

# The Bell Jar



## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF SYLVIA PLATH

Sylvia Plath was born in 1932 and grew up on the Massachusetts coast. Her father died when she was eight. A stellar student, Plath won scholarships to attend Smith and Cambridge University, where she met and married the poet Ted Hughes. They had a rocky marriage and two children. Plath won great acclaim for her first book of poetry, *The Colossus*, in 1959, and published the pseudonymous *The Bell Jar* in 1963 to make money. Plath had suffered from mental illness throughout her life and she fell into deep depression as her marriage dissolved, eventually committing suicide in 1963. Several books of her poetry published after her death display Plath's genius and won her a posthumous Pulitzer Prize. Plath's works are still widely read today.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

*The Bell Jar* is set in 1950s America, a time when American society was predominantly shaped by conservative values and patriarchic structures. It was a society that placed particular restraints on women as it expected them to embody traditional ideals of purity and chastity and to aspire to the life of a suburban mother and homemaker rather than pursuing their own careers. Many women, like Esther Greenwood, felt crushed by the expectations 1950s American society placed on them. Their resentment of these pressures was one of the motivating forces that inspired the feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Though *The Bell Jar* is a classic American coming-of-age novel, Plath's most highly regarded works are her books of poetry, including *The Colossus*, *Ariel*, and *Collected Poems*. These poems share some of the themes of *The Bell Jar* as they explore issues of mortality, sanity, and womanhood, but they are ultimately much wider ranging than the novel and present a complex, intricate vision of many sorts of life experiences.

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *The Bell Jar*
- **When Written:** 1957-1962
- **Where Written:** England
- **When Published:** 1963
- **Literary Period:** post-WWII fiction
- **Genre:** Bildungsroman (coming-of-age novel)

- **Setting:** New York City; greater Boston area
- **Climax:** Esther's suicide attempt
- **Point of View:** First person

### EXTRA CREDIT

**Sylvia Plath's Own Elly Higginbottom.** *The Bell Jar* was originally published under the pseudonym Victoria Lucas in order to protect the real-life figures Plath had based some of *The Bell Jar's* characters on.

**Ghost Titles.** Before settling on *The Bell Jar*, Plath considered titling the novel *Diary of a Suicide* or *The Girl in the Mirror*.



## PLOT SUMMARY

In the summer of 1953, Esther Greenwood, a brilliant college student, wins a month to work as guest editor with eleven other girls at a New York magazine. Esther lives with the other girls at the Amazon, a woman's hotel, and attends a steady stream of events and parties hosted by the magazine. Though Esther knows she should be enjoying herself, she feels only numb and detached from the old ambitious self that her boss, editor Jay Cee, tries to motivate. Esther vacillates between wanting to be wholesome, like her friend Betsy, and wanting to break all rules, like her friend Doreen. She worries about the rigid expectations of virginity, maternity, and wifeliness that society (and her mother) holds for young women and feels paralyzed by her contradictory desires for her own future. She goes on a string of bad dates, the best of which feels anticlimactic when the Constantin, an interpreter, makes no romantic advances and the worst of which ends with the misogynistic Marco trying to rape her.

Throughout her time in New York, Esther flashes back to her troubled relationship with Buddy Willard, a handsome know-it-all medical student who Esther once admired and is now disgusted by, having realized Buddy is a hypocrite for projecting a virginal public image even after he's had a sexual affair. Buddy is currently suffering from TB, but Esther plans to break up with him as soon as he gets better. On her last visit to the sanatorium, she rejected Buddy's marriage proposal and broke her leg skiing.

Back at home near Boston, Esther is rejected from a writing course she had planned to spend the rest of the summer taking. Stuck at home in the suburbs, Esther's mental illness, which was nascent in New York, amplifies into suicidal depression. She stops bathing or changing her clothes. She tries and fails to write a novel and loses the ability to sleep, read, write, or eat.

She lies about her identity to every stranger she meets. She sees Dr. Gordon, an unsympathetic psychiatrist who prescribes and then incorrectly administers electric shock treatment.

Esther tries to kill herself in a variety of unsuccessful ways (by slitting her wrists, hanging herself, and drowning) before hiding in a crawlspace under her house and taking fifty sleeping pills.

Esther is found and rescued and wakes up in a hospital. Facing her own horrific reflection in a **mirror**, she does not recognize herself. Esther is soon moved to the psychiatric ward of the city hospital where she is paranoid, uncooperative, and still suicidal. Eventually the wealthy novelist Philomena Guinea, who has sponsored Esther's college scholarship, decides to sponsor her move to a private asylum, where Esther is treated by the compassionate Dr. Nolan and enjoys comforts and freedoms that the city hospital lacked. The doctors arrange to cut off Esther's steady stream of judgmental visitors (including her mother) who have been exhausting Esther with their advice and inaccurate theories about depression. Joan Gilling, a college friend of Esther's, winds up at the asylum too after emulating Esther's suicide attempt. Through a combination of analysis, insulin injections, and correctly administered electric shock therapy, Esther improves and begins to contemplate reentering her old life.

As her condition improves, Esther earns more freedom to come and go from the asylum and she uses these privileges to buy a diaphragm and to lose her virginity in a one-night stand with a math professor, Irwin. With the encouragement of Dr. Nolan, Esther has learned to embrace her independence as a woman and shake off the stifling social expectations she used to feel constrained by. Unfortunately, though Esther expects her loss of virginity to be a revelation, it results in painful hemorrhaging. Later, she discovers Joan having an affair with another patient, DeeDee, and thinks about lesbianism, which she has no attraction to. Soon afterwards, Joan hangs herself. Buddy visits Esther at the asylum and Esther gets closure on their relationship. Esther feels stable and prepares to return to college, though she knows **the bell jar** of mental illness could descend on her again at any time. The novel ends as Esther enters a last interview with the doctors before returning to college.

insanity.

## MINOR CHARACTERS

**Buddy Willard** – Esther's handsome boyfriend, a self-congratulating, parsimonious, know-it-all doctor who grows subdued after contracting TB. Esther thinks Buddy is a hypocrite for pretending to be pure after sleeping with Gladys and breaks up with him.

**Mrs. Greenwood** – The nervous, conservative mother of Esther who advises Esther to learn shorthand and stay abstinent while she's healthy and, when Esther's gets sick, worries that it is her own fault.

**Doreen** – Esther's friend in New York and the sexiest, worldliest rule-breaker among the contest winners. Doreen is always trying to get Esther to abandon her responsibilities. Esther admires Doreen but thinks, deep down, that she is more like Betsy.

**Joan Gilling** – A horsy girl from Esther's college who briefly dates Buddy, then emulates Esther's suicide attempt and joins her at the private asylum. Joan has an affair with DeeDee and later hangs herself.

**Jay Cee** – The fiction editor at the magazine Esther works for in New York and Esther's boss. Jay Cee is witty and powerful. Doreen points out that she is also very ugly. Jay Cee urges Esther to enter a high-achieving career like her own.

**Betsy** – A wholesome Kansan and Esther's fellow contest winner who looks out for her in New York. Doreen calls Betsy "Pollyanna Cowgirl."

**Mrs. Willard** – Buddy Willard's mother and the self-satisfied dispenser of conservative maxims about marriage and womanhood.

**Dr. Nolan** – Esther's compassionate, progressive-thinking psychiatrist at the private asylum.

**Philomena Guinea** – A famous wealthy novelist and Esther's patron, paying for her college tuition and then her stay at the private asylum.

**Dodo Conway** – The poor, eccentric Catholic who lives in Esther's hometown and bears seven children.

**Constantin** – The elegant and sophisticated simultaneous interpreter who Esther meets through Mrs. Willard.

**Marco** – A dapper misogynist who tries to rape Esther at the country club dance.

**Mr. Willard** – Father to Buddy and husband to Mrs. Willard, Mr. Willard is a shy man who fears the sight of his son's illness.

**Irwin** – The math professor who Esther loses her virginity to.

**Dr. Gordon** – The conceited, unsympathetic psychiatrist who messes up Esther's electric shock, causing her great pain.

**Dr. Quinn** – Joan's psychiatrist at the private asylum and a



## CHARACTERS

### MAJOR CHARACTERS

**Esther Greenwood** – An honors student, frequent prizewinner, and talented poet, Esther Greenwood develops serious mental illness while working in New York one summer and, after attempting suicide, spends the next half year gradually working her way back to health with the help of multiple psychiatrists. Esther emerges from her illness wiser and more independent but also more skeptical of the boundary between sanity and

proponent of Freudian theory.

**Teresa** – Esther’s kindly family doctor who first recommends Esther seek psychiatric help.

**Hilda** – A cold-hearted designer of hats and Esther’s fellow contest winner in New York.

**Mrs. Tomolillo** – The woman who Esther watches give birth at Buddy’s medical school. Later, Esther thinks she is also a mental patient at the city hospital.

**Lenny Shepherd** – A disc jockey and Doreen’s boyfriend in New York.

**Miss Norris** – A polite but mute patient at the private asylum who fascinates Esther.

**Valerie** – A lobotomized patient at the private asylum who is content never to leave.

**Mrs. Mole** – An unruly patient at the city hospital.

**DeeDee** – A patient at the private asylum who is Joan’s friend and lover.

**Esther’s Brother** – Esther’s little brother, who is away studying in Germany during Esther’s descent into depression but who returns and visits her in the hospital later on.

**Jody** – Esther’s old friend from college.

**The sailor** – A sailor who flirts with Esther in Boston.

**Miss Huey** – The administrator of Esther’s electric shock therapy at the private asylum.

**The new black attendant** – An attendant at the city hospital who Esther kicks.

**Frankie** – A short man Lenny Shepherd tries to set Esther up with.

**Will** – Buddy’s peer at medical school who delivers Mrs. Tomolillo’s baby.

**Gladys** – The Cape Cod waitress Buddy had his affair with.

**Mr. Manzi** – The professor of the chemistry course Esther arranges to audit at college.

**The night nurse** – The night nurse at the private asylum.

**Mrs. Banister** – A nurse at the private asylum.

**Mark** – Jody’s boyfriend.

**Cal** – A boy Jody tries to set Esther up with.

**Arthur** – A child who nags Esther on the beach.

**George Bakewell** – A distant one-time acquaintance who visits Esther while she is in the hospital. George has become a doctor, but Esther has the sense that George doesn’t care about her and instead only wants to get a glimpse of an insane person. She orders him out of her room.



## THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



### MIND VS. BODY

At its essence, *The Bell Jar* is an exploration of the divide between mind and body. This exploration unfolds most visibly in the development of Esther’s mental illness, which she experiences as an estrangement of her mind from her body. As her illness amplifies, Esther loses control over her body, becoming unable to sleep, read, eat, or write in her own handwriting. She frequently catches her body making sounds or engaging in actions that she was not aware of having decided to do, as when she can’t control her facial expression for the picture in Jay Cee’s office, or when she discovers herself sobbing at her father’s grave. Over time, Esther’s body becomes her antagonist. At first, she simply refuses to wash it, but eventually she tries to be rid of it altogether by plotting her own suicide. She keeps track of the body’s “tricks” to stay alive and is determined to “ambush” her body “with whatever sense I had left, or it would trap me in its stupid cage.” After her suicide attempt, Esther has trouble even recognizing her body, thinking her **mirror** reflection is a picture of someone else and watching her usually skinny body grow fat with insulin injections.

However, although Esther’s illness widens the gap between body and mind, that gap in fact exists throughout the novel. It is not *caused* by mental illness—mental illness simply expands it. Mind and body are always divided, as evidenced by Esther’s experiences at novel’s start and her memories of herself before her illness. In the first chapter of *The Bell Jar*, before Esther becomes depressed, she has a dissociative experience of not recognizing her reflection in the Amazon’s mirrored elevator door. Flashing back to her day on a ski slope near Buddy’s sanatorium, Esther remembers being exhilarated by the experience of hurtling downhill towards the sun, as if she could transcend her flesh and become “thin and essential as the blade of a knife.”

Plath’s prose style underscores the fundamental division between mind and body through its prodigious use of metaphor and estranging descriptions. The figurative language she uses is incredibly rich and original and feels simultaneously apt and bizarre. As it compares human body parts and human consciousness to everything from goose eggs to nooses, the novel’s language subtly complicates and questions stable understandings of ‘body’ and ‘mind.’ Esther’s perspective also frequently perceives parts of the human body as inanimate

objects until she realizes they are feeling flesh, as when she comes round after fainting from food poisoning and sees a vague heap of cornflowers before realizing the heap is her own arm. Likewise, Esther often perceives lifeless objects as sentient beings, as when, lying beside Constantin, she sees his wristwatch as a green eye on the bed.



## PURITY VS. IMPURITY

Esther remains preoccupied by questions of purity and impurity throughout the novel, framing them in different terms at different points in her development. She thinks about purity of body as well as purity of mind. Indeed, Esther often speaks of purity as a kind of spiritual transcendence that can be accessed through transcendence of the body. At novel's start, she admires the clearness of vodka and imagines that drinking it into her body will purify her spirit. Later that night, she soaks her body in a hot bath to feel spiritually cleansed. Esther also flashes back to the feeling that she might be rendered "saintly" by racing down a ski slope towards the sun.

Yet even though Esther considers purity in multiple arenas of experience, she considers it most frequently in terms of sex. There, 'pure' is synonymous with 'virgin.' Esther's obsession with the sexual purity of those around her and her angst about her own virginity dominates Esther's thoughts on female sexuality. "When I was nineteen," Esther reflects, "pureness was the great issue...I saw the world divided into people who had slept with somebody and people who hadn't...I thought a spectacular change would come over me the day I crossed the boundary line." Contemplating losing her virginity to Constantin, Esther thinks she would wake up the next day and look in the **mirror** to "see a doll-size Constantin sitting in my eye and smiling out at me." Through these thoughts, Esther not only uses purity and impurity to organize the world around her, but also conceives of sex as something that leaves a visible mark—an impurity—in the form of an image on a person's eye.

Even as Esther is attracted to the transcendent, spiritual purity mentioned above, she is resentful of and frustrated by her sexual purity. She feels stifled by the double standard of social expectation, constantly reiterated by women like her mother and Mrs. Willard, which instructs young women to remain virgins until marriage while allowing young men to engage in sexual experimentation without seriously tarnishing their characters. After discovering that Buddy has had an affair, Esther grows furious at his hypocrisy (pretending to be 'pure' while in fact being 'impure'), which echoes the hypocritical standards of the social expectations surrounding her. Esther becomes determined to abandon her own virginity and embrace sexual freedom, which she eventually manages by buying a diaphragm and having sex with Irwin.



## WOMEN AND SOCIAL EXPECTATIONS

*The Bell Jar* offers an in-depth meditation on womanhood and presents a complex, frequently disturbing portrait of what it meant to be female in 1950s America. Esther reflects often on the differences between men and women as well as on the different social roles they are expected to perform. Most of her reflections circulate around sex and career. Esther's interactions with other female characters in the novel further complicate these reflections by presenting different stances towards the idea of womanhood.

As noted in the theme Purity vs. Impurity, Esther is upset by society's insistence that young women stay virgins until after marriage while allowing boys sexual freedom. Female characters like Esther's mother, Mrs. Willard, and Betsy embrace these social expectations and try to push them on Esther by sending her pro-chastity pamphlets and dispensing sexist maxims. Female characters like Doreen, Dr. Nolan, and Joan Gilling reject these expectations and introduce Esther to alternative ways of thinking. Doreen models an unmarried sexual relationship with Lenny Shepherd while Dr. Nolan assures Esther there is nothing wrong with pre-marital sex and encourages her to get fitted for a diaphragm. Through Joan's affair with DeeDee, Esther glimpses a lesbian relationship that bucks society's heterosexual norms.

In addition to enforcing a double standard for women and men's sexual lives, Esther's society also imposes different expectations for male and female careers. In general, women are expected to be homemakers, wives, and mothers and to devote their energies to caring for men and children rather than pursuing their own dreams. Esther's mother, Mrs. Willard, Betsy, Dodo Conway, and many others demonstrate this conventional path and intimate that Esther should follow it too. Her mother's insistence that she learn shorthand implies her faith in a low-level, traditionally female secretarial career. At the other end of the spectrum, Jay Cee, Philomena Guinea, Dr. Nolan, and Dr. Quinn demonstrate an alternative path pursuing careers outside the domestic sphere, and encourage Esther to do so as well.

Though some of the men in the novel are kind or at least harmless, many of the novel's male characters reinforce the gross gender inequality in Esther's society and treat Esther and the women around them with pronounced sexism. Buddy automatically assumes Esther is inferior-minded because she is a woman and also assumes that she will want to marry, have children, and discard all her personal ambition to become a housewife. Marco (and, to a lesser extent, Irwin) objectify Esther for their own sexual gratification. Esther refers to Marco as "a woman-hater." Indeed, he proclaims all women are alike and attempts to rape Esther.



## PERSONAL AMBITION

Throughout *The Bell Jar*, Esther struggles to determine her personal ambitions and much of her growth by novel's end owes to her clarified view of what she wants from herself and from her life. Esther has spent her life prior to novel's start winning grants, scholarships, and prizes, and excelling in academia. At the outset of the novel, amidst the first signs of Esther's developing mental illness, she begins to feel that all of these past successes are meaningless. She realizes that none of her academic achievements have brought her joy and that she has not been truly happy since she was a child running on the beach with her father. Esther begins to feel useless and helpless, recognizing that her knack for winning academic accolades does not necessarily translate into success in the world outside school. "I felt dreadfully inadequate," she reflects, "The trouble was, I had been inadequate all along, I simply hadn't thought about it. The one thing I was good at was winning scholarships and prizes, and that era was coming to an end. I felt like a racehorse in a world without race-tracks..."

As she confronts her own inadequacy, Esther is also paralyzed by indecision about the future. Where she was once able to rattle off a long list of plans and goals, she is now tongue-tied and doubtful, as when Jay Cee asks what her ambitions are and Esther can only reply "I don't know." She compares this paralysis in the face of choice to sitting at the crotch of a fig-tree. "From the tip of every branch, like a fat purple fig, a wonderful future beckoned and winked," Esther imagines, "I saw myself sitting in the crotch of this fig-tree, starving to death, just because I couldn't make up my mind which of the figs I would choose. I wanted each and every one of them, but choosing one meant losing all the rest..."

After she returns to her mother's house and descends further into mental illness, Esther loses personal ambition altogether. She considers dropping out of college and dreams of changing her name to Elly Higginbottom, running away to Chicago, and never striving towards any of her old aspirations again. She loses the refined literary ambitions she possessed at the novel's start—to write a thesis on *Finnegan's Wake*, to be a famous poet—and feels content taking pleasure in popular entertainment by reading tabloids with the uncultured masses.

When Esther eventually regains mental health, she also regains some of her old ambitions, though she now approaches them more knowledgeably. She no longer runs on autopilot accruing successes as she used to in the past. Instead, Esther is hyper-conscious of the hard-won recuperation of sanity, of her retrieved ability to read and think clearly. She values these dearly and is freed from the malaise she felt trapped in at novel's start. At the same time, Esther is wiser to life's complexities and knows that, just like she still retains all the memories and experiences of her depression, so too is there no firm boundary cutting off 'crazy' people from 'sane' ones: "What

was there about us, in Belsize, so different from the girls playing bridge and gossiping and studying in the college to which I would return?" Esther muses, "These girls, too, sat under **bell jars** of a sort." She proceeds into healthy life with caution, knowing that the bell jar of her mental illness may descend again in the future.



## MEDICINE

From Buddy's medical school laboratory to Esther's ritzy private mental asylum, *The Bell Jar* surveys various medical practices in 1950s America and considers their effectiveness. Buddy embodies the ideals and attitudes of modern medicine at the time. He is active, physically fit, hardworking, committed to science, dismissive of the arts (he scoffs at Esther's poetry), and rigorously unemotional (he has no qualms about manipulating new mourners into donating their loved ones' corpses to medical schools). He is also arrogant, insensitive, and naïve, as evidenced by his disastrous bravado teaching Esther to ski (which results in her broken leg) and his obliviousness towards Mrs. Tomolillo's excruciating childbirth pains. Buddy thinks only of how modern medicine's drugs will wipe Mrs. Tomolillo's memory clean of the pain she must nevertheless endure in labor. However, once Buddy contracts TB, he has to confront his own weakness and is thereby forced to mature. When Esther meets him again at novel's end, she finds that Buddy's illness has taught him the patience and humility he lacked at novel's start.

Esther's own experiences showcase the state of 1950s psychiatry. As a psychiatric patient, Esther is subjected to a slew of treatments, some helpful, some not. She resents her sessions with the unsympathetic and arrogant psychiatrist Dr. Gordon and encounters many chilly, condescending doctors before being genuinely helped by talk therapy with the nurturing and perceptive Dr. Nolan. She bristles and worsens under the crudely restrictive conditions of the psychiatric ward at a city hospital, then thrives in the supportive, open environment of a private asylum. Throughout, she is haunted by her imagination of brutal tortures at the state psychiatric hospital and is glad not to have to endure them. She experiences multiple iterations of electric shock therapy, as wrongly and excruciatingly performed under Dr. Gordon, then as correctly and effectively performed under Dr. Nolan. She receives insulin and suffers a side effect of drastic weight gain before having the intended "reaction," with ephemeral results. Alongside her own treatments, Esther also hears about other contemporary psychiatric practices. Through her mother's account of doctors asking questions about Esther's "toilet training" and through Joan's chatter about "Egos and Ids," Esther encounters snippets of the theories of Sigmund Freud, a crucial foundation for psychiatry at the time. Esther remains grateful that her own psychiatrist, Dr. Nolan, practices a talk

therapy free of theoretical terminology and abstraction.



## SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



### THE BELL JAR

**The bell jar** symbolizes mental illness and gives the novel its title. It is Esther's own metaphor for describing what she feels like while suffering her nervous breakdown: no matter what she is doing or where she is, she sits alienated "under the same glass bell jar, stewing in my own sour air." Though she can see through the transparent glass to the world beyond, the glass jar distorts the image of that world, leaving the suffering viewer with a warped understanding of reality. After undergoing electric shock therapy and analysis at the mental asylum, Esther feels the bell jar lifted. However, even as she welcomes health, she fears a future re-descent of the bell jar and wonders whether other bell jars also imprison the seemingly sane people around her.



### MIRRORS

**Mirrors** symbolize identity and Esther's reflection in and relation to mirrors throughout the novel follows the loss of her healthy self to mental illness. Esther's inability to recognize herself in the elevator reflection at the Amazon, the compact mirror in Jay Cee's office, and the mirror a nurse hands her at the city hospital illustrates Esther's slipping grasp on her own identity, which is profoundly distorted by her suicidal depression. At the peak of her depression, Esther relies on this slippage to make suicide easier, thinking that she if she watched the reflection of herself slitting her wrists in a mirror (rather than looking at her actual wrists), she would be able to go through with the task. At the same time, the description of a mirror as "a silver hole" suggests that, to some extent, all images of identity are false, more a projection by the viewer than a revelation of essential truth.



## QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Harper Perennial edition of *The Bell Jar* published in 2005.

### Chapter 1 Quotes

☞ I felt myself melting into the shadows like the negative of a person I'd never seen before in my life.

**Related Characters:** Esther Greenwood (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 10

#### Explanation and Analysis

This quote, which comes at the end of the first chapter when Esther is sitting at a bar, is exemplary of Esther's complex relationship with her body and identity. Many of Esther's descriptions of herself hinge on dematerialization of the body or objectification of the body (comparing a body part to something non-human), and this quote is a telltale example. First, Esther says that she feels herself melting into the shadows (which she says as though it is literally happening). Then she describes her body as becoming "the negative of a person I'd never seen before in my life." Presumably she refers to a photographic negative, which is an image of something that exists, but not the thing itself. Plath escalates the metaphor by having Esther say it's not even a negative of herself, but a negative of someone she's never seen before. So there are many different layers of distancing at work here--Esther seems to feel that her body is entirely divorced from her being, and, writer that she is, she evokes the feeling with a series of severe metaphors.

### Chapter 2 Quotes

☞ ...I noticed a big, smudgy-eyed Chinese woman staring idiotically into my face. It was only me, of course. I was appalled to see how wrinkled and used-up I looked.

**Related Characters:** Esther Greenwood (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Related Symbols:**

**Page Number:** 18

#### Explanation and Analysis

This passage describes Esther seeing herself in a mirror in her apartment building after she has just left Doreen and Lenny in Lenny's apartment. This is the first instance in which we encounter Esther's reaction to mirrors, which is typically (as in this case) one of estrangement rather than recognition. Here, Esther looks so different to herself that she seems to be of an entirely different ethnicity, and she's surprised, too, to look old and tired. Esther's inability to recognize herself is a subtle symptom of her emerging

mental illness, but it also reflects the ways in which Esther seems to have been split from her body via social pressures. Esther, for instance, is obsessed with sexual purity, and it seems that proximity to Doreen and Lenny's sexual encounter has made Esther feel that her body, too, has been somehow debased (she describes herself as "used-up," though there is no explanation for why that would be).

☝ I lay in that tub on the seventeenth floor of this hotel for—women-only, high up over the jazz and push of New York, for near on to an hour, and I felt myself growing pure again.

**Related Characters:** Esther Greenwood (speaker)

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 20

### Explanation and Analysis

After Esther's night going to the bar and to Lenny's house with Doreen, Esther feels dirty and sad. Though her behavior wasn't as rebellious as Doreen's, Esther still feels that she has strayed, perhaps too far, from her typical habits, and she takes a bath to make herself feel better. While she did describe her eyeliner as smudged, it seems that Esther feels more spiritually dirty than physically dirty. Even so, her bath eventually allows her to feel "pure again." This is another example of the confusion of body and mind that defines Esther's relationship to herself, and which will spiral out of control as her mental illness takes hold.

Throughout the book Esther seems to be seeking a spiritual purity that she's never able to precisely define. It is, perhaps, her inability to concretize the purity she seeks that leads her to confuse this abstract purity with bodily purity, such as her bath in this scene, or her obsession with virginity.

### Chapter 3 Quotes

☝ ...I wondered why I couldn't go the whole way doing what I should any more. This made me sad and tired. Then I wondered why I couldn't go the whole way doing what I shouldn't, the way Doreen did, and this made me even sadder and more tired.

**Related Characters:** Esther Greenwood (speaker), Doreen

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 30

### Explanation and Analysis

At the *Ladies Day* banquet, Esther is beginning to grapple with her confusion about her own behavior and her inability to fit in with the other girls at the magazine. Instead of going out to Coney Island with Doreen (the rebellious choice) or going to the fur show with Betsey (the respectable and obedient choice), Esther had laid in bed unable to decide what to do. This marks an initial instance of Esther's tendency to be paralyzed by decision making, particularly when those decisions surround ambition and identity. In this instance, Esther seems to have a very clear idea of what she "should" or "shouldn't" be doing, which shows the well-defined roles and behaviors expected of 1950s women, but Esther seems to have no idea where she, as an individual woman, fits into this scheme. As suggested by Esther's success in school (in which the expectations of her were challenging but well-defined), Esther functions best when she doesn't have to define herself, but still has an outlet for her ambition.

### Chapter 4 Quotes

☝ I wished I had a mother like Jay Cee. Then I'd know what to do. My own mother wasn't much help. My mother taught shorthand and typing to support us ever since my father died...She was always on me to learn shorthand after college, so I'd have a practical skill as well as a college degree.

**Related Characters:** Esther Greenwood (speaker), Jay Cee

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 39

### Explanation and Analysis

On the one hand, Esther's inability to define her career goals seems to be related to her mental illness. She lacks the kind of self-knowledge that would help her define and achieve her ambition, which is not so different from her literal inability to recognize herself in the mirror. On the other hand, though, as this passage illustrates, Esther's problems stem from the sexism of 1950s society. Esther knows that she does not want to be a traditional woman by becoming a homemaker or learning shorthand like her mother (who, this passage implies, only works because there isn't a man in the house), but Esther lacks female role models who could help make a nontraditional life seem concrete and achievable. Jay Cee's skills and knowledge are admirable to Esther, but utterly mysterious, and Esther does not seem to know how to cultivate a professional

mentorship. When she states that she wishes Jay Cee were her mother, it shows that Esther's only model for relating to older women is maternal. This passage shows clearly that women in the 1950s were structurally prevented from career success.

## Chapter 5 Quotes

☝☝ I remember the day [Buddy] smiled at me and said, "Do you know what a poem is, Esther?" "No, what?" I said. 'A piece of dust.' And he looked so proud of having thought of this that I just stared at his blond hair and his blue eyes and his white teeth—he had very long, strong white teeth—and said 'I guess so'.

**Related Characters:** Esther Greenwood (speaker), Buddy Willard

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 56

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Esther is recalling bitterly a conversation that she had with Buddy about poetry, which is Esther's passion. Buddy had told her condescendingly that a poem was "just a piece of dust," implying that his occupation (medical student) was superior to hers. Esther remembers Buddy saying this with a smile and with obvious pride that he had come up with this idea, and his attitude betrays both his disrespect of Esther and his own self-aggrandizement. To belittle Esther, somebody Buddy supposedly loves, while only being concerned with his own cleverness is almost sociopathic in its blatant disregard for human emotion. There's a deep irony here, since Buddy believes that medicine is more important than poetry because it cares for people's bodies, but Buddy seems indifferent to taking care of Esther's emotions. This would certainly validate Esther's claim that Buddy is a hypocrite. Furthermore, this passage shows the ways in which traditionally male professions (like medicine) come with a kind of respect that feminized professions (poetry) lack. Esther has a good argument for why poetry might be more important than medicine (bodies are dust, and a good poem will last longer than any body), but it doesn't carry much weight in her society.

## Chapter 6 Quotes

☝☝ I thought it sounded just like the sort of drug a man would invent. Here was a woman in terrible pain, obviously feeling every bit of it or she wouldn't groan like that, and she would go straight home and start another baby, because the drug would make her forget how bad the pain had been, when all the time, in some secret part of her, that long, blind, doorless and windowless corridor of pain was waiting to open up and shut her in again.

**Related Characters:** Esther Greenwood (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 66

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Esther recalls visiting Buddy at medical school and witnessing childbirth. Buddy explained that the woman had been given a drug that makes women forget the pain of childbirth, and this passage is Esther's response. An important distinction here is that the woman is visibly in pain—she is making horrible noises—so we know that this drug does not take pain away in the present, it only one makes women forget it later. Esther says that this sounds "like the sort of drug a man would invent" because it does not relieve a woman of her pain in the moment, but instead serves the purpose of making her forget something terrible so that she will continue to have more children without thinking of the pain they will cause. Here, medicine is seen as something deployed by men for utilitarian, rather than humanitarian, purposes, and Esther is scared and even resentful of it. This passage is also metaphorical for the damage wrought by structural sexism. While women might not be able to account for everything damaging that has happened to them (Esther would not, for instance, be able to articulate that she has not been taught, like her male peers were, to capitalize on defined career goals), there is a part of each woman that is a "long, blind, doorless and windowless corridor of pain."

☝☝ All I'd heard about, really, was how fine and clean Buddy was and how he was the kind of person a girl should stay fine and clean for.

**Related Characters:** Esther Greenwood (speaker), Buddy Willard

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 68

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Buddy asks Esther if she would like to see him naked, and the question confuses her. As the quote indicates, Esther keeps being told by her family that Buddy is a "fine and clean" person. For Esther, since she is a woman, being "fine and clean" would mean staying a virgin and protecting her body until marriage, but Buddy's question is confusing because he seems willing to engage in behavior that would, if Esther did it, make her no longer fine and clean. Here, she identifies a double standard in social expectations governing sex, in which Buddy can offer to undress in front of her without it making him impure. On the other hand, though Esther is skeptical of the appropriateness of the gesture, she thinks that, because so many people have told her that Buddy is fine and clean, anything he wanted to do couldn't cause much harm. This passage simultaneously illuminates the contradictions of 1950s social norms, and explains the family pressure that undergirds Esther's obsession with purity.

for what they are not (men) than for what they are. This passage seems to be an embodiment of this concept, in which Esther is very aware of what she isn't and what she doesn't want, but has no strong concept of her goals and identity.

☞ I saw myself sitting in the crotch of this fig-tree, starving to death, just because I couldn't make up my mind which of the figs I would choose. I wanted each and every one of them, but choosing one meant losing all the rest, and, as I sat there, unable to decide, the figs began to wrinkle and go black, and, one by one, they plopped to the ground at my feet.

**Related Characters:** Esther Greenwood (speaker)

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 77

### Explanation and Analysis

Esther, who has just enumerated many things that she can't do and doesn't want, now tries to name some of the possibilities she sees for the future, which seems to include everything from what is expected of her (marriage and family) to what she desires (becoming famous poet) to what seems intriguing (being an "Olympic lady crew champion"). It is clear in the language she uses that Esther sees the future as being much less real than her limitations. Furthermore, Esther's musings on the future do not serve to inspire or motivate her. She feels paralyzed by all of the possibilities and by the knowledge that choosing one thing might foreclose all of the others. Esther's circumstances and previous experiences (like her time at the magazine) indicate, though, that her paralysis in the face of the future might not be simply due to her inability to parse her abundance of options. Esther is ambitious, but she seems not to understand how to make an achievable path to any of these goals. The problem, then, is not just that choosing one of the metaphorical figs in the fig tree would preclude choosing the others--it's that all of them seem to be visible but out of reach.

## Chapter 7 Quotes

☞ The trouble was, I hated the idea of serving men in any way. I wanted to dictate my own thrilling letters.

**Related Characters:** Esther Greenwood (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 76

### Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes in the midst of a passage in which Esther is taking stock of everything she can't do (a list notable for its traditionally feminine skills like cooking, singing, dancing, etc.). She notes that she cannot do shorthand, a skill that could get her traditionally feminine secretarial work in which her mother insists she could dictate thrilling letters for her (male) boss. Here, Esther notes that she does not want to serve a man--she wants to be at work on her own projects, making her *own* "thrilling letters." This passage is interesting because it shows that Esther is much better at articulating her faults than her skills, and she is much better at saying what she doesn't want than what she does (she has few concrete career goals, for instance, but she knows she doesn't want to serve a man). A common idea among feminist thinkers is that femininity is a negatively-defined concept, which means that women are most often identified

## Chapter 8 Quotes

☞ People and trees receded on either hand like the dark sides of a tunnel as I hurtled on to the still, bright point at the end of it, the pebble at the bottom of the well, the white sweet baby cradled in its mother's belly.

**Related Characters:** Esther Greenwood (speaker)

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 97

### Explanation and Analysis

This passage, a memory of the moments leading up to a skiing accident, is one of the most exhilarating descriptions in the book. It seems to be one of only a few moments in which Esther has felt purely happy--ironic, since it is mere moments before she badly breaks her leg. It's interesting that Esther's moment of transcendence is described in a way that is resonant with purity. Everything--the people and scenery--falls away, and Esther describes herself as plummeting into her past, into the purity of the sun (without which the world would not exist, she notes) and the purity of a newborn baby. This skiing accident occurs in the context of a trip to visit Buddy, in which he proposes marriage, Esther refuses, and Buddy (and Esther) seem to not entirely trust that she means what she says. In this context, Esther's desire to escape the complex social expectations of womanhood (some of which grate against Esther's personality) and flee towards a purer and simpler past (or future) makes perfect sense. In addition, her happiness in the face of potential danger is resonant with her latent desire for self-destruction.

## Chapter 10 Quotes

☝☝ I squinted at the page. The letters grew barbs and rams' horns. I watched them separate, each from the other, and jiggle up and down in a silly way...I decided to junk my thesis. I decided to junk the whole honors program and become an ordinary English major.

**Related Characters:** Esther Greenwood (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 124

### Explanation and Analysis

This passage comes in the midst of a moment of crisis for Esther. While it seems that Esther has always bristled at the expectations placed on her and felt unsure about her future, at this point in the book she is, for the first time, facing a summer in which she must be completely responsible for her own time. In this vacuum of structure, Esther's mental illness (which has shown itself before, like when she couldn't recognize herself in the mirror of the Amazon) begins to

take over. Here, reading James Joyce's work (which she once hoped to write a thesis about), the letters morph into strange and indecipherable images, and Esther suddenly no longer feels up to reading, let alone thinking critically about a book and writing down her ideas. This deterioration of Esther's ability to perform tasks that were once easy is an alarming development that foreshadows much trouble to come.

## Chapter 11 Quotes

☝☝ "Suppose you try and tell me what you think is wrong." I turned the words over suspiciously, like round, sea-polished pebbles that might suddenly put out a claw and change into something else. What did I *think* was wrong? That made it sound as if nothing was *really* wrong. I only *thought* it was wrong.

**Related Characters:** Esther Greenwood, Dr. Gordon (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 129-130

### Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes from a conversation between Esther and Dr. Gordon (the male psychiatrist with whom Esther is meeting, whose manner makes Esther deeply uncomfortable). This passage shows, first, how estranged Esther has become from something (words) that was once a source of joy for her (since she was a poet). Esther does not trust the doctor's words, not simply because he seems to be a dubious person, but because the things that Esther once took to be stable are now, in the midst of her illness, betraying her (a "claw" could emerge from the "pebbles" of the words at any moment). This passage also begins to address the stigma in medicine and society against mental health. Esther's doctor is supposed to heal her, and in order to do that he needs to make her feel comfortable, but he phrases his question in a way that implies that Esther's problems are not real. In verbally undermining the seriousness of Esther's mental health problems, Esther's doctor makes Esther feel angry and self-doubting, and he thereby diminishes his efficacy as a doctor.

## Chapter 12 Quotes

☛ Then something bent down and took hold of me and shook me like the end of the world. Whee-ee-ee-ee-ee, it shrilled, through an air crackling with blue light, and with each flash a great jolt drubbed me till I thought my bones would break and the sap fly out of me like a split plant. I wondered what terrible thing it was that I had done.

**Related Characters:** Esther Greenwood (speaker)

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 143

### Explanation and Analysis

This passage is Plath's description of Esther's electroshock therapy under the care of Dr. Gordon. While this is supposed to be a therapeutic experience that helps Esther recover from her mental breakdown, the description is anything but therapeutic. Plath describes that it is "like the end of the world" and that Esther "thought [her] bones would break." The experience seems to be one of terror and incredible pain, and it leaves Esther wondering "what terrible thing it was that [she] had done," as though this were a punishment instead of a treatment. This passage clearly recalls the childbirth that Esther and Buddy watched together, in which a woman endured unbelievable pain at the hands of a male doctor. In both of these instances, medicine is used in a way that seems punishing rather than relieving. This passage also illuminates some of the stigma surrounding mental health that Esther experiences. Though Esther seems reasonably aware that her illness is not her fault, she still wonders what she has done that she is being punished for, which indicates a lingering socially-imposed guilt over her symptoms.

☛ It was as if what I wanted to kill wasn't in that skin or the thin blue pulse that jumped under my thumb, but somewhere else, deeper, more secret, and a whole lot harder to get at.

**Related Characters:** Esther Greenwood (speaker)

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 147

### Explanation and Analysis

After Esther's electroshock therapy, her illness seems to have worsened instead of improved. Esther's reminiscence

of her nearly-executed suicide plan from that morning shows the extent to which she has deteriorated, and her explanation of why she didn't go through with the suicide attempt explains a lot about her condition. Esther thinks about slitting her wrists, but balks at actually harming her own flesh. She recognizes, in this quote, that it's not her body that she wishes to kill--it's something in her mind that she does not fully understand and she cannot easily locate. This is another instance of Esther's constant dichotomizing of mind from body. While she knows intellectually that to kill her body would be to kill her mind (and, presumably, the source of her trouble), she cannot talk herself into actually carrying out an action against her own body, because she thinks of it as being utterly distinct from her mind. This mind/body separation has been (and will continue to be) a source of trouble for her, but here it happens to save her life.

## Chapter 13 Quotes

☛ Then I saw that my body had all sorts of little tricks, such as making my hands go limp at the crucial second, which would save it, time and again, whereas if I had the whole say, I would be dead in a flash.

**Related Characters:** Esther Greenwood (speaker)

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 159

### Explanation and Analysis

This passage comes in a scene in which Esther is at the beach with friends and decides to drown herself swimming in the ocean. Her body betrays her own death wish and she continues swimming without meaning to, which prompts her to recall another failed suicide attempt from that morning in which she decided to hang herself but couldn't go through with it. At this point, Esther's body is no longer simply a separate entity from her mind (one with divergent motivations, as her mind wants to die and her body wants to live), but her body has become an actual antagonist to her mind. Esther's body is not simply disobeying her mind's wishes, but it is seemingly tricking her mind and even mocking it. This marks a new extreme in the estrangement that Esther feels from her own body--it is now not simply unrecognizable or even unreliable, it is downright diabolical and a source of continued misery.

## Chapter 15 Quotes

☝☝ ...wherever I sat—on the deck of a ship or a street café in Paris or Bangkok—I would be sitting under the same glass bell jar, stewing in my own sour air.

**Related Characters:** Esther Greenwood (speaker)

**Related Themes:** 

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 185

### Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes as Esther is being driven, by way of Philomena Guinea's generosity, to a much nicer asylum than the one she'd previously been in. While Esther's mother reminds her to be grateful for the opportunity, Esther feels numb. She imagines being given a trip to Europe or a cruise around the world, and determines that even such extravagant and exciting opportunities wouldn't be different than being in an asylum because Esther would still be trapped inside her own mental illness, which renders the world dull and unrelatable. The metaphor Esther chooses for her mental illness is being trapped under a bell jar, which separates her from the rest of the world and warps her view of the world without making it invisible. In other words, Esther's body could inhabit a place, but it wouldn't make a difference to her mind, since, no matter where she is, mental illness has created an unbridgeable barrier between Esther and the rest of the world.

## Chapter 16 Quotes

☝☝ I hated these visits, because I kept feeling the visitors measuring my fat and stringy hair against what I had been and what they wanted me to be, and I knew they went away utterly confounded.

**Related Characters:** Esther Greenwood (speaker)

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 202

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Esther has just been delighted by Dr. Nolan's news that Esther will no longer be receiving visitors. Esther reveals that she does not like receiving visitors because nobody seems to take her ideas or her descriptions of her experiences and beliefs seriously, and everyone

seems to pity her and judge her based on her appearance and the fact of her having been institutionalized. Furthermore, it seems that all of Esther's visitors seek to change or improve her in some way, rather than meeting her where she is and accepting that this is Esther's current state and current struggle. It's reminiscent, in a way, of Esther having always felt that people were trying to push her in the direction of being a more traditional woman. Esther's refusal of traditional femininity has often felt more ambivalent than her refusal of her visitors, though, which shows--oddly--that Esther might be gaining a new sense of self-confidence and self-possession by being essentially exiled in the asylum.

## Chapter 17 Quotes

☝☝ I felt the nurse had been instructed to show me my alternatives. Either I got better, or I fell, down, down, like a burning, then burnt-out star, from Belsize, to Caplan, to Wymark and finally, after Doctor Nolan and Mrs. Guinea had given me up, to the state place next-door.

**Related Characters:** Esther Greenwood (speaker), The night nurse, Dr. Nolan, Philomena Guinea

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 209

### Explanation and Analysis

At this point, Esther has been put in Belsize, the part of the hospital reserved for the patients who are closest to recovery. However, Esther feels conflicted about whether she belongs there--she still feels ill, and she does not fit in with the other patients. Medicine is here, again, portrayed as something menacing and manipulative. The hierarchy of patients that the hospital system creates makes Esther feel that her self-worth is wrapped up in the same kinds of achievements that governed her life in school. An environment in which Esther is judged or looked down on for the speed of her recovery, though, does not seem conducive to healing. Furthermore, the nurse who explains Esther's possible trajectories to her seems to be threatening that if Esther doesn't get better as expected, something bad will happen to her (like ending up in the state-run hospital, in which conditions are not as good). While Dr. Nolan has been caring and helpful, other aspects of Esther's treatment seem to be less concerned with her well-being.

## Chapter 18 Quotes

☛☛ I climbed up on the examination table, thinking: '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 what they did, they would do anyway, regardless...'

**Related Characters:** Esther Greenwood (speaker), Buddy Willard

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 223

### Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs when Esther is at the gynecologist being fitted for a diaphragm, a form of birth control. This is one of the only moments in the book in which Esther seems to understand the connection between mind and body; she sees that the diaphragm, a device intended for her body, is actually doing just as much for her mind. The diaphragm means that she won't have to fear premarital sex and its consequences, and she can be free to make her own choices about her body and her future. This melding of concern for mind and body bodes well for her recovery from her mental illness, and it also allows her a new kind of happiness and freedom that she hadn't previously experienced. This passage also shows the enormity of the burden placed on women by the social expectations that they must remain pure and virginal. Simply by having birth control, Esther becomes liberated from her greatest fears about possible limitations to her future.

## Chapter 20 Quotes

☛☛ There would be a black, six-foot deep gap hacked in the hard ground. That shadow would marry this shadow, and the peculiar, yellowish soil of our locality seal the wound in the whiteness, and yet another snowfall erase the traces of newness in Joan's grave. I took a deep breath and listened to the old brag of my heart. I am, I am, I am.

**Related Characters:** Esther Greenwood (speaker), Joan Gilling

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 243

### Explanation and Analysis

By this point in the book, Esther is experiencing significant recovery from her symptoms, and this passage, a recollection of Joan's funeral, shows just how far Esther has come. While death once represented to Esther a relief from all of her problems and torments, here Esther seems to be resisting death. Her feelings towards death are complex-- she sees it as a shadow and a wound, but also something that doesn't preclude purity and beauty (shown by the imagery of the snow), and in some ways a kind of healing and unifying idea. Confronted by the physical evidence of death, Esther reflects on its meaning without considering its implications for her own future; she describes the "old brag of [her] heart. I am, I am, I am." The other instance of this chant was when she tried to drown herself, and her heart seemed to be mocking her by asserting itself in opposition to her mind's wishes. Here, Esther's mind and body seem unified in their contentedness with her life, or at least with life and existence in general.



## SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

## CHAPTER 1

Esther Greenwood begins her reminiscence of the summer of 1953 when she won a contest to live in New York for a month as the guest editor of a fashion magazine. Though Esther knows she should feel accomplished and grateful for the opportunity to work in New York, she instead feels numb and detached from her own life. She is obsessed with the electrocution of the Rosenbergs (a married couple executed for being Soviet spies). She feels all her college achievements have “fizzled to nothing” in New York and that she is “very still and very empty, the way the eye of a tornado must feel.”

*Esther introduces herself as a person in flux, no longer able to enjoy the fruits of her old ambitions (like her college achievements) or to value what society expects her to value (like the opportunity to spend a summer working in New York). The metaphor of the tornado is at once an image of stable purity (a still, empty center) and an image of filth and chaos (the swirling dust and matter the tornado swirls around that center).*



Esther lives with the eleven other contest winners in the Amazon, a women-only hotel otherwise inhabited mostly by wealthy girls Esther’s age working as secretaries in New York while they wait to get married. Her best friend among the other contest winners is Doreen, a cynical, witty, sexy rule-breaker who tries to talk Esther out of doing her work for Jay Cee, her boss at the fashion magazine. Betsy, a wholesome, all-American girl from Kansas, continually invites Esther to hang out with her and the other girls “as if she were trying to save me in some way,” Esther reflects.

*Women-only hotels were popular in the 1950s as places to house young, unmarried women. Separating themselves from men was a way for these young women (and the women’s parents) to protect their purity/virginity. Doreen and Betsy embody two contrasting models of womanhood: Doreen represents sexual experience and rebelliousness while Betsy represents innocence and obedience.*



For a magazine-hosted party tonight, Esther rejects Betsy’s offer to share a cab in order to go with Doreen, who says they’ll just go for a little while before heading “out on the town.” Doreen criticizes all the young Yale men she expects will be at the party. “They’re so stoo-pit!” she says. Esther reflects, “Buddy Willard went to Yale, but now that I thought of it, what was wrong with him was that he was stupid,” in spite of his good grades. Esther hears what Doreen says “like a secret voice speaking straight out of my own bones.”

*Esther is attracted to Doreen and the cynical worldliness Doreen embodies through her witty snark and adventurousness. Doreen also offers Esther a new way of measuring achievement. Though Esther has always thought that Buddy was smart because he got good grades and went to Yale, Doreen makes her realize that academia is not the only metric of intelligence.*



In a cab stuck in traffic on the way to the party, Esther and Doreen are approached by the dapper, smiling, disc jockey Lenny Shepherd, who convinces the girls to abandon the cab and join him and his friends in a bar. Esther, with her yellowing tan, skinny figure, and unbecoming dress, knows that Lenny is attracted to Doreen’s voluptuous beauty, but she is excited to see another side of city life and doesn’t care. Indeed, Lenny immediately pawns Esther off on his squat, squeaky-voiced friend Frankie in order to dote on Doreen.

*The first of many moments illustrating social expectations about women’s bodies: Esther’s thin boyish physique is considered less attractive than Doreen’s blonde voluptuousness. However, Esther ignores these social expectations in favor of her own system of value: instead of romance and male attention, she is looking for new knowledge and experiences.*



Sitting in the bar, Esther thinks, “I felt myself melting into the shadows like the negative of a person I’d never seen before in my life.” She orders straight vodka to avoid exposing her ignorance about cocktails, and because she remembers an ad in which vodka “looked clear and pure as water.” Drinking it, she finds it tasteless but feels it makes her “powerful and god-like.” She tells Lenny and Frankie that her name is Elly Higginbottom and she’s from Chicago, so as not to have “anything I said or did that night...associated with me and my real name and coming from Boston.” Lenny tries to get Doreen to come home with him and Doreen says she won’t go without “Elly.” Esther says she’ll go too and thinks she “liked looking at other people in crucial situations,” like “a road accident or a street fight or a baby pickled in a laboratory jar.”

## CHAPTER 2

Back at Lenny’s apartment, Doreen and Lenny dance and flirt amidst Lenny’s cowboy-style pine-paneling and stuffed animal decorations. Doreen addresses Esther as ‘Elly’ even when Lenny can’t hear them. Esther sits alone watching them and feels like “a hole in the ground.” When Doreen and Lenny’s kissing gets heated, she slips out and walks the several miles back to the Amazon.

In the **reflection** of the metal elevator door at the hotel, Esther sees “a big, smudgy-eyed Chinese woman staring idiotically into my face. It was only me, of course.” From her room’s window, New York is silent and looks “flat as a poster,” unreal. Esther takes a long hot bath, as she always does when feeling sad, and “felt myself growing pure again.” She goes to bed “pure and sweet as a new baby.”

In the middle of the night, Esther is awoken by knocking and one voice calling “Elly,” one voice saying “Miss Greenwood, your friend wants you.” She opens her door on an extremely drunk and disheveled Doreen and a night maid, who walks off once Doreen falls into Esther’s arms. Esther feels disgusted by Doreen, desperate to be rid of her. When Doreen vomits and passes out on the carpet, Esther leaves her there and retreats into her own room. She decides that from now on, she “would watch [Doreen] and listen to what she said, but deep down...would be loyal to Betsy and her innocent friends. It was Betsy I resembled at heart.”

In the morning, Esther opens the door to find Doreen gone and the hall carpet “clean and eternally verdant” but for a faint mark where Doreen’s vomit had been wiped up.

*As with Esther’s opening comparison of herself to a tornado’s eye, the metaphor of being a negative of a stranger dematerializes her body, sapping it of stable heft. In a similar fashion, giving the fake name and identity ‘Elly Higginbottom from Boston’ makes ‘Esther Greenwood from Chicago’ seem to disappear. Esther’s attraction to vodka’s clearness introduces her obsession with purity and her frequent equation of physical pureness with spiritual transcendence (as when the vodka makes her feel ‘god-like’).*



*Esther’s language continues to dematerialize her own body: she compares herself now to a hole, a physical absence. By calling her ‘Elly,’ Doreen contributes to the figurative disappearance of ‘Esther.’ Lenny and his cowboy-style apartment embody conventional social standards of masculinity.*



*This passage introduces the symbol of the mirror. Esther’s inability to recognize her mirrored reflection is a theme throughout the novel and echoes her slippery grasp on her own identity as she is transformed by mental illness. Again, Esther equates physical purification with spiritual purity.*



*The scene presents an extreme contrast between Esther’s just-bathed, physical purity and Doreen’s grotesque, sexually debased intoxication. Although Esther has previously been attracted to Doreen’s sophistication and defiance, she returns to some of her old, conventional values by aligning herself with the wholesome rule-follower Betsy.*



*As Esther purged herself of thoughts of Doreen by purifying herself in the bath, so too has the carpet been cleansed of Doreen’s vomit stains. Yet a faint mark does remain.*



## CHAPTER 3

At a banquet hosted by *Ladies' Day* magazine, Esther sits with the other girls beside the empty place-setting prepared for Doreen, who is, as usual, skipping events to spend time with Lenny. Each place is set with a favor: a compact **mirror**, a painted frame around "a silver hole." Esther explains that eating rich food is her favorite thing in the world and that she stays skinny no matter what she eats. Having grown up poor, she is awestruck by the wealth of beautiful, expensive food at *Ladies Day*. Esther proceeds to methodically consume an immense amount of caviar, crabmeat-stuffed avocados, and chicken, not worrying about her table manners because she's discovered, from witnessing a famous poet eating salad with his hands, that "if you do something incorrect at table with a certain arrogance...you can get away with it...[everyone] will think you are original and very witty."

Betsy sits on Esther's other side and Esther asks her about the fur-show the rest of the girls had gone to before lunch. Esther feels sorry for herself: she hadn't gotten to go because Jay Cee had called her into her office. She doesn't tell Betsy that she hadn't really been planning to go to the show when Jay Cee had called, that she'd been lying in bed planning to spend the day lying in the park, rejecting both the other girls' scheduled activities and Doreen's invitation to go to Coney Island. She had "wondered why I couldn't go the whole way doing what I should any more...Then I wondered why I couldn't go the whole way doing what I shouldn't, the way Doreen did, and this made me even sadder and more tired."

When Esther arrived in her office, Jay Cee had asked Esther what she wanted to do after college. Esther recalls, "I don't really know, I heard myself say. I felt a deep shock...the minute I said it, I knew it was true." Jay Cee had pressed Esther to learn more languages to make herself more hire-able, and had told Esther about the previous contest winner whose hard work at the magazine earned her a job at *Time*. Esther had told Jay Cee she'd try to learn German in her last year at college, knowing all along that she had no room in her schedule.

*Esther's description of the mirror as "a silver hole" suggests the mirror is a place in which to lose oneself, as Esther lost (and will continue to lose) herself when she failed to recognize her mirrored reflection. Esther's ability to eat as much as she wants without gaining weight subtly emphasizes the divide between her mind (which wants and enjoys the taste of rich foods) and her body (which doesn't seem to be affected by the foods her mind desires). The poet's behavior suggests a way for Esther to act outside of the rigid expectations of female etiquette behavior: act with confidence and others might just "think you are original."*



*Esther's behavior shows her increasing alienation from society's expectations for her and from her old expectations for herself. Esther's new self is passive—neither a deliberate rule-breaker nor a deliberate rule-follower. She seems to fade into her environment, wanting to lie down and avoid activity.*



*Jay Cee embodies the high-achieving ambition that Esther, once so devoted to academic excellence and prize-winning, used to share. In fact, Esther's abandonment of Jay Cee's value system is so new that she barely recognizes it: she is surprised by her own answer to Jay Cee's question. Until recently, she would have answered the question with a long list of well-plotted career aspirations.*



Esther had flashed back to a memory of getting out of a required college course in chemistry, which she hated because, in it, “all the perfectly good words like gold and silver and cobalt...were shortened to ugly abbreviations.” She had aced a botany course because she loved drawing diagrams of the plant specimens.” Botany “seemed so real.” Esther convinced her dean to let her audit the chemistry course, arguing she would just get an A anyway and that she needed room to take an extra literature course. Because Esther was a straight-A student and a favorite of the dean, her plan was approved. Mr. Manzi, the chemistry teacher, beamed at her the whole term, thinking Esther was sitting in the back writing notes out of a sheer love of learning chemistry, when all along she was actually writing poems.

## CHAPTER 4

Sitting in Jay Cee’s office recalling her chemistry scheme, Esther had suddenly felt guilty and wanted to apologize to Mr. Manzi. She’d screened fiction submissions to the magazine while Jay Cee explained the careful flattery she’d have to balance between the two authors she was about to meet for lunch, one a famous, successful man and the other a less famous, less successful woman. Esther had wished she’d “had a mother like Jay Cee. Then I’d know what to do.” Her own mother, Esther had reflected, “wasn’t much help.” She teaches shorthand, which she doesn’t like but urges Esther to learn so as to have “a practical skill” alongside her degree.

At the *Ladies’ Day* lunch, Esther is given a finger-bowl and remembers the first time she saw a finger-bowl at the house of her benefactress, Philomena Guinea, and drank its contents as if it were a soup. Philomena Guinea sponsors Esther’s scholarship at college. She is a wealthy novelist who freely admits she hadn’t done well in school and wrote trashy novels.

After the lunch, Esther and the other girls are scheduled to see a movie, whose romantic plot Esther finds artificial and dull. It stars “a nice blond girl,” “a sexy black-haired girl,” and “two big, broad-shouldered boneheads.” The nice girl ends up happily married and the sexy girl is abandoned.

*Esther’s relationship to her science courses reflects the theme of Mind vs. Body. Esther’s dislike for chemistry and physics is, in a sense, a dislike of the gap between mind and body. Chemistry and physics render physical materials (bodies) into abstract notations and theories. Esther prefers botany, where bodies get treated as the concrete material entities they are and aren’t jettisoned into abstractions.*



*The imbalance between the male and female writers Jay Cee is going to lunch with provides a microcosm of 1950s literary society at large, where male writers were much more powerful and praised than their female counterparts. Esther’s mother embraces conventional social expectations for female careers, but Esther would rather follow the lead of an unconventional, ambitious woman, like Jay Cee.*



*Like Jay Cee, Philomena Guinea represents an alternative female career path to the conventional homemaker role supported by 1950s America. Though Esther does not want to write trashy novels, she does, like Guinea, aspire to make a name for herself as an author.*



*The movie plot reiterates the conventional beliefs and values of 1950s American society: nice virginal girls will be rewarded with happiness while girls who engage in premarital sex will wind up lonely and miserable.*



Mid-movie, Esther and Betsy start to feel sick and vomit all through the cab-ride back to the Amazon. At the hotel, Esther faints and comes round to the sight of a man's shoe and "a vague heap of blue cornflowers on a white ground and this made me want to cry. It was the sleeve of my own bathrobe I was looking at, and my left hand lay pale as a cod at the end of it." The shoe belongs to a doctor, the only kind of man allowed in the Amazon. A nurse with him carts Esther off to bed and explains that all the girls are sick with food poisoning and that the doctor has given her an injection to sleep. She sleeps.

Esther wakes up to someone offering her broth. She thinks it is Betsy but it's Doreen, not smoking for once and with "a sort of expert tenderness flowing from the ends of her fingers" as if she were "Betsy or my mother or a fern-scented nurse." After the broth, Esther feels "purged and holy and ready for a new life." Doreen explains that the crabmeat from the *Ladies' Day* lunch was tested and found to be full of ptomaine. Esther has "a vision of the celestially white kitchens on *Ladies' Day* stretching into infinity" and "the delicate, pink-mottled claw-meat poking seductively through its blanket of mayonnaise." *Ladies' Day* sent every girl a short story collection as an apology and get-well present. Esther thinks that if the present is good, she "wouldn't mind about what happened, because I felt so pure as a result."

## CHAPTER 5

The next morning, Esther receives a phone call from Constantin, a simultaneous interpreter at the U.N. and an acquaintance of Mrs. Willard. He arranges to pick her up in the afternoon. At first Esther is excited to meet him, but she realizes that he is just fulfilling a favor owed to Mrs. Willard and feels depressed, thinking this man will be just as much a disappointment as Buddy Willard, Mrs. Willard's son and the man Esther is expected to marry. Esther is certain she will never marry him because he is a hypocrite. She has not, however, gotten the opportunity yet to tell Buddy this information because he contracted tuberculosis right when she realized the truth about him and she feels she has to wait until he's well to break the news.

Esther decides to skip breakfast so as to be able to skip getting dressed for breakfast and lie in bed all morning. She doesn't want to have a tray sent up because then she'd have to tip the sender and she has already muddled tipping etiquette twice in NY, not knowing the proper contexts or rate to tip.

*Plath's prose captures Esther's alienation from her own body. Her use of figure—comparing the human hand to a codfish—emphasizes that alienation. As a man of medicine, the doctor is highly respected and understood to be honorable. He is thus exempt from the normal prohibitions against men in the women-only Amazon.*



*Esther expects her nurse to be Betsy, having categorized Doreen as a woman who refuses to play a conventional female role. However, Doreen proves more complex than Esther gave her credit for: though she is a rebel and a risk-taker, she can also be a nurturer and a caretaker. Again, a purifying physical experience (drinking broth) vaults Esther's spirit into pure ecstasy. The language used to describe the tainted crab (pink interrupting white, a seductive "poking") is erotically charged, implicitly likening the poison to sexual arousal/awakening.*



*Though at first Constantin seems to be an excitingly exotic foreign figure, his ties to Mrs. Willard draw him right back into the strictures of conventional social expectations that Esther already feels so oppressed by. Buddy Willard is a weight around her neck. On top of feeling burdened by his personal hypocrisy and by her desire to be rid of him, Esther is burdened by other people's belief in his excellence and in her future as his wife.*



*Esther's reasoning—choosing to skip a meal just to avoid the potential awkwardness of tipping—demonstrates her lack of confidence surrounding social expectations and customs.*



Esther picks up the story collection sent over by *Ladies' Day* and reads a story about a fig-tree that a Jewish man and "a beautiful dark nun" daily meet at to pick figs. One day they watch a bird hatching in a nest in the tree and touch the backs of their hands together. To the man's dismay, the nun never comes to pick figs again and the convent sends a sour kitchen maid instead. Esther loves the story and wants "to crawl in between those black lines of print the way you crawl through a fence, and go to sleep under that beautiful big green fig-tree."

Esther reflects that the story is similar to the story of her and Buddy Willard, who watched a baby getting born together and were ever after separated. She thinks pityingly of Buddy lying in a TB sanatorium in the Adirondacks sending her letters about poets and writers who are also doctors to show "maybe doctors and writers could get along fine after all." She notes that Buddy didn't use to think this way. Two years ago, he'd told her with self-satisfaction that a poem was nothing but "a piece of dust." Esther wishes she'd had the wherewithal then to retort that all the people Buddy treats as a doctor were dust, too, and would disappear far sooner than a good poem would. She often reenacts conversations with Buddy in her head in which she comes up with sharp responses to get the better of him, instead of mumbling agreement with him (as she always did in actual life).

Esther recalls how she had first started dating the handsome Buddy Willard, who she'd never seen much of growing up even though their mothers were friends and lived in the same town. Esther spent every weekend in college studying and going on bad blind dates with ugly "mushroomy" boys. Then Buddy had, to Esther's astonished delight, showed up unexpectedly at her college dorm one morning to say hello. When Esther invited him to stay for lunch, he said he was there to go to a dance with Joan Gilling, the daughter of another friend of Mrs. Willard who had asked Buddy to take her. Joan is a horsy, sporty girl who gives Esther the creeps. Esther was mortified to have asked Buddy to lunch and lied about having to run off for a date with two Dartmouth boys. Buddy, seeming hurt at the mention of her date, left Esther with a letter inviting her to Yale Junior prom.

Esther is ecstatic to read the invitation and shouts out the news in her dorm. After that, she notes that all the other girls, who used to make "nasty loud remarks outside my door about people wasting their golden college days with their noses stuck in a book," start treating Esther with respect.

*The story dramatizes anxieties surrounding female purity (virginity): at the first hint of physical intimacy between the nun and the man, she is cut off from contact with him. Plath's use of figuration to describe the lines of print unites mind and body by rendering the abstract imagination of the story into a concrete, tangible place.*



*Yearning for more of Esther's attention, the desperate, invalid Buddy is eager to unite the worlds of medicine and literature. Still, his prior, healthy attitude towards poetry better represented the predominant medical attitude towards art at the time: that it was useless and that those who pursued it were wasting attention that would be much more valuably devoted to modern science and medicine.*



*The story of Buddy and Esther's courtship illustrates 1950s social norms and expectations for women. Esther's academic diligence makes her less attractive to men and she thus spends most of her high-achieving college career relegated to dates with men who are themselves undesirable, and who perhaps can't find other girls to go on dates with. Thrifty and pragmatic as ever, Buddy tries to kill two birds with one stone by asking Esther out on a date while on his date with Joan.*



*Esther's peers had little regard for her academic excellence, but can appreciate and respect someone who goes on a date with a handsome man. These women's bias towards romance over academia echoes the predominant social attitudes of the time.*



Esther remembers the prom itself as a disappointment. She and Buddy danced far apart and she'd felt "dull and flat and full of shattered visions." But afterwards, they'd shared "a dry, uninspiring little kiss" on a hill behind the chemistry lab. Esther had tried to memorize the scenery as they're kissing so that she'll never forget the moment. Buddy had exclaimed how "it makes me feel terrific to kiss you." He tells Esther that, though he has a lot of studying to do he could "manage to see you every third week-end." Esther had been faint with eagerness to tell everyone back at college.

*Esther does not enjoy her date with Buddy in and of itself, but she enjoys the social capital the date earns her among her peers back at college. Thus, her first thought when he suggests dating more seriously is not how happy she'll be to be closer to him but how happy she'll be to get to tell the other girls at school.*



## CHAPTER 6

After graduating Yale, Buddy went on to medical school and Esther recollects visiting Buddy there and discovering he was a hypocrite. She was very curious about the "hospital sights" and spent a day with Buddy going about his studies. She saw cadavers and deformed fetuses preserved in formaldehyde, and remembers being proud of "the calm way I stared at all these gruesome things."

*Esther is intrigued by bodies in situations of distress, and (a bit morbidly) hopes to see such bodies at the hospital. She is proud of herself for keeping her mind in calm control, even amidst the visceral horror provoked by physical decay and deformity.*



After lunch, Buddy took Esther to go see a baby being born. Will, the med student scheduled to deliver the baby, mutters to Esther beforehand, "You oughtn't to see this...You'll never want to have a baby if you do. They oughtn't to let women watch. It'll be the end of the human race." Esther and Buddy had laughed it off. Then, Esther was horrified by the birthing table the woman (Mrs. Tomolillo) had to lie on, which looked like a kind of "torture table."

*Though Esther laughs off Will's warning as a joke, it begins to seem more serious as soon as she begins to see the physical discomforts and humiliation that medical practice forces child-birthing women into.*



Buddy explained that Mrs. Tomolillo, who was making a continuous "unhuman whooping noise," had been drugged so that she would forget the pain she had. Esther was horrified, thinking the drug was "just like the sort of drug a man would invent. Here was a woman in terrible pain, obviously feeling every bit of it...and she would go straight home and start another baby, because the drug would make her forget how bad the pain had been, when all the time, in some secret part of her, that long, blind, doorless and windowless corridor of pain was waiting to open up and shut her in again."

*Esther is horrified by the drug on two counts. First, because it divorces mind from body, making a woman experience excruciating pain but denying her the mental memory of it (which could have helped her avoid repeating that pain in the future). Second, because it is strategically sexist, invented by men to trick women into bearing more children than they might have chosen to bear had they been aware of the pain of childbirth.*



It was a difficult birth and the doctors had to cut open Mrs. Tomolillo's vagina open to deliver the baby, but the baby was born intact and Mrs. Tomolillo got sewn up properly. Yet when they told her that the baby had been born, Mrs. Tomolillo was too drugged to understand and lay there unresponsive. Esther was appalled, having always felt that the most important thing about giving birth would be seeing "the baby come out of you yourself and making sure it was yours." She thought that it would be better to stay conscious if one had to be in so much pain anyway.

*As the drug denies women the memory of childbirth's pain, it also denies them the experience of childbirth's physical pleasures: Mrs. Tomolillo cannot witness the feat of her successful birth nor recognize the body of her new baby.*



Back in Buddy's room, Buddy had Esther read him a poem and explain the value of it, a ritual he'd initiated so that he might understand the worth of poetry and its importance to Esther.

*Buddy's ritual attempts to assess poetry through the rational evaluation systems of medicine and science.*



After hearing the poem, Buddy asked Esther if she'd ever seen a man naked and if she'd like to see him. She said she hadn't and she would. She thought how her mother and grandmother had been hinting to her "what a fine, clean boy Buddy Willard was...how he was the kind of person a girl should stay fine and clean for." Esther was unimpressed by Buddy's penis. She declined to undress in reciprocation, saying "Oh, some other time." She compared getting naked in front of Buddy to having "my Posture Picture taken at college." Buddy dressed.

*Esther's mother and grandmother are hinting at Esther to make sure she stays sexually pure (virginal) for Buddy. Buddy's unromantic manner saps the naked body of eroticism. Getting naked in front of him would, Esther feels, be no more romantic than undressing for her college nurses.*



Combing her hair in front of her face, Esther asked Buddy from behind the curtain of hair whether he'd ever had an affair. She'd expected him to say he was a virgin saving himself for marriage, but Buddy blushed and confessed to a summer-long affair with a waitress, Gladys, who seduced him while he was bussing tables in Cape Cod. Esther was blown away and inwardly furious, though she didn't let on. She thought how all through their courtship, Buddy had hypocritically acted like she was "much more sexy and experienced" when all along he was just pretending to be innocent. She observed how typical it was that "someone had seduced Buddy...it wasn't really his fault." She wasn't annoyed that Buddy had had sex, she was annoyed that he wouldn't own up to that experience in public, claiming instead to be so perfectly innocent.

*Esther uses her hair to create a physical barrier between herself and Buddy. Esther is appalled by the hypocrisy that has enabled Buddy to enjoy all the social approval earned by a virginal public image while also secretly getting to enjoy the sexual experimentation that society discourages. Laying the blame for the affair on the sexually-experienced Gladys, Buddy echoes the attitude of the movie Esther saw, which villainized and punished its sexually-experienced female lead.*



Esther asked Buddy what Mrs. Willard thought of his affair, since she knew he was very close to his mother and that Mrs. Willard was obsessed with virginity. Buddy was always praising his parents' marriage and quoting to Esther Mrs. Willard's conservative maxims about marriage, such as "a man is an arrow into the future and...a woman is the place the arrow shoots off from." Buddy said he had told his mother off, but Esther knew he was lying. Back at college, she asked other girls what they'd do if they found out about a boy's promiscuous past, and the girls shrugged it off saying "most boys were like that and you couldn't honestly accuse them of anything until you were at least pinned or engaged to be married."

*Mrs. Willard's obsession with virginity and sexist maxims and Esther's classmates' attitudes towards male promiscuity illustrate the predominant social dynamics between men and women at the time. 1950s society assumed a double standard for men and women, policing female virginity while condoning men's sexual experimentation.*



In the weeks after the visit, Esther decided to break up with Buddy, but just when she'd made the decision, he called distraught to tell her he'd contracted TB and was going to a sanatorium. He wanted Esther to promise to write and visit frequently, and she promised. She thought how he'd always been so proud of his good health and had attributed Esther's sinus ailments to "psychosomatic" causes. Esther had always "thought this an odd attitude for a doctor to have and perhaps he should study to be a psychiatrist instead." Esther thought Buddy's TB "might just be a punishment for living the kind of double life Buddy lived and feeling so superior to people."

Esther was secretly relieved that Buddy had TB as she was saved the trouble of telling everyone at college that she'd dumped him. She told everyone instead that she was waiting for Buddy to recover. For the rest of the year, Esther studied all weekend undisturbed by the other girls, who pitied her and assumed she was studying "to hide a broken heart."

## CHAPTER 7

Constantin arrives to pick Esther up from the Amazon and is not the disappointment she thought he would be. They bond over their mutual dislike for Mrs. Willard. Sitting in Esther's convertible en route to the UN where Constantin works as a simultaneous interpreter, Esther realizes she hasn't felt so happy since she was a child running on the beach with her father before he died. Esther reflects how strange it is that she's never realized this before, that all through the lessons and achievements of her youth, she's never actually been happy.

At the UN, Esther watches a Russian girl interpreter at work and wishes she "could crawl into her and spend the rest of my life barking out one idiom after another...one more little pebble of efficiency among all the other pebbles." Esther makes a mental tally of all the things she can't do: cooking, dancing, singing, balancing, horse-riding, skiing, speaking other languages, shorthand (which her mother keeps urging her to learn in order to be hireable as a secretary after college, but which Esther avoids since she "hated the idea of serving men in any way. I wanted to dictate my own thrilling letters."). Esther realizes she's "been inadequate all along," she just hasn't realized it in the past. Her one talent, she thinks, is "winning scholarships and prizes, and that era was coming to an end."

*Although society considers Buddy's behavior acceptable, Esther evaluates him according to her personal goals, deciding to break up because she doesn't want to date a hypocrite. Buddy's medical opinions display further hypocrisy, refusing to acknowledge the bodily illness he is supposedly studying to cure. Esther suspects Buddy's sick body might be a reflection of his sick (hypocritical) mind.*



*Buddy's illness allows Esther to escape the relationship without giving up her social capital among her peers, who would lose all respect for her if she threw away such a handsome, accomplished boyfriend as Buddy.*



*Esther's realization challenges her personal ambitions. Though her diligence and academic excellence have yielded many achievements, she suddenly realizes that they have not achieved her happiness.*



*Esther continues to reassess her own ambitions and values. Where she used to define herself in terms of her positive achievements (her academic excellence and myriad prizes), she now sees herself in negative terms, evaluating herself by what she can't do. She thinks her old value system (and her old sense of accomplishment within it) was only appropriate in an academic setting and can't be relied on in the world beyond college.*



Esther sees “my life branching out before me like the green fig-tree in the story” she’d read. Every branch grew a different future like a ripening fruit: being a poet or a professor or an editor or a world traveler or an athlete or having a host of exotic lovers. Esther sees herself “sitting in the crotch of this fig-tree, starving to death, just because I couldn’t make up my mind which of the figs I would choose,” since choosing one meant losing the rest.

Constantin takes Esther to an exotic restaurant and she feels better after eating. She wonders if her vision of the fig-tree of her life might simply have been caused by “the profound void of an empty stomach.”

During dinner, Esther decides to let Constantin seduce her. She has wanted to sleep with someone ever since she’s heard about Buddy’s affair, so that they’d be even. She accompanies Constantin up to his apartment and, as they sit listening to music and drinking wine, Esther calmly recalls warnings from her mother and the female lawyer who wrote an article called ‘In Defense of Chastity’ that there is no sure way to avoid a baby and that a girl should thus stay abstinent till marriage. The woman lawyer insisted that “a man’s world is different from a woman’s world and a man’s emotions different from a woman’s emotions” and only marriage could unite the two. The woman lawyer assured her readers that, no matter what men said, they would “lose all respect for” any girl that slept with them before marriage.

Esther reflects that the article didn’t consider “how a girl felt” and thinks how unfair it would be to stay pure for someone who wasn’t pure himself, like Buddy. The world Esther sees is one in which “pureness was the great issue...I saw the world divided into people who had slept with somebody and people who hadn’t.” Esther imagines she’ll be transformed by sex, that she’ll be able to see a tiny replica of the man she slept with in her eye in the **mirror**.

*Where Esther’s personal ambitions once offered her a clear roadmap for the future, her ambitions now arrest her in place and paralyze her with indecision. Note that all of Esther’s ambitions pursue unconventional careers for women in 1950s America.*



*Esther’s mood shift (and Plath’s use of the abstract, intellectual adjective ‘profound’ to describe her stomach) imply the close relatedness of mind and body.*



*Knowing about Buddy’s affair frees Esther, in her own mind, to pursue sexual experimentation for herself. However, her mother’s pamphlet articulates the sexist double standard supported by society at large. According to this standard, Esther is not free to experiment sexually no matter what Buddy does, because, as a woman, she is subject to different, stricter expectations than a man would be.*



*Esther recognizes and resents the deep injustice of her society’s different expectations for men and women. Esther expects that losing her virginity will not only transform her identity, but will alter her physical appearance as well.*



Esther says she's tired and goes to lie down on Constantin's bed. He follows her and lies down too. She watches him, finding him utterly beautiful. But she wonders whether he, like all the other men she's gotten to know, would seem to lose their beauty once she got to know him. They fall asleep. When she wakes, she looks at Constantin sleeping and imagines how unglamorous it would be to be married to Constantin, as to any man: she'd be stuck cooking and cleaning and slaving away, just as her mother and Mrs. Willard—who was educated and had once been a teacher—had been stuck. She recalls watching Mrs. Willard laboriously braid an elaborate rag rug to throw on the kitchen floor and thinking how, if she had braided the rug, she'd hang it on a wall. Esther thinks how getting married and having children is “like being brainwashed” into being “numb as a slave in some private, totalitarian state.”

*Esther recognizes that her attraction to Constantin's physical appearance is based on her lack of obligation to him and, were she bound to him in marriage, her attraction would fade. Her mother and Mrs. Willard's experiences demonstrate the social imperative for women to prioritize marriage and homemaking above all else (regardless of their personal merit, education, or aspirations). Esther, who has strong artistic ambitions for herself, cannot imagine devaluing her own creation the way Mrs. Willard did with the rag rug.*



Constantin wakes up and drives Esther home. She lies in bed, listening to rain and feeling an ache in her shin from an old leg-break. She thinks Buddy made her break it, then corrects the thought, thinking she broke it herself by being so stubborn.

*Esther's bodily sensation (her leg aching) triggers her mental action (recollection). Plath's prose frequently enters Esther's psychology through physical details.*



## CHAPTER 8

Esther begins to recollect the events leading up to her broken leg. The shy Mr. Willard drove her up to Buddy's sanatorium to visit. The whole ride, Esther wished she could turn around. Mr. Willard told her how she'd be the best daughter he and Mrs. Willard ever dreamed of having (implying that they give their blessing to her and Buddy's marriage). Esther cried and Mr. Willard assumed her tears were tears of gratitude.

*Mr. Willard assesses the situation according to social convention, assuming Esther would be overjoyed marry and become his daughter-in-law. But Esther's personal ambitions don't match up with social expectations for women and her tears are tears of sadness, not joy.*



Esther expected the sanatorium to be cheery and Swiss but it is glum and liver-colored. Buddy had grown grotesquely fat from inactivity and eating and Mr. Willard left almost immediately. Buddy explained to Esther that his father, never having been sick, loathes the sight of illness. In his room, Buddy showed Esther a horrible poem he's written and published and she mustered feigned praise.

*Esther's expectations for the sanatorium are romantic idealizations and don't match up with the medical reality. Buddy apparently thinks he can win Esther's affection by trying to achieve success in the field Esther herself aims to enter.*



Buddy asked Esther to marry him and Esther told him she'd never marry. Buddy cheerfully told her she was “crazy” and that she'd change her mind. Esther reminded him of a psychology questionnaire he'd once tried out on her and how her response that she'd like to live in the city and the country both had categorized her as a neurotic. She told him she could never settle down. “If neurotic is wanting two mutually exclusive things at one and the same time, then I'm neurotic as hell. I'll be flying back and forth between one mutually exclusive thing and another for the rest of my days,” Esther said. Buddy asked to fly with her.

*Trained by society to think that all women want to be wives, Buddy assumes that Esther, too, will end up embracing marriage. Esther tries to drive home to Buddy just how sharply at odds with social expectations her own ambitions are: she aspires to the very kind of life that normative society deems 'neurotic.'*



Later in the visit, Buddy tried to teach Esther to ski on a slope near the sanatorium. Neither he nor Esther had ever skied before. Still, Buddy insisted “the elementary principles were quite simple” and watching ski instructors teach had qualified him to teach Esther. After a half hour, he persuaded a nervous Esther to ride up to the top of the slope to ski down. Esther recalled that “it never occurred to me to say no.” Esther accidentally rode the rope tow up too far and stood at the top of the slope, looking down. She ignored the voice of reason telling her to be safe and walk back down. She coolly acknowledged her potential death.

Esther “aimed straight down” and sped down the hill. She felt her body flying towards the sun and thought, “This is what it is to be happy.” She “hurtled on to the still, bright point at the end [of the hill], the pebble at the bottom of the well, the white sweet baby in its mother’s belly.”

The next thing Esther knew, she was on the ground looking up at Buddy’s blurry face and people all around. Esther looked up at the “white sun” and “wanted to hone [herself] on it till she grew saintly and thin and essential as the blade of a knife.” She announced she’d ski the slope again, but Buddy, smiling, replied that she couldn’t because her leg was broken in two places.

## CHAPTER 9

One morning, Esther is stuck walking alone with Hilda, another contest winner who is a talented hat-maker but seems psychologically shallow, Esther tries to break the awkward silence by bringing up “how horrible” the Rosenbergs execution is. She thinks she’s inspired Hilda’s compassion but Hilda in fact remarks “It’s awful such people should be alive.” Esther thinks Hilda’s voice sounds like a dybuk (a possessing spirit). When Hilda yawns, Esther stares intrigued by “the blind cave behind her face.”

On her last day in New York, Esther feels she is going to cry, though she doesn’t know why. She is forced to sit in Jay Cee’s office for a last fashion shoot with the other contest winners. Each girl has to hold something to represent the career they aspire to but, when the photographers ask Esther what she wants to be, she says she doesn’t know. “She wants to be everything,” Jay Cee tells them. Esther says she wants to be a poet, but then can’t manage to smile as the photographer’s urge. She bursts into sobs and everyone leaves the office. When Esther sits up, she is alone and feels “limp and betrayed, like the skin shed by a terrible animal. It was a relief to be free of the animal, but it seemed to have taken my spirit with it.” In her compact **mirror**, her face appears to be the face of someone beaten up in jail, staring out between bars.

*Buddy’s arrogance can be read as further evidence of his social conditioning: he has been trained by the sexist society he lives in to think of himself as an authority figure, an instructor of women. Thus, it does not take much for Buddy to believe he is qualified to act as a ski instructor. It does not occur to Esther, who has been socially conditioned to look up to and obey men, to disobey Buddy’s instructions.*



*Esther once again accesses transcendent spiritual purity via bodily experience.*



*Intoxicated by the feeling of spiritual purity, Esther is eager to access that feeling again by repeating the physical action that led to it—so eager, in fact, that she seems not to have noticed the pain of a broken leg.*



*Though Esther at first thinks she’s found a way to connect to Hilda via mutual empathy for others’ pain, their conversation ultimately ends up distancing her even further from Hilda. The image of the dybuk dramatizes the divide between mind and body. In it, the voice (articulating thought) is motivated by a different spirit than the body is.*



*This is one of the first signs that Esther is beginning to lose control of her body. She cannot control her tears and feels, after sobbing, that her body has just been possessed. Her almost unrecognizable reflection in the mirror emphasizes her alienation from her body. Esther’s inability to articulate clear career aspirations (and Jay Cee’s quip) demonstrate how muddled and confusing Esther’s own sense of personal ambition has become.*



Jay Cee returns and hands Esther fiction submissions to read through. Esther thinks of her own fiction manuscript, which she has sent to apply to take a famous writer's course later that summer. She is certain she'll find her acceptance letter waiting for her at home. She thinks of sending Jay Cee stories under a pseudonym and of Jay Cee accepting them and scheduling lunch with the writer, who would turn out to be Esther.

Later that day, Doreen convinces Esther to come to a country club dance as the date of someone Lenny knows. Esther had been reluctant, having been unable to get her packing done. "It was becoming more and more difficult for me to decide to do anything in those last days," she recalls. She'd "stared at [her clothes], utterly perplexed." Doreen snowballed everything together and pushed it under the bed.

Doreen takes Esther to an apartment where she is introduced to Marco, her date, an immaculately dressed man with a diamond stickpin that entrances Esther. Esther walks in by "[putting] one foot in front of the other" and stares at the stickpin, which onlookers tease Marco into giving Esther. The others' faces, Esther sees, are "empty as plates, and nobody seemed to be breathing."

Marco says perhaps he will "perform some small service" for Esther that night that will be worth a diamond. He puts his arm around Esther and squeezes so hard she bruises. He reminds her of a snake she once angered at a zoo. He is "a woman-hater," which Esther knows because, at the party, Marco ignores all the models and actresses to pay attention to her, simply because "I'd happened to be dealt to him, like a playing card in a pack of identical cards." He decides what she should drink and forces her to dance the tango, instructing her to "pretend you are drowning." Esther thinks about how "woman-haters could make such fools of women. Woman-haters were like gods: invulnerable and chock-full of power...You could never catch one."

At a break in the music, Marco leads Esther into the garden outside the ballroom. Esther asks him who he's in love with and he tells her: his beautiful first cousin. They can't marry, and she's going to be a nun. When Esther assures him he'll love someone else eventually, he knocks her down in the mud and tears off her dress, calling her "slut" and getting ready to rape her: "he threw himself face down as if he would grind his body through me and into the mud." Esther sees her own naked skin "like a pale veil separating two blood-minded adversaries." Esther kicks and slams his nose and gets free from under him. "All sluts," Marco murmurs, "Yes or no, it is all the same."

*Even though Esther has, as the prior scene illustrated, lost a firm grasp on many of her old ambitions, she remains confident that she wants to keep on writing and to pursue literary achievement.*



*Esther's helplessness packing further demonstrates her slipping command over her own body. She is becoming unable to assert and carry out deliberate action.*



*Plath's prose shows Esther's growing alienation from her body by emphasizing the physical process of walking (which would normally be taken for granted) and portraying human facial expressions as empty and lifeless.*



*Marco's misogyny manifests as both physical and psychological aggression. Physically, he bruises Esther's flesh. Psychologically, he treats her as an interchangeable being without individual identity and instructs her to surrender her personal integrity by abandoning her agency on the dance floor.*



*Marco at first seems to separate women into two categories: beautiful women to be loved, like his cousin, and "sluts" to be raped, like Esther. Yet, his statement at scene's end grimly collapses the division. Plath's prose teases out the psychological import of the characters' physical actions: Marco's rape is motivated by his runaway anger and rabid destructiveness. Esther sees her own flesh as a screen between her and Marco's opposing wills.*



Marco demands his diamond stickpin, drawing two lines of blood from his nose on Esther's cheeks and saying he's earned the diamond with his blood. Esther considers lying to him to conceal the diamond for herself, but then decides to tell him the truth that it's in her purse fallen somewhere around them. She leaves Marco pawing in the dark mud. Back at the party, Esther tries to conceal her grass-matted, muddy back by standing close to the wall. She finds a place in a car driving back to Manhattan. Back at the Amazon, she climbs to the sunroof carrying the bundle of all her clothes and tosses each garment off the roof, watching it sail downwards. She "fed [her] wardrobe to the night wind....like a loved one's ashes."

*The image of Marco's bizarre gesture aptly illustrates his brutal psychological savagery. The action of tossing her old clothes into the night dramatizes Esther's abandonment of her old identity. Plath's metaphor—comparing the clothes to the ashes of a cremated loved one—further emphasizes the drama of that action.*



## CHAPTER 10

Esther rides the train back home to Boston wearing Betsy's borrowed clothes (she'd thrown everything of her own off the roof) and Marco's lines of blood, which she thinks "touching, and rather spectacular" and refuses to wash off. Looking at herself in her compact **mirror**, she looks "like a sick Indian." She doesn't "really see" why people stare at her, since lots of people "looked queerer than I did."

*Wearing someone else's clothes and marked by someone else's blood, Esther's bodily appearance echoes her rapidly transforming identity. Her inability to understand why other people are staring at her demonstrates her dissolving sense of social norms and expectations.*



Her mother picks Esther up at the station and tells Esther in the car that she hasn't been accepted to the fiction writing course she applied to. Esther is at first breathless, then thinks: "I had expected it." She rides back slumped in the back seat, feeling it is "very important not to be recognized."

*Esther continues to recalibrate her personal ambition, choosing to expect defeat now where she used to depend on victory. She slumps to avoid being associated with her prior appearance and identity.*



Alone in the house in the morning, (Her mother has left for her job teaching shorthand to city college girls), Esther crouches at the window to watch Dodo Conway, a short woman "with a grotesque, protruding stomach," walk her several small children and baby in stroller up and down the sidewalk. Dodo Conway is a Barnard graduate and Catholic who lives with her husband (a Columbia graduate) in a ramshackle, tree-screened, clutter-strewn house unlike everyone else's manicured lawns and little houses. She has six children she raises on cheap food. Everyone else in town has two or, if wealthy, four children. Still everyone is fond of Dodo, and Esther is interested in her "in spite of myself." Esther ducks when Dodo turns towards her window.

*Dodo Conway presents a model of womanhood that simultaneously aligns with and contradicts conventional social expectations for women. Though well educated, Dodo has given up her own career prospects in order to be a homemaker and mother (as society expects). On the other hand, Dodo has rejected social expectations governing propriety, moderation, and cleanliness by choosing to have many more children than the middle-class households around her and to raise her family in a chaotic, messy environment.*



The phone rings and Esther tries to disguise her voice in answering. It's her college friend Jody, calling about Esther's spot in a shared apartment they'd rented together when Esther thought she'd be taking the summer writing course. Esther tells Jody to give her room to someone else, though she immediately regrets this after hanging up. She thinks a summer living with her mother listening to Dodo Conway's stroller will drive her "crazy." Esther thinks, "I made a point of never living in the same house with my mother for more than a week." Nevertheless, she doesn't call Jody back and calls up the summer school to leave a message saying she won't be attending any classes at all.

On the kitchen table is a letter from Buddy saying he's "probably falling in love with a nurse who also had TB" but if Esther accompanied Mrs. Willard for a month-long visit to the sanatorium in July, he might forget about the nurse. Esther furiously crosses out his letter and writes a response on the back: she says she is engaged to a simultaneous interpreter and wants nothing to do with Buddy, not wanting to bear the children of a hypocrite. She tapes the paper back into Buddy's envelope.

Esther decides she will spend the summer writing a novel. She sits down at the typewriter. "From another, distanced mind, I saw myself sitting on the breezeway,...small as a doll in a doll's house." She is filled with tenderness by the image of herself and decides to make herself her novel's heroine, "only in disguise." She writes a beginning about a girl named Elaine sitting on a breezeway in the summer "waiting for something to happen." Esther sits for a long time trying to figure out what should happen after that.

Her mother returns in the afternoon and asks Esther shouldn't she get dressed, but Esther replies she doesn't have time to change clothes, she's writing a novel. Lying down despairing over her novel while her mother fixes supper, Esther decides that the reason she can't write is because she hasn't yet had enough experiences. Over supper, her mother convinces Esther to spend the summer learning shorthand, and Esther thinks this practical plan will satisfy the Scholarships Office at college, which expects her to have a summer job. Still, she knows there isn't a single career she wants that requires shorthand.

*Disguising her voice, Esther continues to distance herself from her old identity. Likewise, Esther grows further alienated from her past ambitions. Where she would once have avoided living in the suburbs with her mother and pursued summer school at all cost, she now makes arrangements to spend the summer at home, even though she knows she'll hate it.*



*Buddy's letter tries to manipulate Esther's attentions by making her jealous. Esther no longer feels obliged to restrain her anger towards Buddy and writes a letter designed to injure his spirits. Though the facts of the letter may not be true, the emotional fury it conveys is.*



*Esther retains her literary ambitions even as her other ambitions (like her academic goals) start to dissolve. Yet writing a novel about herself in the third person emphasizes the mental alienation Esther is already experiencing, watching herself "from another, distanced mind."*



*Again, Esther acts in direct contradiction to her own instincts and old ambitions. Though she has no desire to learn shorthand or to pursue the kind of (limiting) career that would require it, she consents to spend the summer learning it. From the conventionally minded perspective of her college's Scholarships Office, a summer spent learning shorthand would appear a responsible, worthy pursuit.*



That night, Esther can't sleep and stays awake all night concocting "plan after plan" for how she could spend the summer, "like a family of scatty rabbits" jumping in her mind. She envisions her nineteen years like a row of nineteen telephone poles but tries and fails to envision another pole. She thinks about twisting "the column of skin and sinew" from which "the piggish noise" of her mother's snore rises. After her mother leaves for work, she tries to hide from the light (which the "raw, red screen" of her eyelids can't shut out) by crawling under the mattress. Still, she wants something heavier over her to make her sleep.

Esther starts reading *Finnegan's Wake*, which she is supposed to write her thesis on in the fall semester at college (she has thought she might write her thesis this summer, to get ahead). After a few lines, "words, dimly familiar...twisted all awry, like faces in a funhouse **mirror**" and "fled past, leaving no impression on the glassy surface of my brain."

Esther decides to abandon her thesis and her honors program but, when she looks up requirements for a regular English major, she realizes that she isn't qualified (the honors program is much freer and has exempt her from courses ordinary students had to take). Then Esther looks up the requirements for English majors at the city college where her mother works, thinking she could transfer. But those requirements are even more rigorous and Esther meets even fewer of them. She has always "looked down" on her mother's college, but now realizes that even the worst students there are in fact more knowledgeable than Esther is. She decides to drop out of school for a year "and think things over."

A couple weeks later, Esther visits Teresa, her family doctor, to ask for more sleeping pills. (Teresa has already prescribed others in the past.) She explains that she needs the pills because she can't sleep or read. As she says this, Esther feels a "zombie" rising in her throat. Teresa refers her to Dr. Gordon, a psychiatrist.

## CHAPTER 11

Sitting in Dr. Gordon's office waiting room, Esther notices everything is beige and there are no **mirrors** or pictures, only framed certificates from medical schools. There are no windows, either, which makes Esther feel safe.

*As when she was overwhelmed by the branching fig-tree of possible career options, so too is Esther overwhelmed by the multiplicity of possible ways to spend her summer. Fractured and multiple, her ambitions now terrify her rather than offering guidance and security. Plath's description of Esther's mother's throat and of Esther's eyelids conveys Esther's increasingly estranged perspective on human body parts.*



*Esther's alienation from her body increases as her eyes lose the ability to read. Plath's comparison of the words to warped faces in a mirror points to literature's shifting identity in Esther's mind.*



*As when she was surprised to realize her own inadequacy while visiting the UN, Esther is now shocked to discover that certain populations she'd always looked down on in the past—non-honors English majors at her own college and English majors at the city college—were in fact accomplished in ways that she herself was not.*



*Esther asks for sleeping pills, assuming she can cure her sleeplessness by drugging her body. But Teresa recognizes that Esther's problem is psychological, not bodily, and refers her to a mental health specialist.*



*The medical office décor foregrounds cerebral over aesthetic values, displaying academic achievements (degrees) and forgoing attractive design (color, pictures, and natural lighting).*



Esther hasn't slept for a week. She is still wearing Betsy's clothes and hasn't washed them or herself since returning from New York three weeks ago because Esther thinks it seems "silly to wash one day when I would only have to wash again the next...I wanted to do everything once and for all and be through with it." She sees days as a series of "bright, white boxes" separated by "sleep, like a black shade," but now that she isn't sleeping, she can see straight ahead through time's "white, broad, infinitely desolate avenue."

In Dr. Gordon's office, Esther is disappointed to find the young, handsome doctor conceited and unhelpful. She had hoped for someone "kind, ugly, intuitive" who could have explained why she could no longer read, eat, sleep, or value human life (since every one only ended in death), and could have helped her "step by step, to be myself again." Esther is annoyed by Dr. Gordon's displayed family photo (as if to dissuade patients' attempts to seduce him) and by his suggestion that her problems are just in her head. Esther decides not to show him evidence of her newly demented handwriting, which she had discovered when trying to write a letter to Doreen that morning and which, of all her symptoms, troubles her "most of all." Dr. Gordon reminisces about the "pretty bunch of girls" he once knew at Esther's college, then dismisses her, telling her to return next week. In the parking lot, her mother sighs at the news of another appointment since Dr. Gordon is expensive.

On Boston Common a few days later, Esther is approached by a flirtatious young sailor. She tells him her name is Elly Higginbottom and she's from Chicago and allows him to put his arm around her and stroke her hip. Inwardly, Esther thinks she should go to Chicago, change her name to Elly Higginbottom, discard her old identity and be a simple, "sweet, quiet" orphan everyone is fond of and nobody expects great things from. She could marry a mechanic and have lot of kids like Dodo Conway.

Suddenly, Esther sees Mrs. Willard approaching on the Common and leaps back from the sailor, pretending just to be asking him directions. But the woman passes and is not, in fact, Mrs. Willard. Esther explains to the sailor that the woman was from her Chicago orphanage and begins to cry, comforted by the sailor. She thinks how that "awful" passing stranger was, unbeknownst to her, "responsible for my taking the wrong turn here and the wrong path there and for everything bad that happened after that."

*Esther's sleeplessness has made her a stranger in her own body, suddenly seeing its existence as a long, barren prison, a row of connected boxes containing her. As she becomes estranged from her body, she also ceases to observe social conventions of bodily hygiene, seeing no point in washing herself or changing her clothes.*



*Though Esther had had high hopes for a psychiatrist's ability to help her, she is utterly disappointed by Dr. Gordon. He is no help at all. Instead of trying to understand Esther's psychological condition, Dr. Gordon seems to assume that that condition is simply made-up and unworthy of his attention. He uses Esther's presence to focus egotistically on his own reminiscences about girls at her college. Esther's inability to make her hand write in her old handwriting further demonstrates her loss of control over her body.*



*Assuming an alternate identity, Esther attempts to free her mind from the strictures of her old self. Where she used to aspire to academic achievement and excellence, she now aspires to a life free of those old aspirations.*



*As she distances herself from her old identity and old ways of thinking, Esther also seems to lose track of the identities around her, first mistaking a stranger for Mrs. Willard and then mistaking that stranger for the instigator of her troubles. Mrs. Willard expects Esther to be virginal and prudent and would not approve of her flirting with a strange man.*



Back in Dr. Gordon's office, Esther tells an "unimpressed" Dr. Gordon that she feels the same (she hasn't slept in fourteen days now) and shows him the scraps of her demented handwriting, letting the pieces of torn up letter "flutter on to [his] immaculate green blotter." Dr. Gordon asks to speak privately to Esther's mother. Esther waits in the car. Her mother returns crying, telling Esther Dr. Gordon recommends electric shock treatments at his private hospital. Esther is intrigued, "as if I had just read a terrible newspaper headline about somebody else."

The day before she is scheduled to receive shock therapy, Esther sits in the park reading an article in a tabloid about a suicidal man talked back from the ledge of a building. She studies the man's face, feeling "he had something important to tell me, and that whatever it was might just be written on his face." But the image dissolves under her gaze. Tabloids, Esther reflects, are the only things she can read these days, the only writing whose letters don't "get cocky and wiggle about."

Esther notices children in a swan boat and sees in her mind's eye herself and her little brother riding a swan boat as children, "as if through the keyhole of a door I couldn't open." She walks through the park and, upon seeing a Weeping Scholar Tree from Japan, thinks how the Japanese "understood things of the spirit" by disemboweling themselves "when anything went wrong." She constructs an elaborate mental image of self-disembowelment.

Thinking about going to shock therapy the next morning with her mother and Dodo Conway driving, it occurs to Esther to run away to Chicago and she walks to the bus terminal. There, she realizes her bank is closed so she can't withdraw the money for a Chicago ticket. When she hears the announcement for a bus that stops next to her house, she hurries on to it.

## CHAPTER 12

The next day, Esther arrives at Dr. Gordon's private hospital for shock therapy and is surprised to see that the hospital is just a "normal," quiet house with unbarred windows and no signs of insanity. At first, the people sitting around the living-room look normal too, but then Esther realizes that "there was a uniformity to their faces" and that they either don't move or move in small, strange, "birdlike gestures." Sitting waiting among them, Esther feels she is in a window display of a huge department store and the patients around her "weren't people, but shop dummies, painted to resemble people and propped up in attitudes counterfeiting life."

*Though Esther tries to communicate her condition to Dr. Gordon, he does not take the opportunity to initiate talk therapy and instead decides to prescribe electric shock treatments.*



*As she studies the suicidal man's face, Esther presumes she can find psychological information inscribed on physical appearance. This assumption hearkens back to her belief that it is possible to perceive a person's lost virginity in that person's eyes.*



*As Esther grows more and more alienated from her present adult identity, she is also estranged from her past childhood identity. The Japanese custom Esther approves of unites body and mind by inflicting bodily wounds to reflect psychological (mental) wounds.*



*Esther's personal ambitions stay muddled and contradictory. Though she wants to go to Chicago and avoid shock therapy, she freely elects to ride home, knowing she'll be driven to the hospital the next day.*



*The appearance of the hospital and its residents provides a stark example of the divide between mind and body. Though the hospital and its patients present a physically normal appearance, that appearance belies their highly abnormal internal character.*



Dr. Gordon leads Esther to another wing of the hospital for her shock treatment. She had tried to ask questions about the treatment but found no words would come out of her mouth when she tried. On the walk there, she sees the windows in this part of the house are indeed barred and encounters a ranting woman restrained by a nurse. Esther lies down in the room for shock treatment and Dr. Gordon fits her head with metal plates and a wire bit. The shock treatment feels like intensely violent and jolting, “the end of the world.” Esther wonders “what terrible thing it was that I had done.”

In Dr. Gordon’s office, Esther lies and says she feels fine when she feels wretched. She remembers getting electrocuted in childhood by an old lamp. Dr. Gordon asks about Esther’s college and reminisces once again about his own past experience with it. He tells Esther’s tense mother that a few more shock treatments will yield “a wonderful improvement” in Esther. One of the mental patients in the living room sticks her tongue out at Esther and, when her mother and Dr. Gordon can’t see her, Esther pulls a face at the girl. On the ride home, Esther feels “dumb and subdued,” unable to concentrate on anything. She tells her mother to call Dr. Gordon and tell him she’s through with his treatments. Esther’s mother is relieved, saying she knew Esther wasn’t like “those awful dead people at that hospital” and that Esther would “decide to be all right again.”

Another day, Esther sits in the park in Boston reading a tabloid article about a dead starlet. She takes out a snapshot of herself she’d taken in a photobooth that day and holds it next to the newspaper photo of the dead starlet: “it matched, mouth for mouth, nose for nose.” She is sure that, were they open, the starlet’s eyes would match her own “dead, black, vacant expression” in the snapshot.

Esther thinks about how she’d tried to slit her wrists that morning. Her mind echoes with Jay Cee and Buddy’s discouraging assessments of her character: “the perfect set-up of a true neurotic”; “you’ll never get anywhere like that.” She hasn’t slept for three weeks. That morning, she’d tried but hadn’t been able to cut her wrist, whose skin “looked so white and defenseless.” Esther had thought, “It was as if what I wanted to kill wasn’t in that skin or the skin or the thin blue pulse that jumped under my thumb, but somewhere else, deeper, more secret, and a whole lot harder to get at.” Standing there in the bathroom, she’d tried standing in front of a **mirror**, thinking, “if I looked in the mirror while I did it, it would be like watching somebody else.” Still, “the person in the mirror was paralyzed and too stupid to do a thing” and she’d simply dropped the razor on her calf, seen the blood, and realized it was too late to kill herself (her mother would be getting home soon). Then she’d caught the bus to Boston.

*Plath’s prose captures the horrifying pain that electric shock treatments could inflict. Esther’s anguished thought, wondering what she has done wrong, expresses a disturbing medical dynamic whereby patients feel they are being punished rather than treated.*



*Dr. Gordon continues to reveal his own ineptitude and insensitivity as a psychiatrist. Esther chooses to engage with the other mental patients rather than considering herself above their antics, as Dr. Gordon and her mother do. Though she means well, Esther’s mother fundamentally misunderstands the nature of mental illness, thinking that it is a matter of choice and ‘deciding’ to be well rather than the involuntary disease it actually is.*



*Once again, Esther looks to others’ bodily appearances for indications of psychological affinity. As when she sought out the image of the suicidal man, Esther feels connected to someone else’s damaged body and unstable mind.*



*Esther’s suicide attempt demonstrates her alienation from her body while also showing her intractable connection to that body and that body’s wellbeing. She is affected by the vulnerability of her own flesh and recognizes that her flesh itself is not what she wants to kill. Rather, she seeks out something “deeper, more secret” lingering behind the skin. She thinks that looking at her mirrored reflection (rather than her flesh itself) might help her to feel more stoic towards her body and make suicide easier. Yet, as often, Esther’s limbs seem unable to carry out the task her mind wants them to perform.*



Esther gets a transit worker to explain to her how to get to Deer Island Prison by crying desperately and saying that her father is in the prison. When she gets to the beach in front of the prison, a guard stops her from walking it and she chats with him about the prison, which looks “friendly, like the buildings of a seaside college.” She tells him she used to live in the town by the prison, which is where he was born too. She thinks how nice it would have been to grow up and marry this prison guard. She asks him what it takes to get locked in the prison and he tells her that homeless people in Boston often break a store window at the start of winter in order to spend a few months in prison, protected from the cold. “That’s nice,” Esther says, and walks off down the beach.

Further down the beach, Esther sits on a log on a sandbar she remembers from her childhood. The beach is overrun with summer people, though Esther stands out as the only person in skirt and high heels. She contemplates slitting her wrists with the razors in her purse but realizes she has no warm bath. Esther is approached by a nagging little boy, Arthur, who warns her the tide is coming in, then pretends not to have been talking with her when his mother calls for him. He leaves. Esther sits still, “as if the sea could make my decision for me.” The freezing tide reaches her feet. “My flesh winced, in cowardice, from such a death,” Esther thinks, and rises to retreat back up the beach.

## CHAPTER 13

A week later, Esther lies on a beach with her friend Jody, Jody’s boyfriend Mark, and Cal, a boy Jody’s set Esther up with. Esther had expected the others to notice that she “didn’t have a brain in [her] head,” but so far everything’s been normal. She and Cal discuss a play in which a mother has to decide whether or not to kill her insane son (Esther notes that she’s forgotten everything she’s ever read, except for everything she’s ever read about insane people). Esther shifts the conversation towards the best way to commit suicide. When Cal says he’d kill himself with his father’s gun, Esther asks if his father lives in Boston. (He doesn’t).

It’s now been four weeks since Esther has slept and she Jody, Mark, and Cal’s company tests her nerves, which she feels emitting smoke “like the smoke from the grills. The whole landscape...quavered in front of my eyes like a stage backcloth.” She thinks she might soon snap and start babbling about her sleeplessness and inability to read or write. She announces she’s going for a swim and Jody urges Cal to accompany her. Esther challenges him to swim out to a far rock. After a while, Cal turns back, exhausted, but Esther keeps on, thinking she’ll swim until she’s too tired to swim the return. She hears her heartbeat in her ears “like a dull motor...I am I am I am.”

*As the mental hospital’s physical appearance seemed out of line with its function, so too does the prison’s cheery look contradict its grim purpose. Esther’s thought that it would have been nice to marry the prison guard, and that it might even be nice to spend a winter in prison, represents a new understanding of what is “nice” and worth aspiring to, an understanding she would not have related to in the past.*



*Esther’s physical appearance sets her apart from the other beachgoers and makes her seem questionable, strange—the kind of person Arthur wouldn’t want his mother to see him talking to. Though Esther is mentally attracted to the prospect of letting the sea rise over and drown her, her body would not be able to sit still for such a death.*



*Esther expects her mental distress to transform her physical appearance and to be visible to Jody, but this isn’t the case. Esther’s old ambitions have been recalibrated to suit her mental illness. She now focuses all her energies on contemplating insanity and suicide.*



*Plath’s metaphors render the abstract concrete by transforming strained nerves—a psychological state—into a smoking grill and the conceptual fact of existence into a physical, audible rhythm played out by the body’s heartbeat (“I am I am I am”).*



Esther recalls how she'd tried to hang herself that morning. She'd made a noose from the cord of her mother's bathrobe but then couldn't find a place in the house to hang the rope from. Then, she'd tried to pull the cord with her hands to strangle herself, but her hands kept loosening their grip at the crucial moment of her own accord. "I saw the body had all sort of little tricks," Esther had thought, "which would save it, time and again, whereas if I had the whole say, I would be dead in a flash." She realizes that she'll have to "ambush" her body "with whatever sense I had left, or it would trap me in its stupid cage for fifty years without any sense at all."

Esther has discovered, from reading abnormal psychology paperbacks and comparing her own symptoms, that her case is incurable. Though she considers turning herself over to an asylum, the memory of Dr. Gordon's horrible shock therapy prevents her from doing so. She thought how, institutionalized, she would be gradually moved into worse and worse hospitals, from private to public as her family's money ran out. She imagines being locked in a basement with the other incurable cases. "The more hopeless you were, the further away they hid you."

Still swimming towards the rock, Esther watches Cal swim back to the shore and walk up the beach, a "worm...among dozens and dozens of other worms." She realizes that, if she reaches the rock, her "body would take that excuse to climb out...gathering strength to swim back." Esther tries to drown herself right there, diving down again and again. Again and again, she resurfaces. "I knew when I was beaten," Esther thinks, and swims back.

Another day, Esther goes to visit her father's grave. On the way, she thinks how she'd like to become a Catholic so that the other Catholics might persuade her not to kill herself. Esther had asked her mother about becoming a Catholic nun, which her mother had laughed at, explaining that you needed to meet many requirements to be a nun. Esther imagines going to a Boston priest so that her hometown priest wouldn't know she was contemplating suicide.

*Esther's alienation from her body has reached a new extreme. She now sees her body as a direct antagonist to her mind, an enemy that she will have to plot against ("ambush") in order to get what she wants (death). Through the warped perspective of her mental illness, death appears a victory, an escape from psychological distress, rather than a tragic loss of life.*



*Esther trusts the pop psychology paperbacks she reads but they are of dubious medical authority. Where Esther once felt hopeful that psychiatry could help her, Dr. Gordon's horrific care has made her think of psychiatry as a danger to be avoided, a practice specializing in painful, forced entrapment.*



*Esther's alienation from her own body alienates her from other human bodies as well: they look like worms to her. When she tries and fails to drown herself, Esther's language (being "beaten") emphasizes her understanding of her body as her mind's enemy.*



*As when she considered becoming a non-honors English major, Esther discovers that she in fact lacks the qualifications to do something that she'd previously assumed was easy.*



Reaching the cemetery, Esther thinks how strange it is that nobody has ever come to visit her father's grave. Her mother had not even let Esther come to his funeral, since she'd been just a child then. Because she'd missed the funeral, her father's death "had always seemed unreal" to Esther. Of late, she's longed to begin tending his grave. She searches for it, wearing the black raincoat she bought with the last of her savings from her New York salary. She'd decided to kill herself once she exhausted those savings. At last, she finds her father's grave, crowded beside another grave. She kneels to place wild flowers on it. Esther thinks, "I couldn't understand why I was crying so hard. Then I remembered that I had never cried for my father's death. My mother hadn't cried either." She weeps.

Next day, Esther leaps up as soon as her mother leaves for work. She has a suicide plan and leaves a note on the table telling her mother she is going for a long walk. She retrieves the bottle of sleeping pills from where her mother keeps them hidden in her closet. She takes a glass of water with her down to the cellar and crawls into an old "earth-bottomed crevice" whose mouth opens on the cellar. She replaces the logs to cover the mouth of the crevice. In the dark, she lies, "wrapping my black coat round me like my own sweet shadow," and swallows each pill with a sip of water. As she reaches the end of the bottle, she sees lights flash and passes out.

## CHAPTER 14

Esther regains consciousness in darkness, to the sound of somebody "moaning," then crying "mother!" She feels a chisel periodically crack her eyelid to let light in "till the darkness clamped shut on it again." Next she comes to consciousness on a bed, again in darkness, with "a cheery voice" telling her she'd "marry a nice blind man some day." Next she comes to consciousness when a man "loosened something" above her eye, and she sees light again. He assures Esther she is not blind as she thinks she is.

Esther wakes up in a hospital bed and receives an unwelcome visit from her distraught mother and brother, home from his summer in Germany. She denies her mother's claim that Esther called for her. Esther receives another unwelcome visit from George Bakewell, a distant one-time acquaintance who is now a doctor. Feeling George doesn't care about her but only wants to get a glimpse of an insane person, Esther orders him out of her room.

*Because she hasn't ever had the opportunity to confront her father's grave (the physical testament to his death) Esther has always felt his death to be somehow abstract, "unreal." Yet seeing the grave now drives the fact of his death home to her. Her tears surprise her, producing another instance of her estrangement from her body. Yet these tears are also the long-delayed recognition of a grief that has been denied expression since her childhood.*



*This suicide attempt seems much more successful than her previous ones, and Esther is well on her way to "winning" the battle against her body. The physical symbolism of the underground crevice emphasizes Esther's mortal intention: crawling into it, she is crawling into her own grave.*



*Esther returns to consciousness utterly powerless over her body. The moaning and call presumably issue from her own mouth but she hears them as if uttered by someone else's voice. She cannot even open her eyes and experiences vision as something someone chisels open or loosens on her face.*



*Though George Bakewell is a doctor, Esther senses that he is simply using his medical position as an excuse to ogle her condition, and bitterly resents him for it.*



Later, Esther ignores the nurse's warning and persuades the nurse to give her a **mirror**. At first, Esther thinks what she's handed isn't a mirror "but a picture" depicting a shaved and bloated head bruised multiple brilliant colors and raw with mouth sores. Esther smiles at the pictured face and the face smiles back. Esther drops the mirror, breaking it and causing commotion among the nurses who scold her and say she'll get her due "at you-know-where." Later, Esther is transported by ambulance to the psychiatric ward of the city hospital (the town hospital has no psych ward). Her mother rides with her, saying that, had she not broken the mirror, she might not have been moved.

Later, Esther lies in bed in the city hospital psych ward. In the bed next to her lies an Italian woman who says she got admitted for sticking her tongue out at her mother-in-law. When she hears Esther tried to commit suicide, she stops conversing with Esther. A group of doctors enter to examine the patients and ask Esther how she feels. She says "lousy" and explains she can't sleep or eat, but the doctors protest that she slept last night and she herself realizes she's been "eating ravenously" ever since gaining consciousness.

The group of doctors move on to examine the Italian woman and Esther hears them call her by an Italian name with many L's, "like Mrs. Tomolillo." From this point on, Esther refers to the woman as Mrs. Tomolillo. Mrs. Tomolillo points and whispers to the doctors about Esther and asks the doctors to close the bed-curtain between them, which they do.

Another day, Esther sits on a bench outside the hospital with her mother. She sees Mrs. Tomolillo, sitting nearby, is imitating her mother but every time she tells her mother to turn around to see, Mrs. Tomolillo reverts to normal and Esther's mother doesn't believe her. Doctors keep coming up to Esther to introduce themselves. Esther thinks that some of them are too young to be doctors and suspects they are giving her false names. She thinks they are recording her conversation with her mother. She begs her mother to get her out of the hospital and, to Esther's surprise, her mother agrees, on the condition that Esther promise to "be good" and start cooperating with hospital staff.

Later, in the psychiatric ward's dining hall, Esther watches another patient, Mrs. Mole, get sent to her room for dumping a tureen of beans on her plate. Esther watches the new attendant gawk at them all, "his first crazy people." He tries to clear away some of the patients' plates before they've been served, and Esther tells him to wait. He mockingly calls her "Miss Mucky-Muck" under his breath. On her way out of the dining hall, Esther kicks him hard, saying "That's what you get."

*Esther's inability to recognize her own reflected face in the mirror shows just how wide the divide between her mind and body has become. The nurse's scolding promises of punishment and her mother's explanation of why Esther is being moved to the psychiatric ward infantilize Esther and treat her mental illness as if it were petulant misbehavior rather than the serious disease it is.*



*Esther's suicidal depression frightens the woman lying next to her, who apparently considers her own mental illness to be superior to Esther's. Esther's identity is again in flux as her suicide has distanced her from the non-sleeping, non-eating person she had become before trying to kill herself.*



*Through the warped perspective of her mental illness, Esther conflates the identity of the woman she watched give birth at Buddy's medical school with the identity of this woman in the psychiatric ward.*



*Esther's extreme paranoia about Mrs. Tomolillo's mimicry and the doctors' false names is evidence of her own mental instability. Esther's mother, as usual, does not understand the nature of mental illness and thinks that Esther is in voluntary control of her own behavior.*



*Esther is as annoyed by the new attendant's voyeuristic ogling as she was by George Bakewell's. At first, she tries to preserve her and the rest of the patients' dignity in his eyes by reasoning with him, asking him to treat them like deserving human beings. When he doesn't respond, she resorts to physical violence.*



Another day, as the nurse reads the thermometer she uses to take Esther's temperature each day, Esther asks why they keep taking her temperature when it's "normal." Esther thinks, but doesn't say, that she *wishes* something were wrong with her body: "I would rather have anything wrong with my body than something wrong with my head." But she finds the idea too "wearisome" to articulate.

Seeing the nurse's tray of thermometers propped on the covers over her feet, Esther slyly kicks the tray off and the thermometers shatter. The nurse is furious and doesn't believe Esther's claim that it was an accident. Esther manages to scoop up a ball of mercury before being hurried off and locked up in Mrs. Mole's old room. The new attendant grins at her through the locked door. Esther ignores him and plays with her mercury. "If I dropped it, it would break into a million little replicas of itself," she thinks, "and if I pushed them near each other, they would fuse, without a crack, into one whole again." Esther doesn't know what's been done with Mrs. Mole.

## CHAPTER 15

Some days later, Esther is being driven in Philomena Guinea's chauffeured car to a private mental asylum. Her mother and brother sit on either side of her in the back seat. Her mother has explained that Philomena Guinea read about Esther's story in a paper and telegraphed to find out if there was "a boy in the case." When Esther's mother explained that Esther was driven mad by fear that she might never write again, Philomena Guinea flew back from Barbados and sponsored Esther's move to a private hospital. Philomena Guinea had, apparently, herself been institutionalized at the height of her career. Esther's mother urges her to be grateful, but Esther is numb. She feels that no matter where she is, she "would be sitting under the same glass **bell jar**, stewing in my own sour air."

Esther is surprised by how open and unsupervised the new hospital is, and suspects that the other patients (cheerfully reading magazines and playing badminton) might not actually be crazy. She is introduced to her (female) doctor, Dr. Nolan, and to a bunch of (male) doctors, of whom there are so many, that she suspects the introductions are a test.

*Though the medical establishment around her keeps on monitoring Esther's physical health, Esther knows that her illness is not bodily but mental.*



*Esther is punished by being put in solitary confinement, a common practice used to discipline misbehaving psychiatric patients at the time. Esther's game with the mercury could be seen as a symbol for her fluctuating identity. The shiny, silver pieces of mercury resemble pieces of a mirror. Esther fractures and fuses them as she continues to fracture and recombine the pieces of her own identity.*



*With Philomena Guinea's sympathetic assistance, Esther will be spared the frightening, brutal environments of public psychiatric facilities. Still, Esther feels unable to appreciate this assistance. Her mental illness traps her in the warped space of her own mind, a condition she compares to being placed under a bell jar, unable to relate to or interact meaningfully with the world around her.*



*Accustomed to the more restricted environment of the city hospital, Esther suspects that the plush, liberated environment of the private asylum is a sham. In psychiatry, as in many professional careers of the 1950s, men far outnumbered women.*



Later, Dr. Nolan visits Esther in her room and asks about her experience with Dr. Gordon. At first, Esther is reluctant to tell the truth, wary that “the doctors must all be in it together.” But when she tells Dr. Nolan her honest feelings, Dr. Nolan comforts her, assuring Esther that Dr. Gordon’s painful treatments were a mistake, that electric shock (performed properly) isn’t painful, and that she will personally tell Esther beforehand if she ever has to get shock treatments again. When Dr. Nolan leaves behind her matchbox, Esther wonders if Dr. Nolan is testing her. She stores the matches in her bathrobe hem.

In her first weeks at the new hospital, Esther visits a new patient on her ward, Miss Norris, who is polite but silent and seems as oblivious to Esther’s presence as she is convinced that there are large barriers she must step over to get through each doorjamb. Esther fattens as she receives thrice-daily insulin injections, administered so she can have “a reaction” that never seems to come. Esther walks the grounds with Valerie, another patient in her ward (Caplan) who used to be very angry and in a more restrictive ward for more serious cases (Wymark). Then Valerie got a lobotomy (she shows Esther the scars), became calm-mannered, and has enjoyed freedoms to visit town or go shopping ever since. When Esther asks when she thinks she’ll get out Valerie, laughing, responds she isn’t leaving because she likes it at the hospital.

Some time later, Esther is moved into a sunnier room in Caplan the same day that Miss Norris (over whom Esther has kept frequent, futile vigils, hoping to hear her speak) is getting moved to Wymark. A nurse tells Esther that a friend has come to Caplan and urges Esther to visit. Esther complies and is flabbergasted to find Joan Gilling.

## CHAPTER 16

Joan explains how reading about Esther’s presumed suicide in the papers inspired Joan to kill herself too. She’d been having a wretched summer trying to secretary while plagued by bunions, and the doctors she’d seen had been largely unsympathetic, suggesting she treat her suicidal feelings with group therapy. Joan was admitted to the hospital after she’d gone to New York to try to kill herself and failed in the attempt. She gives Esther the newspaper clippings about her disappearance and eventual discovery. Esther at first doesn’t recognize two of the smudgy printed photographs of herself. The last photograph is of her when she was found in the basement, and depicts “a long, limp blanket roll with a featureless cabbage head” being lifted into the back of an ambulance.

*It’s immediately apparent that Dr. Nolan is a superior psychiatrist to Dr. Gordon. She actually listens to Esther, considers Esther’s perspective, and promises to honor Esther’s health and happiness. In so doing, she wins Esther’s trust.*



*Like Esther’s, Miss Norris’ mental illness manifests as a disassociation of body and mind. She is oblivious to the actual physical characteristics of her environment and seems unable to make herself speak. Insulin injections and lobotomies were popular psychiatric treatments of the era. Yet the seeming ineffectiveness of the insulin injections on Esther and the frightening consequences of Valerie’s lobotomy (she now has no desire to reenter the healthy world) call the usefulness of these treatments into question.*



*Within the hierarchy of the asylum, Esther is moving up (being shifted to a nicer room) while Miss Norris is descending (being shifted to Wymark, the house for more serious cases).*



*By emulating her suicide, Joan holds an eerie mirror up to Esther’s own identity and behavior. Esther’s inability to recognize her own photographs in the paper stands in stark contrast to earlier scenes where she identified with newspaper photos of strangers. Like Esther’s experience with Dr. Gordon, Joan, too, has suffered some ineffective psychiatrists.*



Esther's falls asleep after dinner and wakes up to a loud voice repeatedly shouting "Mrs. Banister!" (Mrs. Bannister is the night nurse.) Esther realizes she is the one shouting and beating her bedpost. Mrs. Bannister runs over and, smiling, tells Esther she's "had a reaction." Esther says she feels "funny," and Mrs. Bannister assures her she'll "be better now."

*Esther's long-awaited reaction to the insulin treatments manifests in extreme alienation between mind and body—she does not even recognize her own voice shouting.*



During her next visit to Dr. Nolan's office, Dr. Nolan brings up the reaction. Esther says she felt better at first after it but doesn't anymore. Esther still lives in fear that any day, Dr. Nolan might prescribe shock treatments.

*Even after the insulin treatment has finally taken effect, its effects seem negligible.*



Dr. Nolan tells Esther she has good news: Esther won't be receiving any more visitors. Esther is surprised and delighted. She's thinks about how she's suffered an endless stream of visitors since arriving, everyone from her former employer to her former English teacher to Philomena Guinea to a Unitarian minister to her mother. Esther has despised these visits, "feeling the visitors measuring my fat and stringy hair against what I had been and what they wanted me to be."

*From the perspective of Esther's visitors, Esther's failures as a person are manifest in her physical appearance. They want her to be restored to the old Esther, whose well-kempt appearance reflected her academic excellence and social propriety.*



Esther thinks about how most of the visitors have been nervous around her and have tried to dispense advice. Her aggrieved mother keeps asking Esther "to tell her what she had done wrong" and says the doctors keep asking her about Esther's toilet training (which had been painless). That afternoon, her mother had brought her roses for her birthday. Esther had dumped the roses in the trashcan. Esther tells Dr. Nolan that she hates her mother. Dr. Nolan smiles "as if something had pleased her very, very much, and [says], 'I suppose you do.'"

*The doctors' inquiries about Esther's toilet training are evidence of contemporary psychiatric practice's commitment to the theories of Sigmund Freud, who thought that adult mental health could be traced back to childhood development and experiences.*



## CHAPTER 17

Some days later, a nurse tells Esther that she'll be moving to Belsize, the best house at the hospital (and the one from which people went back to their lives in the real world). Esther insists she's not ready, but the nurse tells her not to worry. Joan, Esther knows, is already at Belsize, having swiftly escalated through the hospital hierarchy. "Joan was the beaming double of my old best self," Esther thinks, "specially designed to follow and torment me."

*Esther now operates within the mental asylum's value system where achievement is measured in terms of movement through the various houses. Joan's experiences continue to serve as an eerie mirror to Esther's own.*



At Belsize, Esther feels intimidated by the fashionable, poised women, who chat and joke and play the piano and bridge. Joan treats Esther "coolly, with a slight sneer." Esther worries the women think "people like me" should be put in Wymark. In the evening, she sits politely on the sidelines of the women's jolly activity.

*Joan's superior airs and Esther's anxieties about the other women's opinions reflect the evaluative hierarchy of the asylum. Joan feels "better than" Esther simply for having moved to Belsize sooner.*



Later in the evening, Joan discovers a picture of Esther from her New York days printed in a magazine. Joan and the other women ask Esther if the girl in the picture is her, and Esther insists it is not, even as the other women insist hopefully that it must be her. "It's somebody else," Esther tells them.

*As with the photos in the newspaper clippings Joan showed her, Esther is unable to identify with the bodily image of her healthy self.*



A few minutes later, the night nurse joins some of the patients to play bridge and complains about her other job at the state asylum, which makes the private asylum look like a "country club." Esther feels "the nurse had been instructed to show me my alternatives. Either I got better, or I fell, down, down, down...from Belsize, to Caplan, to Wymark and finally...to the state place next-door."

*Though Esther has grown used to the plush comforts of the private mental asylum, the night nurse reminds her of uncomfortable facilities in the public system.*



One morning, Esther is not served a breakfast tray, which terrifies her, as she knows that only patients scheduled for electric shock don't get trays. She runs down the hall to hide, terrified and furious that Dr. Nolan, whom she loves and trusts, has broken her promise to warn Esther in advance about shock treatments. Dr. Nolan finds Esther crouched in an alcove and explains that she *has* come to warn Esther, that she didn't realize Esther would discover the fact through the breakfast trays, and that she's going to personally escort Esther to the treatment and will be there when Esther wakes up. She leads Esther to the treatment room and where Miss Huey, the attendant, soothingly assures Esther there won't be pain. Indeed, as soon as the treatment starts, Esther blacks out without pain.

*What at first seems like a breach of trust turns out to be a simple misunderstanding. Dr. Nolan is the compassionate, sympathetic psychiatrist she has always claimed to be. Indeed, she fulfills her promise to administer electric shock therapy correctly and painlessly, and Esther is able to experience the treatment in its ideal form (rather than in its misapplication by Dr. Gordon).*



## CHAPTER 18

Esther wakes from her shock treatment to Dr. Nolan's voice calling her. She can see a woman's torqued body on a bed near her but Dr. Nolan quickly ushers her out of the room. The treatment was, Esther agrees, as Dr. Nolan had promised: pain free. Esther feels "surprisingly at peace. The **bell jar** hung, suspended, a few feet above my head." Dr. Nolan assures Esther all the treatments will be this way and tells her she will be having them thrice a week.

*In addition to being as painless as Dr. Nolan promised, the electric shock therapy is also as effective as Dr. Nolan promised. It has freed Esther from the bell jar of her mental illness.*



Eating breakfast after treatment, Esther looks at her knife, trying to think what she "had loved knives for." She can't think of the answer. Her "mind slipped from the noose of the thought and swung, like a bird, in the center of empty air."

*Still, despite its effectiveness, the shock treatment yields disturbing consequences. In its wake, Esther's mind is slower moving, emptier.*



Some days later, Joan visits Esther's room to brag about a letter from Buddy. Esther is reading. Her shock treatments are over and she has town privileges now. Joan, who has been worsening, has been hanging about Esther as if to siphon some of Esther's recovery. Esther shows Joan that she, too, has gotten a letter from Buddy. Buddy has asked both women if he can come and visit. Esther thinks she might let him, as it "would be a step" for her to renounce him even when she had no one, to face up to the truth. Joan says she will let him in order to see "wonderful" Mrs. Willard, who she always preferred to Buddy and who she will ask Buddy to bring along on the visit.

Esther thinks back to that morning when she'd walked into the room of another Belsize patient, DeeDee, thinking the room was empty and wanting to pick up some sheet music. In the dark room, she'd seen Dee Dee lying back on the bed pillows, barelegged and smiling, and Joan rising up from the bed, adjusting her hair. Now, Joan says she'd never liked Buddy, who "thought he knew everything about women..."

Esther is slightly creeped out but mostly fascinated by Joan, whose "thoughts and feelings seemed a wry, black image of my own." Esther wonders "if I made Joan up...if she would continue to pop in at every crisis of my life to remind me of what I had been, and what I had been through, and carry on her own separate but similar crisis under my nose."

That morning, during her session with Dr. Nolan, Esther had professed not to understand what a woman could find in a woman that she couldn't in a man. "Tenderness," Dr. Nolan had replied. Now, Joan tells Esther she likes Esther "better than Buddy." She stretches out on Esther's bed. Esther remembers a minor scandal about two unpopular girls having an affair in college. Esther had tried, back then, to get details about it, hoping to discover some "specific evil," but to no avail. Esther also remembers the famous lesbian poet at her college's appall when Esther suggested getting married and having children: "what about your *career*?" the poet had exclaimed. Now, Esther tells Joan flat out "I don't like you. You make me want to puke," and leaves the room.

Some time later, Esther goes to get fitted for a diaphragm in Boston at the encouragement of Dr. Nolan, who has laughed off the abstinence injunctions Esther's heard as "propaganda." In the waiting room, Esther sits surrounded by women with babies, feeling bewildered by these women's contentment. "If I had to wait on a baby all day," Esther thinks, "I would go mad." Esther has concocted an elaborate excuse to tell the doctor about why she needs a diaphragm but, when she sees his matter-of-fact, cheerful manner, she doesn't tell it.

*The system of privileges, like the system of houses, is another aspect of the mental asylum's value system and hierarchy of achievement. Esther is attracted to seeing Buddy again because she feels that telling him the honest truth about her feelings would mark a personal accomplishment.*



*By exploring a lesbian affair, Joan challenges conventional societal expectations about female sexuality, virginity, and behavior.*



*Again, Esther views Joan as a kind of strange mirror, "a wry black image" of Esther's own behavior and circumstances.*



*Esther is intellectually intrigued by the prospect of lesbianism and the freedoms from male chauvinism and conventional female roles that life as a lesbian might offer. However, she is sexually uninterested in other women and makes that disinterest emphatically clear to Joan.*



*Esther is used to thinking about sex and virginity in terms of the obsession with purity and shame about sexuality that she has learned from her mother and from her society at large. Yet neither Dr. Nolan nor the doctor fitting her for a diaphragm give any weight to those conventional views.*



Climbing up to the examination table, Esther thinks, “I am climbing to freedom, freedom from fear, freedom from marrying the wrong person, like Buddy Willard, just because of sex, freedom from the...Homes where all the poor girls go who should have been fitted out like me.” She returns to the asylum with her diagram in a box, feeling independent and pleased with herself.

*Esther understands that the physical freedom to engage in premarital sex is also a psychological freedom—not to be beholden to men, not to have to restrict one’s own experiences or police one’s virginity. She relishes it as a form of spiritual liberation.*



## CHAPTER 19

Some time later, Joan announces to Esther that she’s going to be a psychiatrist, a plan supported by her own psychiatrist, Dr. Quinn, whose “abstract quality” entails discussion of “Egos and Ids” and gives Esther “chills.” Joan brags that she is also moving out of the asylum by becoming one of the nurse’s roommates. Esther is jealous that Joan will beat her out the door, though she herself will leave the asylum, too, in a more permanent capacity than Joan: she will be returning to college for the winter term. She is just staying on at the asylum until then, as the doctors have vetoed her spending the interval with her mother back home.

*Dr. Quinn’s terminology again reflects 1950s psychiatric practice’s strong grounding in Freudian theory, which posited the human psyche in terms of an “id” (conducting primal urges), a “superego” (conducting social expectations), and an “ego” (balancing the self between the other forces).*



Some time later, Esther loses her virginity to Irwin, a math professor she met on the steps of the Harvard library and decided to seduce after seeing his book-crammed study. While Esther was visiting his study, Irwin was visited by and turned away another woman, who Esther assumes he’s been sexually involved with. After meeting him she called for permission to stay overnight in town, telling Dr. Nolan she’d sleep over with Joan. Esther feels that her virginity has “weighed like a millstone around my neck” ever since she found out about Buddy’s affair. She is eager to discard her virginity with Irwin, who she thinks an ideal candidate to lose it to because he is both intelligent and experienced.

*Compared to Esther’s other experiences with men, Esther’s interaction with Irwin demonstrates her new self-empowerment and confidence. She deliberately chooses Irwin as the person she wants to lose her virginity to; she herself arranges the circumstances under which that experience can occur.*



Esther expects sex with Irwin to yield a “miraculous change” in her, but she only feels pain. She asks Irwin if pain is normal. He says it is and gets up to shower. Esther feels a lot of blood seeping between her legs. Irwin comes back and assures her it’ll be fine, though Esther is bleeding enough to drench several towels. She has Irwin drive her to Joan’s apartment in Cambridge and tells a befuddled Joan to call a doctor because she’s hemorrhaging. Esther avoids telling Joan she’s just lost her virginity. After several doctors hang up when Joan says it’s a problem about “a period,” Esther has Joan bring her to the Emergency Room in a taxi and Esther manages to tell a nurse there the truth without Joan hearing. A doctor tells Esther her case is “one in a million” and fixes her up.

*Despite Esther’s new enlightenment regarding birth control and premarital sex, she has retained her old romantic imagination about losing her virginity, a fantasy that is quickly dashed by unromantic physical reality. Not only does sex fail to trigger her spiritual transformation, it ends up causing Esther great pain and near death from loss of blood. Despite the doctor’s snark, he acts as a force for good and manages to save Esther’s life.*



Back at the asylum some days later, Esther is awakened in the night by Dr. Quinn looking for Joan. Since her brief stint in Cambridge, Joan has returned to Belsize to live but has free town privileges. She has apparently not returned from a trip to the movie and can't be found. Esther has no leads. At dawn, Dr. Quinn returns to tell Esther that Joan has been found dead, having hung herself in the woods of the asylum.

*Joan's warped reflection of Esther's life warps even further. Like Esther, Joan has made multiple suicide attempts. Yet unlike Esther, Joan has managed to succeed in one of her attempts. Her death makes Esther seem even luckier to be alive, to have won out against suicidal depression.*



## CHAPTER 20

It's January and Esther will soon return to college. She has only to pass next week's interview with a board of doctors and she'll be free to go. Dr. Nolan has warned her frankly that most people at college will act awkwardly around her or avoid her altogether, treating her "like a leper with a warning bell." Her mother has visited and invited Esther to put the past away like "a bad dream." But, Esther thinks, "to the person in the bell jar...the world itself is the bad dream" and she can't forget any of the experiences of her mental illness, that they are her "part of [her]" now. Later Esther wonders what the real difference is between girls at Belsize and the girls at college, who also "sat under **bell jars** of a sort."

*As Dr. Nolan points out, Esther's time spent in mental health institutions will forever brand her in society. Esther knows this to be true even though many other people who have never been institutionalized may share similar psychological conditions or experiences with those who have been officially institutionalized. The girls at Esther's school, she knows, sit under their own bell jars.*



Buddy comes to the asylum to visit Esther. She expects to feel some twinge at seeing him, but feels nothing. His car is stuck in a snowdrift and she digs it out for him, though, when she first offers to, he looks at her with "the same compound of curiosity and wariness" that Esther detected in the eyes of all her guests at the asylum. She laughingly reminds Buddy that she's "all right" and that it's he, not she, who shouldn't exert himself.

*Buddy's wariness about Esther digging out the car confuses physical and mental health—Esther's sickness, unlike his own, was purely psychological and has thus left her perfectly capable of physical exertion.*



Over tea, Buddy asks Esther the question he's come to ask, wanting to know if she thinks that there's something about him that "drives women crazy." His manner is newly "grave, even tentative," lacking his old confident bravado. Esther thinks it is the face of a man "who often does not get what he wants." She assures him that he is not at fault for her or Joan's illness. Inwardly, Esther recalls Dr. Nolan angrily reprimanding her for blaming herself for Joan's death. Dr. Nolan had assured her that even "the best of psychiatrists has suicides among their patients" and that Joan was the only person responsible for her death.

*Where Buddy used to be chauvinistically confident and authoritative, he has unlearned the bravado that 1950s sexist society once trained him to cultivate. Wise as always, Dr. Nolan emphasizes the distinction between psychiatric care/concern for another person and each individual's essential psychic independence.*



The day before her interview, Esther walks the asylum grounds, bidding farewell to Valerie's "calm, snow-maiden face behind which so little, bad or good, could happen." Esther wonders if **the bell jar** will descend on her again on the future. She worries, too, who she will marry now that she's been institutionalized, thinking back to Buddy's question which he'd asked on his visit "as if to revenge himself for my digging out the car and his having to stand by, 'I wonder who you'll marry now, Esther.'"

Esther calls Irwin to remind him to pay the bill for her Emergency Room visit after their affair. When he asks when he'll get to see her again, Esther tells him 'Never,' and feels "unaccountably weak-kneed and relieved" at being "perfectly free."

Esther remembers how she had attended Joan's funeral and thought of the hole in the ground where "that shadow would marry this shadow, and the peculiar, yellowish soil of our locality seal the wound in whiteness and yet another snowfall erase the traces of newness in Joan's grave." She had heard her own heart make its "old brag...I am, I am, I am."

Preparing to enter her interview, Esther has none of the certainty and knowledge she'd hoped to have upon leaving the asylum. She sees the asylum librarian, an alumna of the asylum, and wonders "how she knew she had really graduated at all." Esther thinks that there should be "a ritual for being born twice." As she is trying to think of one, Dr. Nolan gestures into the room. Approaching the familiar faces and eyes of the doctors, Esther steps into the room.

*Even though Esther is reentering her old life at college, she knows that she is irreversibly transformed. Her old notions of what she would do with her life and who she might marry are no longer applicable. And she will forever afterwards be wary of future mental illness, of recurring descents of the bell jar.*



*Empowered as a woman and a sexual free agent, Esther acts with confidence in her own best interests.*



*Compared to Esther's thoughts about death during her mental illness, her thoughts now are peaceful and serene. Even as she sees death in terms of "shadow" and "wound," she sees it also in terms of purity, of "whiteness" and "newness."*



*Esther acknowledges her mental illness and experiences at the asylum as a permanent, inescapable part of her life, but her return to the healthy world nevertheless feels to her like a purifying ritual, a kind of second birth.*





## HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

### MLA

Ross, Margaret. "The Bell Jar." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 6 Apr 2014. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

### CHICAGO MANUAL

Ross, Margaret. "The Bell Jar." LitCharts LLC, April 6, 2014. Retrieved April 21, 2020. <https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-bell-jar>.

To cite any of the quotes from *The Bell Jar* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

### MLA

Plath, Sylvia. *The Bell Jar*. Harper Perennial. 2005.

### CHICAGO MANUAL

Plath, Sylvia. *The Bell Jar*. New York: Harper Perennial. 2005.