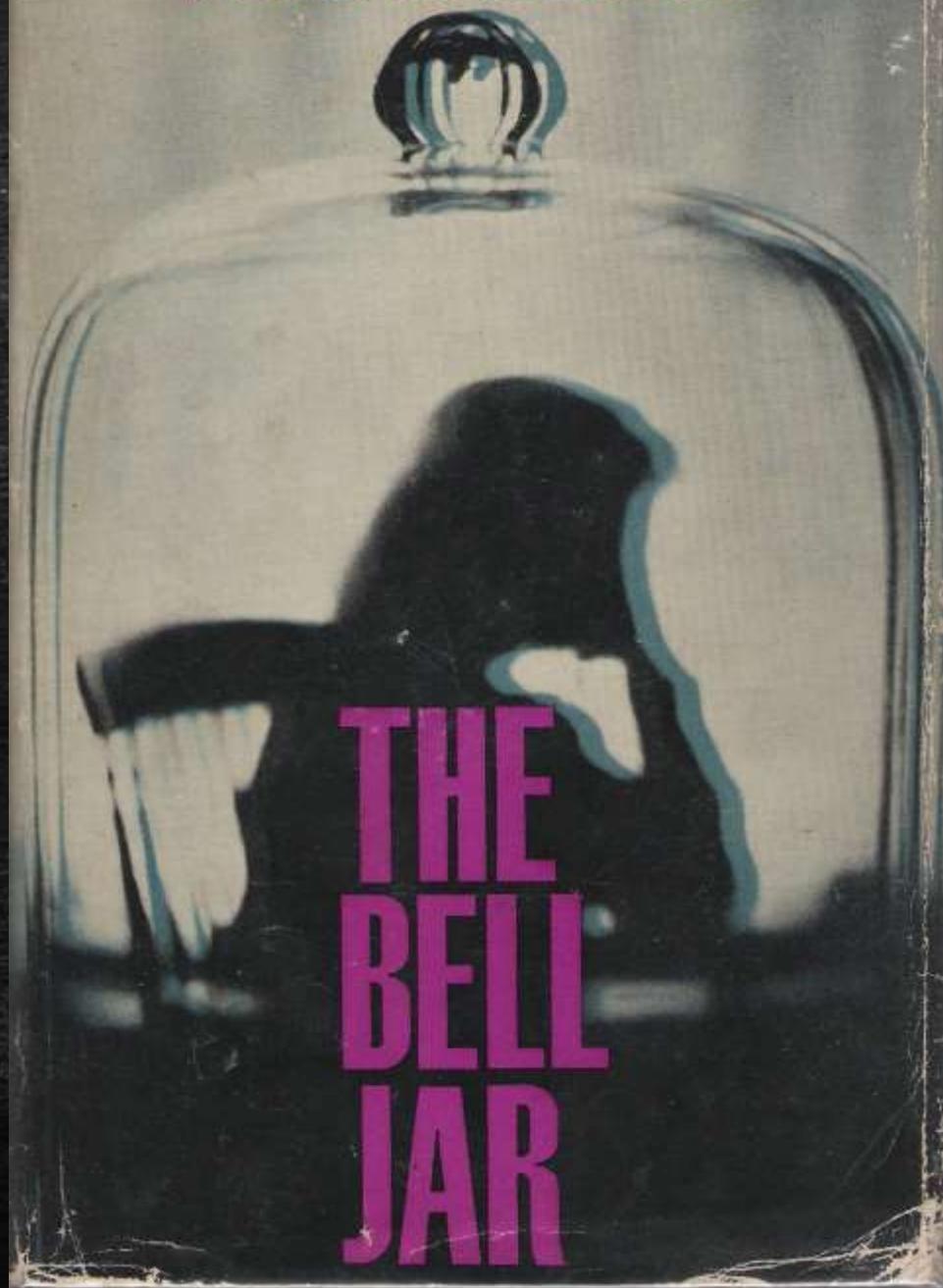


20th Century American Novel II

The Bell Jar (1963) by Sylvia Plath

Victoria Lucas



**THE
BELL
JAR**

Characters

- Esther Greenwood
- Doreen
- Betsy
- Jay Cee
- Buddy Willard
- Lenny
- Constantin
- Eric

“Begin at the beginning,” the King said,
very gravely, “and go on till you come to
the end: then stop.”

from Alice in Wonderland

Intro

It was a queer, sultry summer, the summer they electrocuted the Rosenbergs, and I didn't know what I was doing in New York. I'm stupid about executions. The idea of being electrocuted makes me sick, and that's all there was to read about in the papers -- goggle-eyed headlines staring up at me on every street corner and at the fusty, peanut-smelling mouth of every subway. It had nothing to do with me, but I couldn't help wondering what it would be like, being burned alive all along your nerves.

Where is the narrator now?

I realized we kept piling up these presents because it was as good as free advertising for the firms involved, but I couldn't be cynical. I got such a kick out of all those free gifts showering on to us. For a long time afterward I hid them away, but later, when I was all right again, I brought them out, and I still have them around the house. I use the lipsticks now and then, and last week I cut the plastic starfish off the sunglasses case for the baby to play with.

Observing from a bell jar

For a minute I thought Lenny was talking to me as well, but then I heard Doreen say, "I won't come unless Elly comes." I had to hand it to her the way she picked up my fake name.

[...]

I liked looking on at other people in crucial situations. If there was a road accident or a street fight or a baby pickled in a laboratory jar for me to look at, I'd stop and look so hard I never forgot it.

I certainly learned a lot of things I never would have learned otherwise this way, and even when they surprised me or made me sick I never let on, but pretended that's the way I knew things were all the time. (Ch. 1, p. 12)

Doreen

I decided the only thing to do was to dump her on the carpet and shut and lock my door and go back to bed. When Doreen woke up she wouldn't remember what had happened and would think she must have passed out in front of my door while I slept, and she would get up of her own accord and go sensibly back to her room. I started to lower Doreen gently onto the green hall carpet, but she gave a low moan and pitched forward out of my arms. A jet of brown vomit flew from her mouth and spread in a large puddle at my feet. [...]

I made a decision about Doreen that night. I decided I would watch her and listen to what she said, but deep down I would have nothing at all to do with her. Deep down, I would be loyal to Betsy and her innocent friends. It was Betsy I resembled at heart.

(Ch. 2, p. 20-21)

Playing the game (and eating)

I'd discovered, after a lot of extreme apprehension about what spoons to use, that if you do something incorrect at table with a certain arrogance, as if you knew perfectly well you were doing it properly, you can get away with it and nobody will think you are bad-mannered or poorly brought up. They will think you are original and very witty.

(Ch. 3, p.25)

Bonding, puking and death

Usually after a good puke you feel better right away. We hugged each other and then said good-bye and went off to opposite ends of the hall to lie down in our own rooms. There is nothing like puking with somebody to make you into old friends. [...]

Betsy was already there. I could hear her groaning behind the door, so I hurried on around the corner to the bathroom in the next wing. I thought I would die, it was so far. (Ch. 4, p.41)

Imaginary conversations

I spent a lot of time having imaginary conversations with Buddy Willard. He was a couple of years older than I was and very scientific, so he could always prove things. When I was with him I had to work to keep my head above water. These conversations I had in my mind usually repeated the beginnings of conversations I'd really had with Buddy, only they finished with me answering him back quite sharply, instead of just sitting around and saying, "I guess so."

Now, lying on my back in bed, I imagined Buddy saying, "Do you know what a poem is, Esther?"

"No, what?" I would say.

"A piece of dust."

Then just as he was smiling and starting to look proud, I would say, "So are the cadavers you cut up. So are the people you think you're curing. They're dust as dust as dust. I reckon a good poem lasts a whole lot longer than a hundred of those people put together." (Ch. 5, p. 53)

Relationships

Movies

Most of the action in this picture took place in the football stands, with the two girls waving and cheering in smart suits with orange chrysanthemums the size of cabbages on their lapels, or in a ballroom, where the girls swooped across the floor with their dates, in dresses like something out of *Gone With the Wind*, and then sneaked off into the powder room to say nasty intense things to each other.

Finally I could see the nice girl was going to end up with the nice football hero and the sexy girl was going to end up with nobody, because the man named Gil had only wanted a mistress and not a wife all along and was now packing off to Europe on a single ticket. (Ch. 4, p.39)

An article in Reader's Digest

It gave all the reasons a girl shouldn't sleep with anybody but her husband and then only after they were married. The main point of the article was that a man's world is different from a woman's world and a man's emotions are different from a woman's emotions and only marriage can bring the two worlds and the two different sets of emotions together properly. My mother said this was something a girl didn't know about till it was too late, so she had to take the advice of people who were already experts, like a married woman. This woman lawyer said the best men wanted to be pure for their wives, and even if they weren't pure, they wanted to be the ones to teach their wives about sex. Of course they would try to persuade a girl to have sex and say they would marry her later, but as soon as she gave in, they would lose all respect for her and start saying that if she did that with them she would do that with other men and they would end up by making her life miserable. (Ch. 7, p. 76)

What does Eric have to say about this?

I said maybe if you loved a woman it wouldn't seem so boring, but Eric said it would be spoiled by thinking this woman too was just an animal like the rest, so if he loved anybody he would never go to bed with her. He'd go to a whore if he had to and keep the woman he loved free of all that dirty business. (Ch. 7, p. 75)