

20th Century American Novel II

The Bell Jar (1963) by Sylvia Plath

Mother's denial

My mother smiled. "I knew my baby wasn't like that."

I looked at her. "Like what?"

"Like those awful people. Those awful dead people at that hospital." She paused. "I knew you'd decide to be all right again." (Ch. 12, p. 140)

Mother's advice

My mother said the cure for thinking too much about yourself was helping somebody who was worse off than you (Ch. 13, p. 155)

Is the Catholic Church a solution?
(Ch. 13, p. 158)

Self-deprecation

I had meant to cover my legs if anybody came in, but now I saw it was too late, so I let them stick out, just as they were, disgusting and ugly.

"That's me," I thought. "That's what I am." (Ch. 14, p. 167)

Mirror

Joan

I looked at Joan. In spite of the creepy feeling, and in spite of my old, ingrained dislike, Joan fascinated me. It was like observing a Martian, or a particularly warty toad. Her thoughts were not my thoughts, nor her feelings my feelings, but we were close enough so that her thoughts and feelings seemed a wry, black image of my own.

Sometimes I wondered if I had made Joan up. Other times I wondered 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. (Ch. 18, p. 209-10)

Joan

"I like you."

"That's tough, Joan," I said, picking up my book.

"Because I don't like you. You make me puke, if you want to know."

And I walked out of the room, leaving Joan lying, lumpy as an old horse, across my bed. (Ch. 18, p.

Valerie

I sat down near Valerie and observed her carefully. Yes, I thought, she might just as well be in a Girl Scout camp. She was reading her tatty copy of Vogue with intense interest.

"What the hell is she doing here?" I wondered. "There's nothing the matter with her." (Ch. 15, 181)

"What will you do when you get out?"

"Oh, I'm not leaving," Valerie laughed. "I like it here." (Ch. 15, 185)

The Choice

I felt the first man I slept with must be intelligent, so I would respect him. Irwin was a full professor at twenty-six and had the pale, hairless skin of a boy genius. I also needed somebody quite experienced to make up for my lack of it, and Irwin's ladies reassured me on this head. Then, to be on the safe side, I wanted somebody I didn't know and wouldn't go on knowing -- a kind of impersonal, priestlike official, as in the tales of tribal rites. (Ch. 19, p. 218)

Revenge or Liberation?

Ever since I'd learned about the corruption of Buddy Willard my virginity weighed like a millstone around my neck. It had been of such enormous importance to me for so long that my habit was to defend it at all costs. I had been defending it for five years and I was sick of it.

(Ch. 19, p. 218)

The return of Buddy Willard!

"I've been wondering. . . I mean, I thought you might be able to tell me something."

"I'll tell you if I can, Buddy."

"Do you think there's something in me that *drives* women crazy?"

I couldn't help myself, I burst out laughing -- maybe because of the seriousness of Buddy's face and the common meaning of the word "crazy" in a sentence like that. (Ch. 20, p. 229)

"I wonder who you'll marry now, Esther" (Ch. 20, p. 230)

Living in a bell jar (A)

I knew I should be grateful to Mrs. Guinea, only I couldn't feel a thing. If Mrs. Guinea had given me a ticket to Europe, or a round-the-world cruise, it wouldn't have made one scrap of difference to me, because wherever I sat -- on the deck of a ship or at a street café in Paris or Bangkok -- I would be sitting under the same glass bell jar, stewing in my own sour air. (Ch. 15, p. 178)

Living in a bell jar (B)

"We'll take up where we left off, Esther," she had said, with her sweet, martyr's smile. "We'll act as if all this were a bad dream."

A bad dream.

To the person in the bell jar, blank and stopped as a dead baby, the world itself is the bad dream.(Ch. 20, p. 227)

Living in a bell jar (C)

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? Those girls, too, sat under bell jars of a sort. (Ch. 20, p. 227)

Living in a bell jar (D)

But I wasn't sure. I wasn't sure at all. How did I know that someday -- at college, in Europe, somewhere, anywhere -- the bell jar, with its stifling distortions, wouldn't descend again? (Ch. 20, p. 230)

Happy end?

"All right, Esther."

I rose and followed her to the open door. Pausing, for a brief breath, on the threshold, I saw the silver-haired doctor who had told me about the rivers and the Pilgrims on my first day, and the pocked, cadaverous face of Miss Huey, and eyes I thought I had recognized over white masks.

The eyes and the faces all turned themselves toward me, and guiding myself by them, as by a magical thread, I stepped into the room.

The Bell Jar and *The Catcher in the Rye*
Similarities and differences
