first visited her benefactress, Philomena Guinea, a wealthy novelist who attended Esther's



college and set up a scholarship, which allowed Esther to attend the college. Esther had been encouraged by the Scholarships Office to write to Mrs. Guinea and thank her for the opportunity she had given her. Her benefactress had answered her letter and invited her to lunch. It was at that lunch that Esther saw her first finger-bowl. Not knowing what to do with it she mistakenly drank from it, a faux pas her hostess did not correct. It was only later that Esther found out what it was actually used for.

After their lunch the girls go to a film premiere. Once they are seated, Esther begins to feel unwell. She wishes to leave and Betsy, also feeling unwell, leaves with her. Both girls begin throwing up on the way back to the hotel. Once they reach the hotel each girl goes to a bathroom where she is violently ill. Esther is disturbed by another girl knocking on the door. After she opens the door, she passes out onto the floor. She is discovered by a doctor and nurse. The hotel nurse takes her back to her room. Esther is told that all of the girls have food poisoning. She has been given an injection to help her sleep. When Esther awakes, Doreen is there with a bowl of soup. The girl tells her that the crabmeat they had at lunch was full of poison. Ladies' Day has sent the girl presents to make up for making them sick. Each girl is given a copy of *The Thirty Best Short Stories of the Year*.

Analysis

Esther has a gluttonous attitude. She will not share the caviar with Betsy at the luncheon. She turns to food to keep from thinking about sex. Doreen chooses to spend her time with Lenny rather than at the luncheon. The other girls do not trust Doreen and do not associate with her.

Esther is uncertain of her future. The trip to New York shows her that she does not know what she wants to do with her life. She always strives to win awards and contests, but she does not know what she will do after college. Esther has no motivation. The thought of her future scares her. She does not want to end up like her mother teaching shorthand and typing to support her family. Esther sees college as the way away from her mother.

The girls become sick following the Ladies Day luncheon. Doreen takes care of Esther. She is a real friend to Esther.

Discussion Question 1

Why do you think Esther tells Jay Cee the truth about not knowing what she wants to do after college? Why did her own answer to Jay Cee's question surprise her so much?



Discussion Question 2

What does Esther's manipulation of the physics professor and her Dean tell you about Esther? Why do you think she attended the chemistry class even after she did not have to do so?

Discussion Question 3

Why do you think Esther seemed happy by the news that she was not the only girl who was sick?

Vocabulary

Arrayed, locale, immaculate, antithesis, receptive, promptitude, wan, sepulchral, nondescript, obscure, ingenious, villanelles, conjured, benefactress, debutante, rapt, tepid, celestially, infinity, keeling.



Chapter 5 and Chapter 6

Summary

Chapter 5

Esther is recovering from her bout of food poisoning. She has been given the day off to recover by Jay Cee. She receives a phone call from a man named Constantin. He is a simultaneous interpreter working at the United Nations, and he has been referred to her by Mrs. Willard, Buddy's mother. Constantin stayed with the Willards when he first came to America. He and Esther make plans to go to the UN to have a meal. Esther's upcoming date makes her begin to think about Buddy Willard. Everyone expects her to marry him when he recovers from tuberculosis and leaves the sanatorium, but Esther knows that she will never marry Buddy because she sees him as a hypocrite. She would love to be able to tell him how she feels; but, the fact that he has TB keeps her from doing so. Instead she humors his delusions that they will one day be married until the time that he recovers from his illness and she can tell him how she truly feels.

Esther spends the morning in bed reading the book that the Ladies' Day people sent her. She reads a story about a fig tree. A fig tree grew between the properties of a Jewish man and a convent. Every day the Jewish man and a beautiful nun came to pick the figs. One day the two touch hands. The next day and from then on an ill-tempered maid came to pick the figs and count the figs the man took to make sure he did not take any more than she did. Esther saw herself and Buddy as the Jewish man and the nun. They met and had a shared experience; but, when something awful happened they went their separate ways.

Esther remembers when Buddy asked her to go to his Yale Junior Prom with him. Their mothers were good friends, but Esther had always admired Buddy from afar. She was surprised when during Christmas break he came to her house and told her he would be stopping by her college to see her sometime. She does not hear from him again until March when he stops by to visit her at her dorm. He is there to go to the Senior Prom with Joan Gilling. Joan is also from Esther's home town and a year ahead of her in college. He is taking her since Joan's mother asked Buddy's mother if he would. Esther is jealous of Joan so she tries to make Buddy jealous by telling him she has two dates. He hands her a letter and leaves. The letter invites her to go to the Yale Junior Prom with him. Once the other girls in her house learn she is going to prom their attitude toward her changes. She is treated more kindly. Esther's visions of romance are dashed when Buddy treats her like a friend during the prom. It is only after the prom that he takes her to see the view behind the chemistry lab and kisses her there. Buddy seems to be greatly affected by the kiss, but Esther feels very little.

Chapter 6



Esther has been begging Buddy to show her some of the sights of the hospital, and one weekend she finally gets her wish. She watches as he cuts up a cadaver and then he takes her to one of his lectures. The experience she seems to remember the most, however is when they witness the birth of a baby. The woman has been given a drug that will make her forget the pain of childbirth that she is experiencing while not doing anything to alleviate the actual pain she is suffering.

After watching the birth of the baby Esther and Buddy go back to Buddy's room. They light a candle, open a bottle wine, and lie side by side on the bed as Esther reads poetry aloud. After Esther finishes reading the poem, Buddy suddenly asks her if she has ever seen a man naked. She says that she has only seen statues and agrees to look at Buddy. He undresses and stands before her. The only thought in her head is of turkey gizzards and necks, and she becomes depressed. Then Buddy wishes to see Esther naked. She declines, and he does not argue. He gets dressed once again.

After Buddy is dressed they kiss and finish the rest of the wine. Esther suddenly asks Buddy if he has ever had an affair. She expects him to say that he is a virgin like Esther and is saving himself for marriage. Buddy surprises her, however, when he admits that he has slept with someone. He tells Esther that it was a waitress he worked with last summer on Cape Cod. The waitress was older than Buddy and had seduced him. He further tells Esther that he slept with the woman at least thirty times. She cannot believe that Buddy has had that much experience. Esther feels betrayed that he has acted as though he was pure and innocent and she was the one who was experienced and sexy. She feels as if he has been ridiculing her the entire time.

Esther has just decided to break up with Buddy when he calls to tell her he has TB. He has to go to a sanatorium in the Adirondacks and wants her to write to him and possibly visit. She promises she will, but she does not feel sorry for Buddy at all. Instead, she sees his TB as a punishment for the double life she feels that he has been living. Esther is not above using Buddy's illness for her own gain either. She saves herself from further blind dates by telling all of the girls in her house about Buddy's condition and that they are almost engaged. She receives a great deal of sympathy as a result.

Analysis

Esther and Buddy's relationship is more important to Buddy than it is to Esther. She liked him when she felt he was unattainable to her; but, once she has him she does not want him. She feels nothing when Buddy kisses, while he is greatly affected. Esther wants to end the relationship, but with Buddy in recovery from TB she cannot.

When Buddy takes Esther to the hospital, she is greatly affected by witnessing the birth of a baby. She sees the experience as man's subjugation of woman. The woman is given drugs so that she will not remember the pain of the experience. With no memory of the pain, she will allow herself to become pregnant again.



Buddy does not stir any passion in Esther. When she sees him naked, she is more disgusted than fascinated. She is even less inclined when she finds out that he is not a virgin. She does not like that he has had experience when she has not. This worries her. She cannot have a relationship when she feels at a disadvantage.

Discussion Question 1

Do you believe that Esther is a romantic? What experience has she had with men? Were they good experiences or bad ones? Why do you think she gets set up on so many blind dates?

Discussion Question 2

Describe Buddy and Esther's relationship? What does their kiss say about their relationship? Do you think Esther is truly in love with Buddy?

Discussion Question 3

What is Esther's reaction when Buddy tells her that he has had an affair with someone? Why do you think that she reacts as she does?

Vocabulary

Nonplussed, laden, insinuating, simultaneous, hypocrite, spontaneously, procession, infinite, psychosomatic, lurid.



Chapter 7 and Chapter 8

Summary

Chapter 7

Esther meets Constantin. He is shorter than she is, but she finds him handsome. They get along well together and spend time talking badly about Mrs. Willard. Esther is happier with Constantin than she has been since she was nine years old, the age when her father died. It had never occurred to her before that she was only truly happy up until the age of nine. Esther goes with Constantin to the UN where she watches the interpreters work. As she sits between Constantin and a Russian interpreter, she thinks about all of the things she cannot do. She could not cook like her grandmother or mother and she did not know shorthand. Her mother told her she needed to learn it in order to get a good job after college. She continued to list in her mind the things she could not do. She started to feel inadequate. The only thing she was good at was winning scholarships and prizes and that was coming to an end for her.

She imagined her life branching out like a fig tree. At the tip of each branch was a potential future for Esther. One branch had a husband and children, another was a famous poet, another was a brilliant professor, and yet another one was an amazing editor. There were also branches leading to travel to far away places in Europe and Africa as well as a branch with many lovers with unusual names and occupations. Esther feels unable to choose any one branch because she wants them all; therefore, she does not choose any. Instead, she watches as each chance slips away.

Esther and Constantin go to dinner where she drinks too much and decides that she will let him seduce her. She remembers the only boy with whom she has ever discussed sex. His girlfriend ran away with someone else and Esther, the only one around when he discovered it, tried to cheer him up. Eric felt that people acted like animals when it came to sex. He told Esther about the first time he had sex. He went to a whorehouse where the prostitute did not even remove her dress. The experience had made sex the equivalent of going to the toilet. He had decided that if he fell in love with a woman he would not have sex with her because he would not debase her by such an act and lower her to being an animal.

Esther goes to Constantin's apartment with him. She is ready to be seduced, but part of her remembers the advice of her mother and the general idea that women should wait until they are married to have sex. Her mother sent her an article saying that men liked women to be pure so they could teach them about sex. Yes, men would try to persuade women to have sex with them and assure them that they would marry them later. However, generally, once they got what they wanted the men would lose respect for the woman and no longer want to marry her. Esther decides that if she cannot find a man who can remain pure, then there is no reason for her to stay pure. Constantin, however,



shows little sign of wanting to seduce her. She even goes to lie down on his bed. He joins her at one point, but falls asleep.

Esther imagines what it would be like to be married to Constantin. She imagines the life of a wife to be a dull one. She cannot feel that she would be happy with such an existence, catering to a family day in and day out. Esther remembers Buddy insinuating that once she was married and had children that she would not want to write poems any longer. Esther sees this as a death sentence to her creativity. Therefore, marriage must require some form of brainwashing in order to comply tamely to such a life. When Constantin wakes up, he takes Esther home.

Chapter 8

Mr. Willard drives Esther to the Adirondacks to see Buddy. It is the day after Christmas, and Esther grows gloomy as they near their destination. Mr. Willard tells Esther that he and his wife have always wanted a daughter hinting that they would readily accept her as Buddy's wife. Buddy gives Esther an ashtray that he has made as a present. His father leaves the two alone. He is driving back alone, and Esther will take the train home.

Buddy shows Esther a poem that he has had published in a magazine. She thinks it is dreadful, but she lies to him about it. Esther tries to keep her distance from him fearing his illness, but he tells her that he is not positive so cannot give her anything. Buddy asks Esther to marry him. She resists the impulse to laugh. Esther tells him that she is never going to marry and tries to explain to him that she does not know what she wants in life and does not want to be tied down.

Buddy takes Esther skiing. She has never been in her life and ends up breaking her leg. Esther is happy zipping down the hill. She wants to ski down the hill again, but she cannot because of her broken leg.

Analysis

Esther realizes that she has not been happy since her father's death. His death has affected her life, and she has not even realized it. She feels that her mother does not believe in her. She is always telling Esther that she needs to learn shorthand to get a good job after college. This makes her feel inadequate. It seems like her life is now on a downhill slide. After college, she will be nothing. Esther is confused about what she wants to do with her life. This confusion feeds her inadequacy.

Esther is confused about sex. She sees it as fascinating yet disgusting. She has not experienced it and sees it as another way to enslave women. If she keeps her virginity, she will not be held under the thumb of any man. This leads her to refuse Buddy's offer of marriage. She will not bow down to any man.



Discussion Question 1

Why does Esther decide that she will let Constantin seduce her? What does it mean for a girl of Esther's age and this time period to decide to have sex before marriage? How would society view her?

Discussion Question 2

How does Esther's view on marriage differ from other girls her age? How would marriage affect some of the future options she saw on the fig branches? How did the marriage of the Willards and that of her own parents affect her viewpoint?

Discussion Question 3

Do you think that Buddy is surprised by Esther's refusal of his marriage proposal? What reason does Esther give for refusing?

Vocabulary

Intuition, protegee, idiom, transcribe, velds, notorious, balalaika, insubstantial, indistinguishable, totalitarian, renderings, tortuous, succumbed, malady, neurotic, rivulet, dissociate, disconsolate, inconsequential, insentient, pivot.



Chapter 9 and Chapter 10

Summary

Chapter 9

Esther makes small talk with Hilda, one of the girls at the hotel. She asks Hilda isn't it awful about the Rosenbergs. They were to be electrocuted that night. Hilda believes they deserve to die.

The girls are having their pictures taken for the magazine. The idea is to be pictured with something that says what you want to do with your life. Esther does not know what to say. Jay Cee says she wants to be everything. Esther says she wants to be a poet. Sitting for the picture, Esther begins to cry. Once she starts she cannot stop. She is left alone in the room for privacy.

Jay Cee comes back with an armload of manuscripts for Esther to read. Esther thinks of how nice it would be if one day her own manuscript made its way across Jay Cee's desk. She has applied for a summer school course with a famous writer. She has sent a manuscript to him. She is waiting to see if she is good enough to be admitted into his class. She is sure she will get a letter of acceptance.

Doreen invites Esther on a double date with her and Lenny. The guy for Esther is from Peru. Esther is sitting among all her clothes that she has to pack for the next day's departure. Esther has found it hard to do anything in the last few days. She eventually agrees to go with Doreen.

Esther date is Marco. He has a diamond tiepin that he gives to Esther. He says that perhaps during the evening he will perform a small service worthy of a diamond and roughly handles her arm. Esther feels he is a woman-hater. He makes her dance and then leads her out into the garden. Esther asks him whom he loves, and he tells her that he loves his first cousin who is going to be a nun.

Marco attempts to assault Esther. She contemplates just lying there and letting him take her virginity, but he calls her a slut and she fights him. She gets away from him throwing his diamond into the grass. He gets on his hands and knees to find it. She gets a ride with some people leaving the dance. Esther goes back to the hotel and takes her bundle of clothes to the hotel roof. One by one she lets the wind take each article of clothing off the roof and into downtown New York.

Chapter 10

Betsy has traded Esther a skirt and blouse to wear home because she has thrown all of her clothes off the roof. She still has the diagonal streaks of blood on her cheeks that Marco place there the night before. People look at her strangely. Doreen gives her two dozen avocado pears as a parting present.



Her mother picks her up at the station. She gets into the back of the car so her mother cannot stare at her. Her mother tells her that she did not make it into the writing program. Esther does not know what she will do with her summer.

Esther keeps her eyes on the neighbors. Dodo Conway is a Catholic with six children. Esther finds her fascinating; but, at the same time, she is repulsed. She does not want children of her own and finds Dodo's children excessive. Esther calls her friend at college and lets her know that she won't be coming for the summer. They should give away her room at the apartment they were to share with their friends.

Esther sets up a table outside in the breezeway and begins to write a novel. She does not get dressed and wears her nightgown all day. She quickly tires of writing because she feels she has no experiences to relate onto paper. Her mother tries to teach her shorthand so that she will have a useable skill. Esther cannot see herself in such a position and feigns a headache and goes to bed. Esther hops from one idea to another to spend her summer, but she ends up doing nothing. She cannot sleep or eat. She gets sleeping pills from her family doctor, her aunt's sister-in-law. She suggests that Esther see Dr. Gordon, a psychiatrist.

Analysis

Esther is concerned that she does not know what she wants to do with the rest of her life. She is excited about the prospect of being part of a writing course taught by a famous writer. She believes that she will be part of the class and daydreams about sending her manuscripts into Jay Cee. She admires Jay Cee, and she would like to think that Jay Cee would praise her work.

Esther is obsessed with sex. She is willing to have sex with Marco until he calls her a slut. Then, she fights to defend her virginity. He believes all women are sluts and does not respect them. The assault has a profound effect on Esther. She throws away all of her clothes that she has gotten in New York and does not wash away the blood that Marco smeared on her face, but wears it as a badge of honor.

Esther spirals into depression when she is not accepted into the writing program. She does not know what she will do with her life. This leads her to not sleep and eat. Her doctor becomes concerned for her and recommends that she see a psychiatrist.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Esther call Marco a woman-hater? What does he do to make her think this? Why does she change her mind in letting Marco have sex with her to fighting him?



Discussion Question 2

Why does Esther throw her clothes off the hotel roof? Why does she want to end her trip in New York on such a note?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Esther give up on writing a novel? Why does she have trouble sleeping?

Vocabulary

Bilious, retracted, frieze, pristine, pseudonym, extricated, conglomerate, immaculate, facet, invulnerable, infinitesimal, precarious, immobile, interstices, inordinate, paraphernalia, excessive, corrasable, awry, intuitive.



Chapter 11 and Chapter 12

Summary

Chapter 11

Esther goes to her first appointment with Doctor Gordon. She is still wearing Betsy's white blouse and dirndl skirt. She has not washed them in her three weeks home, and they are giving off a sour odor. She also has not washed her hair in three weeks. She has not slept in seven nights. Her mother does not believe she has not slept, but Esther watches the clock through the night and sees every minute tick by. She does not wash her hair or clothes because she does not see the point since thinking of washing everyday made her tired.

Esther does not like Doctor Gordon. He seems too perfect with his perfect looks and perfect family. She cannot relate to him. She is suspicious of him and feels that he does not believe that there is anything wrong with her. Esther does not tell him everything because she does not trust him. She has tried to write a letter to Doreen, but she can't get it written. Her handwriting is large, crude, and slanting. She tears up the letter and hides it in her pocketbook. At the end of the section, Esther walks to her mother's car. Mrs. Greenwood is disappointed that all Doctor Gordon said was see you next week.

Esther goes to the Commons and meets a sailor. She tells him her name is Elly Higginbottom from Chicago. Esther wishes she could go somewhere where people do not know that she had thrown away a scholarship at a big Eastern women's college, messed up her month in New York, and refused to marry a medical student. In Chicago, for instance, she could start fresh.

Esther sees a woman she believes to be Mrs. Willard. Esther pretends to be asking the sailor directions. It turns out that the lady is just an older woman in a brown suit whom Esther does not know. Esther begins to cry. She blames the woman in the brown suit for causing her to take the wrong turns in her life and for everything bad that happened as a consequence.

At her next appointment, Esther tells Dr. Gordon that she feels the same. He does not seem to believe her so she tells him again how she has not slept in fourteen days. Furthermore, she cannot read or write or swallow properly. She digs into her pocketbook and pulls out the scraps of the letter she wrote to Doreen. He asks to speak to her mother. She picks up the pieces of the letter and goes to get her mother.

When her mother comes back, she tells her that Dr. Gordon wants to give Esther shock treatments at his private hospital. Esther goes to the park and thinks about running away to Chicago. She goes to the bus terminal to see how much a ticket to Chicago would cost. She ends up getting on a bus that will take her two blocks from her home.

Chapter 12



Esther is taken to Dr. Gordon's private hospital. The shock treatment is very painful for Esther, and she thinks that her bones will break. The doctor tells Mrs. Greenwood that after a few more shock treatments Esther will show a wonderful improvement. Once they are home, Esther tells her mother that she is through with Dr. Gordon. Her mother believes that Esther is deciding to be better and that is all she needs.

Esther contemplates committing suicide. She draws a warm bath and takes the bag of razor blades that she carries in her pocketbook out and selects a blade. She looks at her wrists, but she cannot bear to cut them. She cuts her leg and feels nothing. She gets a thrill at watching her blood flow down her leg to her shoe. She has taken too much time getting up the courage to act, and her mother will be coming home soon. She takes a bus to Boston.

Esther goes to Deer Island Prison. The guard will not let her walk along the beach. She tells him she used to live in the area. She thinks that if she had not moved she could have met and married this guard. She asks him how a person gets locked up in the prison.

Esther goes to the public beach. She has the box of razor blades in her pocket. She is the only person on the beach in a skirt and high heels, so she stands out. The people find her odd. She sits by the ocean as the tide comes in and contemplates drowning herself. The cold water makes her wince and she decides against it.

Analysis

Esther does not like Dr. Gordon. She finds him to be too perfect and she cannot relate to him. She is suspicious of why he wants to help her and doubts that he can. He does not seem interested in her at all. After only two visits, he suggests shock treatment. His treatment does not help her and makes her not trust him, which leads her to terminate their relationship.

Esther contemplates different ways to commit suicide. She chickens out each time because she cannot harm herself. Esther wants to run away from her life, but does not want to end it. She wants to be a different person who is not stifled by the wrong decisions she has made in her life. Esther wants a do over where she makes the right decisions.

Discussion Question 1

Why is Esther suspicious of Dr. Gordon? Does she find him a competent psychiatrist? Why or why not?



Discussion Question 2

Why does Esther want to make a fresh start in Chicago? Why does she choose Chicago?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Esther carry a box of razor blades with her? Why can she not commit suicide? Do you feel that she really wants to kill herself?

Vocabulary

Perspective, desolate, beguiled, askew, reminiscent, sallow, virile, discerned, diaphonous, emanated, factitious, resonant, peremptory.



Chapter 13 and Chapter 14

Summary

Chapter 13

Esther spends the day at the beach with friends. She is nervous about being around Jody because she does not want her to detect the change in her. She goes for a swim with Jody's friend Cal to keep from being part of a group that might detect her flaws.

That morning before the arrival of Jody and the two boys, Esther tries to hang herself. She takes the cord of her mother's bathrobe and ties it into a knot. She searches through the house for a place to hang herself, but is unsuccessful. She reminisces about her grandmother's house that had beams and loft ceilings. She tries to just tighten the cord around her throat, but her fingers get numb and stop so that she revives rather than strangles. It is her body's way of protecting herself. She thinks about turning to doctors to help her, but then remembers Dr. Gordon's shock machine.

Esther tries to drown herself at the beach, but she is buoyed back to the surface. She tries three times; and, each time she pops back to the surface. Knowing when she is beaten, she heads back to shore.

Mrs. Greenwood suggests that helping someone else will stop her thinking so much about herself. So her mother's sister, Teresa, arranges for her to volunteer at the hospital. Esther is assigned to the maternity ward. She is given vases to give to the women. Looking at the vases, she sees that some of the flowers are dying. So, she takes out the dead flowers and rearranges the vases. This upsets the women who know what types of flowers they should have. They become angry and begin to yell at her. Esther runs away.

Esther goes to the cemetery to visit her father's grave. The family has not been there since her father was buried. She feels a need to pay back her father for the neglect. She wants to give him the mourning he never got from his wife. She thinks about how her life would be different if he would have lived. Esther lies on her father's tombstone and mourns her father.

When her mother leaves for work, Esther jumps out of her bed and leaves a note on the table that she is going for a long walk. She then gets the sleeping pills that her mother keeps locked up in her closet only doling them out to Esther one at a time at bedtime. She gets a glass of water and takes it and the pills to the cellar. There is a hole in the wall that is unused so Esther climbs in the hole, seals herself in and takes the sleeping pills.

Chapter 14



Esther wakes up in the hole. She hears voices and is taken from her tomb. She does not understand where she is and why people are holding her down. She later wakes again and cannot see. A cheery voice tells her that there are lots of blind people in the world.

A doctor comes and loosens the bandages around her eyes so that she can see. She is amazed by this and tells him that the nurse told her she was blind. He laughs at this and tells her that her sight is perfectly intact. Her mother comes to see her because the nurse tells her that Esther called out to her during the night. Esther's brother is with her.

A George Bakewell comes to see her. He tells her he goes to her church and she dated his roommate at Amherst. He is houseman at the hospital. She believes he has come to see a girl who would try to kill herself.

Esther demands to see a mirror. The nurse tells her she cannot because she does not look very pretty. The nurse gives her a mirror and what Esther sees is a person with a shaved head. One side of the face is purple and bulged out in a shapeless way. Realizing the person is her, Esther drops the mirror. Another nurse rushes in upset that Esther was given the mirror.

Esther is moved to a city hospital. Her mother tells her that she needs a special ward that their local hospital does not have. A doctor comes to see her with a group of residents in tow. He asks her how she is doing. She says she cannot sleep, but the doctor counters by saying that the nurse said she had slept last night. She says she can't read or eat. Then, she remembers that she has been eating ravenously since she came to. The doctor moves on to the next patient saying a staff doctor will be seeing her.

Esther does not like the woman who has the bed next to hers. Mrs. Tomolillo imitates Mrs. Greenwood as she sits talking with her daughter. Esther watches her, but when she points this out to her mother Mrs. Tomatillo stops and makes Esther look like a liar. Esther hates it in the hospital because doctors are all around her and her mother taking notes. It is because Esther refuses to talk to them, her mother tells her. She asks her mother to try to get her out of the hospital. Her mother agrees if Esther agrees she will be good. Esther agrees that she will.

The patients are served their lunch by a Negro. He is new because they are usually served by an old man. He is watched by the nurse as he places the serving dishes on the table in front of the patients. The women stare at the dishes, but do not open the lids. Mrs. Tomolillo always acted as mother and served the plates around to them, but she has been sent home.

Esther lifts the lid of one of the dishes and serves herself a helping of green beans and turns and passes it to the woman next to her. It is the first time this woman has been allowed to the table. She upends the entire dish into her plate and on her lap. The nurse returns the beans to the tureen and takes the woman, Mrs. Mole away to her room. The



Negro returns and tries to take the empty plates, but Esther tells him that they are not done. The Negro gives her an insolent bow.

The second tureen has macaroni, and the third has baked beans. Esther is appalled. You do not serve two types of beans at one meal. Esther eats her food and then goes around where the nurse cannot see her from the waist down. She goes in behind the Negro and kicks him in the calf. She tells him that is what you get.

The nurse comes to take Esther's temperature. It is always normal, so she questions why they do it. There is nothing wrong with her body, just her head. The nurse lays the box of thermometers on Esther's bed. She finds this annoying and something makes her pretend to yawn and turn over so that her foot goes under the box and tips the thermometers into the floor. She tries to say it was an accident, but they know it was not. She scoops up a ball of mercury from the floor as they take her to Mrs. Mole's old room. She wonders what they have done with Mrs. Mole.

Analysis

Esther is getting decidedly worse as she attempts several times to commit suicide. She tries to hide her depression from her friend and limits her contact with her so that she will not see how she has changed. She does not want her to know the dark thoughts that are in her mind. Esther nearly succeeds in killing herself when she takes the sleeping pills and hides herself away. This lands her in the city hospital. Esther readily admits that she tried to kill herself and does not care what the people think of her.

She does not like the doctors and will not talk to them. So, they listen in on her conversations with her mother to gain insight into her thought processes. This angers Esther because she does not like being watched. She feels that people are always trying to test her in some way and she must not let them get the better of her. This leads her to kick the Negro man who serves the food and to tip the thermometers. It makes her feel that she has some sort of control over her situation.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Esther feel that she has to mourn her father for both herself and her mother? Why did Mrs. Greenwood not mourn her husband's death?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Esther go into the basement and seal herself into a hole in the wall before she takes the sleeping pills?



Discussion Question 3

Why does Esther take offense that there are two types of beans at the table? Why does she kick the man?

Vocabulary

Amiable, fiasco, superfluous, commotion, infallibility, catechisms, credos, lapsed, stagnant, intact, ravenously, gawped, insolent, baleful.



Chapter 15 and Chapter 16

Summary

Chapter 15

Philomena Guinea, Esther's benefactress, gets her transferred to a private hospital. During the journey, Esther contemplates jumping off the bridge over the Charles River. Her mother and brother flank her on both sides so she is unable to get out of the car. Esther knows that she should feel grateful to Philomena, but she feels nothing. She feels trapped under a bell jar.

Esther gets her own room at Caplan. There are no bars on the windows. Esther is unnerved by what happened on the bridge. She knows that even if her mother and brother had not been there she would not have made a move to jump. Another surprise is her doctor at Caplan. Dr. Nolan is a woman. Esther did not know there were women psychiatrists. The patients are given privileges to play golf and badminton.

Dr. Nolan has her first session with Esther. Esther tells her about the shock therapy that Dr. Gordon put her through. Dr. Nolan says that it was done wrong and if done properly the patient feels nothing and simply falls asleep. She finds shock therapy to be beneficial to some patients.

Esther attempts to make friends with the new woman who is moved into the room next to her. She thinks this will get her points with the nurses and maybe help her get privileges so that she can attempt to escape. The woman does not talk. She just stares straight ahead.

Esther is getting insulin injections three times a day. She does not see the benefit of them, but Valerie a fellow patient tells her that she has just not had a reaction yet. The injections are causing her to gain weight and look as if she is pregnant. Valerie shows Esther her scars where she has had a lobotomy. She used to be angry all the time, but is fine now. She tells Esther that the new woman, Mrs. Norris, that Esther is trying to befriend should not be in Caplan, but in Wymark, a facility where they keep the worse cases. Valerie likes it at Caplan and never wants to leave.

The nurse informs Esther that she is moving, and she is afraid they are taking her to Wymark. Actually, they are only moving her to the front of the house where there is a lot of sun. Miss Norris is also being moved, but she is moving to Wymark.

The nurse informs Esther that an old friend of hers has the room next to her new room. She encourages Esther to visit her. Esther is confused because she does not know who could possibly be in Caplan that she would know. She knocks on the door and goes in to find Joan, Buddy Willard's girlfriend before he started dating her.

Chapter 16



Joan tells Esther how she came to be in Caplan. She was working for a fraternity and her boss was terrible. She went on sick leave for a reprieve from him. She would never answer her phone. Her doctor sent her to a psychiatrist. The doctor told her that she would benefit from group therapy. She is appalled at the idea of telling a group of strangers about how she wants to kill herself.

Joan then read about Esther in the paper. She has a pile of clippings that chronicle the events after Esther took the sleeping pills and hid in the cellar. Her mother reported her missing, and the police started a search. It was then discovered that the sleeping pills were missing. They used bloodhounds to try and find her. They did not think that they would find her alive. The last article details how Mrs. Greenwood went to do the laundry in the cellar and heard moaning coming from an unused hole and that was how Esther was found.

Joan took all of the money she had and went to New York because she felt it would be easier to kill herself there. Her parents found her, and she ended up putting her wrists through a window slicing her wrists. Esther asks her if she is alright now, and she says she guesses that she's fine.

Esther has a reaction to her medicine during the night. The nurse tells her that she will be better now. Esther is better for a little bit, but she tells Dr. Nolan she feels the same at their next session. Dr. Nolan tells her that she has decided that Esther will not be allowed to have visitors anymore. Esther's mother has been there and upset Esther. She has also had visits from a Christian Scientist who attempted to tell her that her problems dealt with her acceptance of God, her English teacher from high school who tried to teach her Scrabble to get her interested in writing again, and Philomena Guinea who complained that the doctors are not doing enough for her. These visits make her feel worse. So, Dr. Nolan is helping her by banning visitors. Esther tells Dr. Nolan that she hates her mother.

Analysis

Philomena wants to help Esther because she had a breakdown of her own and the doctors were able to help her. She wants to give Esther the same opportunity. Esther is surprised to see Joan in the facility. The reader learns what happened after Esther took the sleeping pills and hid away. Esther's plight is important to Joan. She attempts suicide after reading about Esther's attempt. It shows how a vulnerable person can be influenced by other people's actions and what they read about. An unstable mind can get an idea from any action whether it is good or bad.

Esther is struggling to recover, but the outside world is barging in and impeding the process. The visitors make her feel bad about herself because she feels that they are judging her by what she used to be. This makes her uncomfortable and impairs her recovery. Dr. Nolan bans the visitors because she sees the affects they are having on Esther and to recover Esther must remain positive about herself and not reflect on how others see her.



Discussion Question 1

Why does Philomena Guinea help Esther by paying for her stay in a private hospital? Does she feel a connection with Esther because of her past experiences?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Esther hate her mother? How does Mrs. Greenwood treat her daughter? How does this affect Esther's recovery?

Discussion Question 3

Why is Joan obsessed with Esther's disappearance and her suicide attempt? Did Esther's suicide attempt make Joan attempt to take her own life? Why?

Vocabulary

Improbable, reposed, blithely, vigil, stile, tentatively, pretence, morale, ambiguous, phoney, confounded.



Chapter 17 and Chapter 18

Summary

Chapter 17

Esther is sent to Belsize the best house in the asylum. A patient is sent there when they are ready to prepare for matriculation back into society. Esther is puzzled by this move because she does not feel that she is ready for Belsize. Joan is there and Esther is not keen on seeing her again. She believes, however, that at Belsize she will not have to worry about shock treatments. Shock treatments are the one thing that she fears the most. She is happy that she will be leaving them behind.

The women at Belsize are fashionably dressed and several are married. They are allowed to shop downtown and visit friends. They also have private jokes. Joan seems at home with these women and treats Esther coolly like she is inferior.

Joan, DeeDee and Loubelle joke with Esther about seeing her picture in a fashion magazine. The photograph shows a girl in a strapless evening gown with a whole lot of boys bending in around her. The nurse comes in and asks if the girl in the photo is really her and she says no that Joan is mistaken. She will not rise to their banter. Esther stays in the lounge while the women play bridge. She can see that the nurse believes she should not be at Belsize.

The next morning Esther is not given her breakfast and she becomes worried. Only people who are going to have shock treatment are not served their breakfast in their rooms. When she goes to inquire about her breakfast, she is told she will get it later. Esther runs to the salon and hides in the corner with her blanket over her head. She is angry with Dr. Nolan for not telling her. She had promised to would tell her before giving her a shock treatment. If she had known the night before, she would be prepared for it.

Dr. Nolan comes and hugs her and tells her she came early to tell her about the treatment. She did tell her the night before because she did not want to keep her awake. She promises to go with Esther and be with her the whole time so that everything will happen the way she promised. The doctor leads Esther through the basement that connects the buildings to the Electrotherapy room. Miss Huey escorts Esther in the room and she sees the machine behind the bed and masked people flanking the bed. Miss Huey helps her climb onto the bed and fits the machine on her. She sets something on Esther's tongue and in a panic she bites down and is enveloped by darkness.

Chapter 18

Esther wakes up to find Dr. Nolan standing by her calling her name. The doctor leads her outside and Esther feels the bell jar hanging suspended above her head not



encompassing her. The doctor asks if it is like she told her it would be. Esther affirms it is. Dr. Nolan informs her that she will be having shock treatments three times a week.

Joan comes to Esther's room telling her that she got a letter. She shows Esther a pale blue envelope. Esther shows her an identical pale blue envelope. Buddy Willard is out of the hospital and wants to visit. Joan only liked Buddy for his parents. Her parents are quite different from the Willards and Joan liked seeing them until Buddy started dating Esther and Joan had to stop visiting them. Joan wants to invite him and his mother so she can see Mrs. Willard. She never cared for Buddy.

Esther catches Joan and DeeDee together in DeeDee's room. Esther is confused by the relationship because she does not understand woman and woman relationships and man and man relationships. Esther thinks about the relationships in her life and realizes that she attract weird old ladies. Joan tells Esther that she prefers Esther over Buddy.

Esther goes to a doctor to get contraception. It is illegal in Massachusetts. Dr. Nolan sends her to a friend of hers. She professed to Dr. Nolan that she did not like being under a man's thumb and wanted the freedom to sleep around like men with having a baby. Dr. Nolan says she could. Esther tells her about the Defense of Chastity and the doctor dismisses it as propaganda and gives her the name and address of the doctor.

Esther feels guilty that she has no engagement ring and contemplates making up a story for the doctor on why she is getting fitted for contraception. The doctor, however, asks her no questions; so, she does not have to lie. She sees getting the contraception as freedom.

Analysis

Esther is confused by her move to Belsize because she does not feel ready for the freedom that she can obtain there. She does believe that she has no fear of shock treatments there. This belief is proven false, and she feels betrayed by Dr. Nolan. The doctor realizes her error and promises to help the young girl through the experience. She truly wants to help her, and the treatment is nothing like her first one with Dr. Gordon.

Dr. Nolan wants Esther to get better. So she listens to her fears and tries to help alleviate them. Esther talks to her about her confusion of same sex relationships, and the doctor tells her that the women are seeking tenderness from one another. Esther thinks about her own relationships with women. A famous poet at the college lived with another woman and did not understand Esther's proclaiming that she might someday want a husband and kids. The woman questioned Esther's views about her future. Esther thinks about her relationship with Philomena Guinea and Jay Cee. They all want to adopt her and make her like them.

Esther gets contraception to get control over her body. She does not want to be told that she cannot have sex unless she is ready for the consequences. She did not know there was an alternative until she talked to Dr. Nolan. She believes the Chastity Defense



because she is taught nothing else. Dr. Nolan opens up an avenue that will help her take control of her life.

Discussion Question 1

Why do you think that Dr. Nolan chose to give Esther shock treatment after moving her to Belsize? Why was this time so different from the first time? How does Dr. Nolan differ from Dr. Gordon?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Esther see getting contraception as freedom? How does it make her feel?

Discussion Question 3

Why is Esther so confused by lesbian relationships? How has her life been affected by lesbian? Why is she concerned by these relationships?

Vocabulary

Placid, foreboding, dishevelled, disdainful, intricate, pallid, cadaverous, evasively, renouncing, maxims, wry, ingenious, revelation, communal, innocuous, puling.



Chapter 19 and Chapter 20

Summary

Chapter 19

Joan tells Esther that she wants to be a psychiatrist. She is getting to leave Belsize. She will live in Cambridge with one of the nurses who needs a roommate. Esther is jealous. She has been accepted back into her college, but while she waits for the semester to start she is staying at Belsize. Dr. Nolan believes that she should not stay with her mother because it would not be good for her recovery.

Esther has town privileges. She meets Irwin outside of the library. She decides that he will be the man to whom she loses her virginity. She needs someone who is intelligent and experienced to balance her lack of experience. Irwin is a mathematics professor, and she believes him to be very experienced. She has felt like her virginity was a millstone around her neck since learning that Buddy Willard was not a virgin. She has been defending it for five years and is sick of it.

Esther tells Irwin she is a virgin, but she thinks he does not believe her. It hurt her, and she bleeds profusely afterward. Irwin takes her to Joan's apartment because she cannot ask him to take her to Belsize. He does not know of her stay at the asylum. Joan takes her to the emergency center because she does not stop bleeding. The doctor tells her she is one in a million and tells her he can fix her problem.

Dr. Quinn comes into Esther's room one night at Belsize. She asks Esther if she knows where Joan is. Joan returned to Belsize a few days after her and Esther's trip to the Emergency Ward. The doctor is concerned because Joan has not returned after a trip to town to the movies. Esther tells her that she does not know where Joan could be. Dr. Quinn returns the next morning to tell Esther that they found Joan in the woods. She hanged herself.

Chapter 20

Buddy Willard comes to Belsize to see Esther. Buddy is concerned because two of the women he has dated have wound up in asylums. Joan has killed herself, and Esther attempted to kill herself. He wonders if he is the cause. Esther assures him that he is not to blame. Buddy questions who will marry Esther now that she has been in the asylum. She does not know.

Esther has not seen Irwin since their night together which led to her hospital stay. She breaks off the relationship over the phone. She is happy to be perfectly free.

Esther goes to Joan's funeral at the request of her parents who tell her that she is one of Joan's best friends. She recognizes many of the people there from her college and



her hometown. She wonders what she is burying. She listens to her heart chant, I am, I am, I am.

Esther waits for her meeting with the board to decide if she can leave Belsize. Dr. Nolan tells her not to be scared. She wishes that she knew what is lying ahead, but there is no way to know that. Dr. Nolan calls her name, and Esther steps into the room to learn her fate.

Analysis

Esther loses her virginity and almost loses her life. She has held onto her virginity because she held it before her like a badge of honor. To be pure is to be honorable, and that is what she has been taught. She now believes that by having sex with a random man she will become a different person and a weight will be lifted from her. The experience is not a pleasant one for her, and the man is not sympathetic to her situation. She does not know what to expect from the experience, and he is not helpful in guiding her through it.

Esther feels that people blame her for Joan returning to Belsize. She thinks that the trip to the Emergency Ward may have affected her. Dr. Nolan tells her it is not her fault and Esther in turn tells Buddy that he had nothing to do with the women's mental issues. At Joan's funeral, Esther is burying her past and going on to what she hopes will be a bright future. She is happy to have a second chance, but she is scared of what lies ahead.

Discussion Question 1

Do you think that the trip to the Emergency Ward is to blame for Joan's return to Belsize? Is it Esther's fault? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

Why is losing her virginity so important to Esther? What kind of man is she looking to sleep with? Why does she choose Irwin?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Buddy come to see Esther? Do you think he is to blame for Esther and Joan's mental instability? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

Interim, wistful, ruefully, incomprehensible, peremptory, surreptitiously, tedious, cascaded, torrents, resolutely, predicament, myopic, immaculate, dissociate, deluge, pristine, effaced, flamboyant.



Characters

Esther Greenwood

Esther is a young college student who feels the pressure to succeed. She has had several successes in college and feels that this is the best time in her life and it will only go downhill. She is spending a month in New York interning at a fashion magazine with some of the best and brightest college students. Esther is able to see more of the world and begins to view the world in a sexual way. She sees the world as those who are virgins and those having sex. She wants to be one of the ones having sex, but she is also repulsed by the thought. She escapes being sexually assaulted and this leaves a rift inside of her.

When she learns that she is not accepted into the summer writing program that she has been coveting, she becomes distraught and begins spiraling into depression. She sees this as the beginning of the end of her success. Esther gets progressively worse and begins to think of ways to commit suicide. She goes to a psychiatrist who uses electroshock therapy that is very painful and scares her. She refuses to go back and her mother agrees to this thinking her daughter wants to get better so she will.

After several attempts, Esther finally almost succeeds in killing herself and ends up in a mental hospital. Her mentor helps her get into a private institution where Esther begins to heal. She finds her sexual freedom when she is fitted for birth control and is able to view sex in a less threatening way. Once Esther has control over something in her life, she begins to become progressively better and once she loses her virginity she is ready to face her future and what it holds. Esther is empowered to become the woman she is meant to be.

Mrs. Greenwood

Mrs. Greenwood is Esther's mother. She and Esther do not get along. Mrs. Greenwood does not ever tell Esther what to do. She just asks her pointed questions to suggest what she should do. Without showing any feeling, her mother tells Esther that she did not make it into the writing program. She does not know what is important to her daughter; so, she does not understand how the rejection affects her daughter.

Mrs. Greenwood is a simple woman who supports her family by teaching shorthand and typing at the local college. This is how she supports Esther and her brother after their father dies. Esther sees her as weak, but it must have been hard for her to raise her children on her own. Mrs. Greenwood has hardened her heart to deal with the tragedies in her life.

She does not want her daughter to have a mental illness because she knows the stigma that will be placed on her for this. Mrs. Greenwood worries about her daughter and will do anything for her, but Esther does not see this. She blames her mother for her father's



death and not being able to mourn for him. Her relationship with her mother is rocky, and she has no respect for Mrs. Greenwood.

Buddy Willard

Buddy Willard is Esther's boyfriend. He went to Yale and became a doctor. He contracts TB while working at the hospital. Esther dumps him, while he is recovering from his illness. Buddy dated Joan and Esther, and he is concerned that he is the reason they are both in the mental institution. He is concerned that Esther will not find anyone who will want to be with her after her time in a mental institution.

Doctor Nolan

Doctor Nolan is Esther's psychiatrist when she enters Caplan. She is like a mother figure to Esther. Esther trusts her and is able to recover under her care.

Doreen

Doreen is one of the girls who wins an internship to the fashion magazine. She is sexually active, and Esther finds her fascinating. She has a relationship with Lenny Shepherd.

Joan Gilling

Joan Gilling dated Buddy Willard before Esther. She ends up in the same mental hospital as Esther after trying to commit suicide. She sees Esther as her best friend. Joan hangs herself on the hospital grounds.

Jay Cee

Jay Cee is the editor that Esther works for while she is in New York City for a month. She sees potential in Esther and tries to encourage her.

Betsy

Betsy is one of the girls who won an internship to the fashion magazine. She tries to discourage Esther's friendship with Doreen. She gives Esther a skirt and blouse when Esther throws her clothes off the hotel roof.



Constantin

Constantin is a simultaneous interpreter at the UN who asks Esther out on a date. They are brought together by Mrs. Willard, Buddy's mother. At the end of the evening when they go back to Constantin's apartment, Esther decides she will let him seduce her. Constantin, however, is not interested in Esther sexually and ends up falling asleep instead.

Irwin

Irwin is a math professor that Esther meets while out for the day from the mental hospital. She decides to allow him to seduce her. She ends up hemorrhaging badly after their night together and has to go to the hospital. Once Irwin gets what he wants, he is not interested in Esther any longer and ignores her attempts to communicate with him.

Doctor Gordon

Doctor Gordon is the psychiatrist that Esther's mother takes her to after she returns home from New York. Mrs. Greenwood is worried about Esther's behavior since she is acting oddly and does little during the day. Dr. Gordon gives Esther electroshock therapy, and she never returns to his office again.

Philomena Guinea

Philomena Guinea is Esther's benefactress who provided her with the scholarship that allowed her to attend Smith College. Philomena is a great deal like Esther. She is a successful writer, who has made a great deal of money. She also stayed for a period of time at the mental hospital after she attempted to kill herself.



Symbols and Symbolism

Crevice in the cellar

The crevice in the cellar is where Esther hid away after taking a large number of sleeping pills to kill herself. She barricaded the entrance and waited for the pills to take effect.

The Bell Jar

Esther sees the bell jar as madness. She sees herself as trapped under it, and it skews her outlook on the world around her and keeps her from interacting with the people around her as well.

Caplan

Caplan is the building where Esther is housed when she first arrives at the private mental hospital. The patients here require more care.

Walton, Dr. Gordon's private hospital

Esther is sent to Dr. Gordon's private hospital for electroshock therapy. She has a painful experience and refuses to go back.

Belsize

Belsize is the building where patients who are responding well to treatment are placed. They have more freedom and are allowed privileges such as going into town.

The Thirty Best Short Stories of the Year

Ladies' Day gave Esther a book, *The Thirty Best Short Stories*, after she got food poisoning from food served at an event they hosted. It was the only possession she kept when she left New York to return to Boston.

The Fig Tree

A fig tree is featured in the book Esther receives from Ladies' Day. Marco also tried to rape Esther under a fig tree.



New York City

Esther went to New York City for a month to work for a fiction editor.

Boston

Esther lives in Boston with her mother once she returns from New York and before she goes back to college for fall.

Wymark

Wymark is the state hospital where the very difficult, mentally ill patients are sent. No one at the private hospital wants to be sent there.



Settings

New York City

The story starts in New York City where Esther is spending a month interning at a magazine. She stays at The Amazon, a hotel for women only. Esther has the opportunity to explore the city.

Caplan and Belsize

Caplan and Belsize are the asylums where Esther spends her time recovering from her nervous breakdown. They are situated near Cambridge, and she is allowed town privileges when she is at Belsize. They are comfortable places where she has her own room and is able to recover at her own pace.

Mrs. Greenwood's Home

Esther stays with her mom when she comes back from New York City after not being accepted into the writing program at her college for the summer. She does not like staying with her mother because they do not get along. She spends her time in the park and traveling the city. It is at this time that she attempts suicide several times.

Yale

Esther goes with Buddy Willard to the Yale prom. She is excited about this because she has liked him for many years. Dating a Yale man also makes her more popular at her college.

Adirondacks

Esther's boyfriend is staying at a tuberculosis recovery center for in the Adirondacks. Esther goes to see him so that she can end their relationship. They end up going skiing, and Esther breaks her leg.



Themes and Motifs

Role of Women in 1950s America

One of the themes in *The Bell Jar* is the role of women in 1950s America. This was a time when women were expected to marry and take care of the home. A young girl of Esther's age was meant to be interested in making a suitable match by choosing a husband who could take care of her and provide for a family.

Esther, however, is not sure of what she wants. She is unable to make any kind of decision as to whether she wants to marry and have children or if she wants a career. Her unstable mental state does not allow her to hold much interest in which direction her life turns. Esther contemplates the possibility of becoming a well-known author such as her benefactress, Philomena Guinea or an important and successful editor such as her boss in New York, Jay Cee. When asked what she wants to do in life Esther is filled with misery and can only cry.

Esther's peers find her constant studying unnatural for a young woman of her age. They ridicule and ignore her for her studious habits. There are also those who believe she needs to have a boyfriend instead of studying so much; so, they set her up on numerous blind dates. The men are not ones which she would ordinarily find attractive, but the women who set Esther up seem to be under the impression that anyone is better than no one at all. The dates usually end badly, and she never gets a second date. It is on her own that she finds and dates Buddy Willard. He is a perfect husband prospect since he is a good looking athlete who is studying to become a doctor. He will be able to take care of Esther should they marry. Esther, however, grows indifferent to Buddy's attentions and decides to break up with him. She does not have any interest in having him for a husband.

Esther's mother also tries to make her conform to certain conventions of the time. She does not see Esther's English degree as something that will allow her to obtain a job appropriate for a woman. Instead, she encourages her daughter to learn shorthand so that she can become a secretary, which Mrs. Greenwood sees as an appropriate job for her daughter. Esther does not have any interest in learning shorthand so she refuses to conform to that particular role just as she does to others that people have tried to force her into.

Perception of Mental Illness

Another theme of *The Bell Jar* is society's perception of people with mental illness. After Esther tries to kill herself and is subsequently placed in a mental hospital, she is viewed by society with fear and unease, not compassion. Even those close to her have difficulty dealing with and understanding her illness.



Esther's first encounter with this perception is in the mental hospital after she tries to kill herself. After learning about Esther's attempted suicide, the woman in the bed next to her, Mrs. Tomolillo, refers to the patients in the hospital as 'nuts' and quickly turns away from Esther, immersing herself in a magazine. Later on, Mrs. Tomolillo has the doctors draw the curtain around her bed so that she is completely cut off from Esther and does not have to have any contact with her.

Esther's mother, Mrs. Greenwood, regards her illness as an embarrassment and an inconvenience. She is sure that Esther can get better if she would only try to do so. She does not have any sympathy or empathy for her daughter's condition. She seems to desire a quick fix for her daughter and appears to have the expectation that visiting Dr. Gordon one time will bring Esther back to normalcy.

She is disappointed when Dr. Gordon requests to see Esther the following week. After her shock treatment at Dr. Gordon's private hospital, Esther refuses to go back to him. Mrs. Greenwood see this as her daughter deciding to be all right again, rather than being like the other people at the hospital whom her mother describes as 'the awful dead people.' After Esther is sent to the city mental hospital, Mrs. Greenwood tells Esther that she would not be going to the mental hospital if she had only behaved herself at the other hospital. She believes Esther's condition is entirely under her control, and it is entirely her own willfulness that caused her to be sent away from the hospital.

Even when she is not in love with Buddy any longer, Esther supports him through his battle with tuberculosis. However, he is not prepared to do the same for her. His physical illness is seen as acceptable; whereas, Esther's illness which affects her mental state is not something Buddy can understand or overlook. He visits Esther while she is in the mental hospital, making his feelings clear when he inquires about whom is she going to marry now. He seems to feel that due to her bout with mental illness no one will be willing to take her as a wife.

Esther tries to hide her condition from her friends and act as normal as she possibly can, knowing that they would not understand the truth of her feelings. When she leaves the mental hospital, she is allowed to return to college and finish her studies. Esther dreads going back since she knows that some of the girls at college will know that she tried to commit suicide and then was put in a mental hospital to recover. She knows that the tale will spread and she will be looked at differently and subsequently avoided.

Maternal relationships

Maternal relationships are a theme of the novel. Esther has a horrible relationship with her mother. They do not get along at all. This makes Esther look at the women in her life as mother substitutes. She looks up to Jay Cee, her boss at the fashion magazine in New York, because she sees her as a strong independent woman. This is something Esther would like to be. Esther wishes that Jay Cee was her mother.



Esther looks at Dr. Nolan as a mother figure. She is more like her mother than Jay Cee, but she is also a professional. Esther looks up to these women. She would like to be like them, but she fears she will be like her mother. She sees her mother as weak and unemotional. This makes her look at herself as a person and how she wants to be viewed by others. Esther wants to be independent and strong, and she strives to become this woman.

Sexuality

Sexuality is a theme of the novel. Esther views sex as something to be scorned. She hangs onto her virginity as a way to protect herself. Esther views the world as those who have had sex and those who have not. This is apparent when she is in New York and she looks at the group of girls she is with as innocent or as in Doreen's case as a slut. She tries to be friends with Doreen, but she cannot embrace the sexual intensity that surrounds her. Doreen is very sexual and this scares Esther.

Esther views Doreen with fascination and with scorn. She wants to be sexually free, but she is scared to be like Doreen. This makes her upset, and she blames Doreen for it. Esther holds onto her virginity for most of the novel. When she does finally feel free, it is when she is fitted for a type of birth control. Sexuality is seen as empowerment. When she loses her virginity, it is seen as the beginning of her healing from her mental illness. It seems that Esther always held the key to her well being and just needed to fully accept who she is and what she wants.



Styles

Point of View

The point of view of the novel is first person. The reader is able to see everything through the eyes of Esther Greenwood. This gives the reader a perfect view of how she sees everything around her and allows them to travel with her as she descends into insanity. Esther is a college student who feels the pressure of always succeeding and wonders if she will find success after college. This leads her to have a nervous breakdown.

The story is told through exposition and dialogue. The reader sees how Esther views her life and the people around her. It allows the reader to form a special bond with Esther and see how she goes from being an average college student to a resident of an asylum. The journey through Esther's mind is a spellbinding ride that leaves the reader breathless.

Language and Meaning

The language of the novel is powerful and suggestive. Esther is a writer and her story is told in a florid fashion that draws the reader in and takes them along through the intricate ride through Esther's mind. The language is typical of a college student. The language is simple yet powerful and allows the reader to morph into Esther's mind and experience what she experiences. Plath is an excellent writer who uses her skill of the language and imagery to write a novel that is spellbinding and leaves the reader sharing Esther's despair and hoping she finds the strength to conquer her fears.

Plath's style is powerful with her use of imagery and language to make Esther's world become real to the reader. She uses simple, but concise worlds that draw the reader in and makes them experience what Esther is experiencing. The chapters are short and concise and show the slow progress of Esther's descent into insanity and her journey back to recovery. Esther's journey becomes real to the reader and they travel with her on her journey from madness to recovery and root for her success.

Structure

The Bell Jar is comprised of twenty chapters. The chapters are short and concise and show Esther's spiral into madness and her slow journey to recovery. It is a powerful novel that draws the reader in and makes them part of the story. It is an easy and quick read that is enjoyable.

The plot of the novel is simple. Esther is a college student who cracks under the pressure of her success. She experiences a nervous breakdown and attempts suicide. The novel follows her as she slowly descends into madness and thinks of anyone to



end her life. She comes up with many ways and eventually does follow through on the attempt. This lands her in the state hospital and through the kindness of a benefactress to a more affluent asylum that leads to her recovery.

The novel is a quick read with short concise chapters. It chronicles Esther's slow descent into madness and her slow recovery. The words are simple and make the book easy to read. It is the story of a young woman who buckles under the pressures of her success and has a nervous breakdown. She must struggle to regain the life she once knew.



Quotes

I am climbing to freedom, freedom from fear, freedom from marrying the wrong person, like Buddy Willard, just because of sex, freedom from Florence Crittenden Homes where all the poor girls go who should have been fitted out like me, because they did, they would do anyway, regardless...

-- Esther (Chapter 18 paragraph Paragraph 2 , pg. 223)

Importance: Esther finds sexual freedom when she is fitted for birth control. She sees it as a way to have sex without becoming pregnant, which she has always been told would happen if she had sex. Sex has always been scary to Esther before because she did not want to become pregnant. This freedom leads to her healing and sense of empowerment in her life.

To the person in the bell jar, blank and stopped as a dead baby, the world itself it the bad dream.

-- Esther (Chapter 20 paragraph Paragraph 4, pg. 237)

Importance: This quote shows how Esther feels trapped by her mental illness. There is nothing else in her life, but what is in her mind. It makes her numb to the outside world.

I guess I should have been excited the way most of the other girls were, but 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.

-- Esther (Chapter 1 paragraph Paragraph 5, pg. 2-3)

Importance: This is the reader's first indication that Esther is not the average girl enjoying a month in New York City. She has little interest in what goes on around her and seems to be in a perpetual trance moving through life without enjoying it.

Don't let the wicked city get you down.

-- Jay Cee (Chapter 4 paragraph Paragraph 4, pg. 39)

Importance: Jay Cee says this to Esther. It makes Esther see Jay Cee as a maternal figure. She wants to have a strong person in her life. She sees her mother as weak.

And I knew that in spite of all the roses and kisses and restaurant dinners a man showered on a woman before he married her, what he secretly wanted when the wedding service ended was for her to flatten out underneath his feet like Mrs. Willard's kitchen mat.

-- Esther (Chapter 7 paragraph Paragraph 2, pg. 85)

Importance: This quote shows how Esther feels about marriage. She sees it as the enslavement of women. It is not something that she wishes to do with her life.



I'm never going to marry.

-- Esther (Chapter 8 paragraph Paragraph 9, pg. 93)

Importance: Esther does not want to be tied down. She wants to be free to do what she wants and sees marriage as a constriction.

I'm so glad they're going to die.

-- Hilda (Chapter 9 paragraph Paragraph 1, pg. 99)

Importance: Hilda says this about the Rosenbergs when Esther asks her isn't is awful about the Rosenbergs. Esther feels sorry for the Rosenbergs. She does not like that they will be electrocuted. Hilda's comments show the contrast of Esther's thoughts to society's. She feels sorry for the murderers, but everyone else thinks they should die. It shows her skewed view of society.

I think I should tell you right away you didn't make that writing course.

-- Mrs. Greenwood (Chapter 10 paragraph Paragraph 5, pg. 114)

Importance: Without knowing it, Esther's mother destroys Esther's future. When Esther does not get into the writing program, her life is in limbo. She does not know what to do and spirals into a depression that has been slowly enveloping her even before receiving the news about not being accepted into the writing program.

Suppose you try and tell me what you think is wrong?

-- Dr. Gordon (Chapter 11 paragraph Paragraph 9, pg. 129)

Importance: Esther feels that Dr. Gordon does not believe there is anything wrong with her. By asking her what she thinks is wrong, she finds him condescending and unfeeling. She does not trust him. This is not a good doctor patient relationship because trust is important.

That was a mistake. It's not supposed to be like that.

-- Dr. Nolan (Chapter 15 paragraph Paragraph 8, pg. 189)

Importance: Dr. Nolan sees electrotherapy as a successful tool and is upset by how Dr. Gordon treated Esther. She believes it should be a soothing process that helps the patient to heal.

I wonder who will marry you now, Esther. Now you've been here.

-- Buddy (Chapter 20 paragraph Paragraph 5, pg. 241)

Importance: Buddy's comment shows how society views the mentally ill. Esther will have a hard time being accepted back into society after having been in a mental institution.

How did I know that someday—at college, in Europe, somewhere, anywhere—the bell jar, with its stifling distortions, wouldn't descend again?



-- Esther (Chapter 20 paragraph Paragraph 1, pg. 241)

Importance: Esther is worried that she will not be able to escape her mental illness. She feels that it will follow her throughout her life and will descend upon her again at some point in her life.