

20th Century American Novel II

The Bell Jar (1963) by Sylvia Plath

The interpreter (narcissism?)

There I went again, building up a glamorous picture of a man who would love me passionately the minute he met me, and all out of a few prosy nothings. A duty tour of the UN and a post-UN sandwich! (Ch. 5, p.49)

Getting intimate with Buddy Willard (ch. 6, p.64)

Looking for perfection

I looked at him secretly from under a fall of hair. He was lying on his back, his hands under his head, staring at the ceiling. [...] And then I wondered if as soon as he came to like me he would sink into ordinariness, and if as soon as he came to love me I would find fault after fault, the way I did with Buddy Willard and the boys before him. The same thing happened over and over: I would catch sight of some flawless man off in the distance, but as soon as he moved closer I immediately saw he wouldn't do at all. That's one of the reasons I never wanted to get married. The last thing I wanted was infinite security and to be the place an arrow shoots off from. I wanted change and excitement and to shoot off in all directions myself, like the colored arrows from a Fourth of July rocket. (Ch. 7, p. 78-79)

Reflecting on parents and relationships

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

Hadn't my own mother told me that as soon as she and my father left Reno on their honeymoon -- my father had been married before, so he needed a divorce -- my father said to her, "Whew, that's a relief, now we can stop pretending and be ourselves"? -- and from that day on my mother never had a minute's peace. (Ch. 7, p. 80-81)

Choices, choices, choices

What do you want in life?

"Doesn't your work interest you, Esther?"

"Oh, it does, it does," I said. "It interests me very much." I felt like yelling the words, as if that might make them more convincing, but I controlled myself. All my life I'd told myself studying and reading and writing and working like mad was what I wanted to do, and it actually seemed to be true, I did everything well enough and got all A's, and by the time I made it to college nobody could stop me. (Ch. 3, p.29)

Options or lack of them

I didn't know shorthand either. This meant I couldn't get a good job after college. [...] The trouble was, I hated the idea of serving men in any way. I wanted to dictate my own thrilling letters. (Ch. 7, p. 72)

Options or lack of them

I saw my life branching out before me like the green fig tree in the story. From the tip of every branch, like a fat purple fig, a wonderful future beckoned and winked. One fig was a husband and a happy home and children, and another fig was a famous poet and another fig was a brilliant professor, and another fig was Ee Gee, the amazing editor, and another fig was Europe and Africa and South America, and another fig was Constantin and Socrates and Attila and a pack of other lovers with queer names and offbeat professions, and another fig was an Olympic lady crew champion, and beyond and above these figs were many more figs I couldn't quite make out. 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 (Ch. 7, p. 73)

I want it all and I want it now

"Remember how you asked me where would I like to live best, the country or the city?"

"And you said. . ."

"And I said I wanted to live in the country and in the city both?"

Buddy nodded.

"And you," I continued with sudden force, "laughed and said I had the perfect setup of a true neurotic and that that question came from some questionnaire you'd had in psychology class that week?"

Buddy's smile dimmed.

"Well, you were right. I *am* neurotic. I could never settle down in either the country *or* the city." (Ch. 8, p. 89)

Misogyny

I had never met a woman-hater before.

I could tell Marco was a woman-hater, because in spite of all the models and TV starlets in the room that night he paid attention to nobody but me. Not out of kindness or even curiosity, but because I'd happened to be dealt to him, like a playing card in a pack of identical cards. (Ch. 9, p. 102)

I'm going slightly mad (Ch. 10, p. 117, 121)

Seeing Dr. Gordon

At first I wondered why the room felt so safe. Then I realized it was because there were no windows. [...] I hadn't washed [my clothes] in my three weeks at home. The sweaty cotton gave off a sour but friendly smell.

I hadn't washed my hair for three weeks, either.

I hadn't slept for seven nights. (Ch. 11, p. 122)

Fantasizing

I would be simple Elly Higgenbottom, the orphan. People would love me for my sweet, quiet nature. They wouldn't be after me to read books and write long papers on the twins in James Joyce. And one day I might just marry a virile, but tender, garage mechanic and have a big cowy family... (Ch. 11, p. 127)

Suicidal thoughts I

The trouble about jumping was that if you didn't pick the right number of stories, you might still be alive when you hit bottom. I thought seven stories must be a safe distance. (Ch. 11, 131)

Suicidal thoughts II

They disemboweled themselves when anything went wrong.

I tried to imagine how they would go about it. They must have an extremely sharp knife. No, probably two extremely sharp knives. Then they would sit down, cross-legged, a knife in either hand. Then they would cross their hands and point a knife at each side of their stomach.

They would have to be naked, or the knife would get stuck in their clothes. (Ch. 11, p. 132)

Suicidal thoughts III

"If you were going to kill yourself, how would you do it?" Cal seemed pleased. "I've often thought of that. I'd blow my brains out with a gun." I was disappointed. It was just like a man to do it with a gun. A fat chance I had of laying my hands on a gun. And even if I did, I wouldn't have a clue as to what part of me to shoot at. I'd already read in the papers about people who'd tried to shoot themselves, only they ended up shooting an important nerve and getting paralyzed or blasting their face off, but being saved, by surgeons and a sort of miracle, from dying outright. (Ch. 13, 150)

Suicidal thoughts IV

I thought drowning must be the kindest way to die, and burning the worst. (Ch. 13, 151)

Suicide attempts

- Razor (Ch. 12, 142)
- Rope (Ch. 13, 152)
- Sea (Ch. 13, 154)
- Pills (Ch. 13, last page)