

# **The Bell Jar Book Notes**

## **The Bell Jar by Sylvia Plath**

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## Author/Context

Sylvia Plath was born in 1932 on the 27<sup>th</sup> of October in Boston, Massachusetts. Her father was an immigrant and her mother was a first generation American. Her father died in 1940 as a result of a leg amputation. Plath attended high school in Wellesley Massachusetts, and began to write poetry and short stories. She attended Smith College on a scholarship, and in 1952 won a *Mademoiselle* short story contest which allowed her to work as a guest editor. She returned home from this and later attempted suicide. She spent several months in an institution. Afterwards, she graduated from Smith and then went to Cambridge University on a Fulbright scholarship. There, she met poet laureate of England, Ted Hughes, and married him that year. She finished her time in Cambridge and they moved to the United States. Plath started writing poetry more seriously. Her first book of poetry *The Colossus and Other Poems* was published in 1960. She had two children and eventually separated from Hughes for a while. In 1963, *The Bell Jar* was published under a pseudonym. A month later, Plath committed suicide.

Although Plath only published one book of poetry during her life, her posthumous publications and her novel, have made her a mainstay of contemporary poetry. The poems from her final days were compiled and edited by Hughes. In 1965, these poems were published in *Ariel*. Although it was not the edition Plath had envisioned, *Ariel* became a classic work of modern poetry and continues to be read all over the country. In 1981, Hughes published an edition of Plath's collected poems that won the Pulitzer Prize in 1982.

*The Bell Jar*, published originally under the pseudonym 'Victoria Lucas,' was not printed with Plath's name until 1966. Although it was a popular book, it received new notoriety from its association with *Ariel*. *The Bell Jar* is not regarded as a novel in the traditional sense, because it is not a piece of fiction. Instead, it is considered to be a deep work of slightly fictionalized autobiography. Elizabeth Bronfen says, "we can now perhaps come to value *The Bell Jar* for its astonishingly astute depiction of two aspects of postmodernity." These aspects are of the outer person and her inner identity. The theme of this conflict dominates Plath's only novel.

Plath's poetry has been equally influential for its straight forwardness and honesty. In this, Plath is also lauded for being one of the first breaks in a long male literary tradition. Her endeavor to become recognized and respected as a writer was concomitant with a nation of women trying to become equal to and respected by their American male counterparts. Her poetry is unique and different from the post-world war poetry that had dominated the literary scene for the past decade. Her voice was that of a new and altered generation.

Plath's literary abilities, coupled with her personality and early demise, have combined to create a mythology and a hero for many people. Her desperate voice in *The Bell Jar* and *Ariel* went unheard until she took her own life. It is only after her death that she achieved the fame of which she had always dreamed. Her effect on literature is more



than in her art. Her personality demanded a new honesty and realness from writers. Although many critics have qualms with her decision to end her life, most agree that her life demands that social conventions be questioned. In the words of Ronald Hayman, "it is she who effectively argues through her writing that the old conventions need to be reassessed."

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## Plot Summary

Esther Greenwood is in New York as an editorial intern. She won the position along with eleven other girls in a writing contest. Her roommate is Doreen, a very beautiful girl who is more audacious than the rest. That night, they are supposed to go to a party with one of the others, but they end up at a bar with a man named Lenny Shepherd. Doreen and Esther go back to Lenny's place with his friend, and Doreen ends up making out with Lenny. Esther leaves. The next day, there is a banquet at which all the girls eat crabmeat. Earlier in the morning, their boss, Jay Cee, had criticized Esther for not knowing what she was going to do with her life. She cries over her dessert as she thinks about this. She and Betsy go to a movie, but Esther leaves early because she feels sick. By the time she gets back to the hotel she is puking. All eleven of the girls get food poisoning from the crabmeat. Esther is woken by Doreen, who is not sick because she spent the day with Lenny. Esther reads a short story and thinks about her boyfriend Buddy. They first kissed at his junior prom at Yale. Their mothers are good friends. He got tuberculosis before she could break up with him. Now he is in a sanatorium recovering.

Once, she went to visit him at medical school and saw the birth of a baby in the maternity ward. Soon after, Buddy admitted to Esther he had sex with a waitress the summer before. She realized he is hypocritical because he had always acted so innocent. It was at this moment she had sworn to break up with him. Before she was able to dump Buddy, he contracted TB and was sent to a sanatorium. Later, Esther accompanied Buddy's father and visited him at the sanatorium. To impress her, he had taken to writing poetry, but Esther thought it awful. He asked her to marry him and she said that she never wants to get married. He didn't take this seriously. Soon after, Buddy took Esther skiing and she broke her leg in two places.

A man named Constantin takes Esther out to lunch and they go back to his place. She decides that she wants to have sex with him, but he is not interested. The next day, she breaks down crying. Doreen makes her go out with her, Lenny, and a guy named Marco. Marco tries to force himself on her, but she punches him in the nose. Later that night, she throws all of her clothing off the roof of the hotel.

Esther goes home and finds out that she will be staying in the suburbs for the summer. She sends a letter to Buddy telling him that she wants nothing to do with him. She gets depressed. She can't write, read or sleep. Her mother tries to get her to learn shorthand, but she doesn't want to. All she wants is stronger sleeping pills. Her doctor sends her to a psychiatrist. The psychiatrist doesn't really listen to her, and after two meetings, prescribes shock therapy. Esther fears this and tries to escape but cannot. The treatment is terrible for her and only makes her worse. She begins to seek out ways to kill herself everyday. She tries hanging, cutting her wrists with razors, and drowning. Finally, she overdoses on sleeping pills and hides herself in the basement.

Esther is found and taken to the hospital. Here, she breaks a mirror on purpose and is sent to a psychiatric ward at another hospital. At the second hospital, she continues her



violent behavior and slips further into depression. She is finally transferred to a private institution where she slowly begins to improve at the hands of Dr. Nolan. Another ex-girlfriend of Buddy's, Joan, enters the asylum and they talk. Esther begins to gain weight and one night has a violent episode. Dr. Nolan realizes Esther's violent episode was a nervous reaction to her mother, and the many visitors she was receiving. She tells Esther that she will not be having visitors for a while.

Esther gets better and moves into other buildings. One day, Dr. Nolan surprises her by scheduling shock treatment, but it goes well. Esther only needs five treatments before they are done. Joan gets out of the hospital. Esther tells Dr. Nolan she is planning to have sex, and he tells her to get fitted for a diaphragm. Esther does and has sex with a man she meets. She hemorrhages badly from intercourse, and must go to the hospital. She gets back to her room and someone asks her if she knows where they can find Joan. They find Joan in the woods, dead.

Esther is apprehensive about leaving the institution, but Dr. Nolan reassures her that she is ready to go. Buddy comes to visit her in a snowstorm, but she feels nothing when she sees him. She gets ready for the exit interview. The novel ends as Esther pauses, focuses, and enters the room where all the doctors who saw her on the first day are sitting.



# Major Characters

**Esther Greenwood:** The heroine of the novel. Esther Greenwood is an autobiographical portrait of Sylvia Plath. The novel chronicles her descent into madness and her struggle to escape from it. Its title, the bell jar, is a metaphorical explanation for what her insanity felt like. It is suffocating; it closes her off from the world. When it descends, she cannot see or hear clearly and she is trapped alone. This madness comes from Esther's personal struggle with many things. Her maternal relationships - Her mother and Jay Cee - are dominating. She has trouble relating to men and becomes very sexually frustrated and confused. Her friendships with women disappoint her. She cannot decide what to do with her life, and feels the world is looming in on her. When everything crashes, suicide seems to be the most painless escape. It is not until she has her first (though frightening) sexual experience, and learns to deal with other women, including her mother, that Esther begins to breathe. Her experiences in different mental institutions expose some of the failings of early psychiatric treatments: Shock therapy and lobotomies. The book ends with her ascending from despair, in hopes of leaving her madness behind forever.

**Doreen:** Esther's first female friend in the novel. Doreen is both similar and dissimilar to the other ten girls. She is beautiful and very into her looks, but she doesn't want to do the boring activities with the others. She is interested in making her own itinerary. Esther gets pulled along, until Doreen meets Lenny Shepherd. The pair immediately click and exclude the rest of the world from their happiness. This leaves Esther to stew in her own sorrow, even though she had considered leaving Doreen alone before that. It is through Doreen, that Esther meets Marco, a man with whom she has the most harrowing and violent experience in the novel.

**Buddy Willard:** Buddy is Esther's boyfriend, to a certain extent, for the greater part of the novel. There is no point in the novel, however, when she is happy about this. She recounts when she first got together with Buddy, he seemed like a god to her. This facade was broken after he told Esther that he slept with a waitress on many occasions during the summer. She had decided to break up with him soon after this, but Buddy contracted TB and was sent away to a sanatorium. Esther waits until she gets home from New York to abruptly break up with him. It is because of him that she broke her leg. The last time we see Buddy is at the end of the novel when he goes to visit Esther at the asylum. His reason for visiting her is a selfish one--he wants to know if he drove Esther and Joan crazy. Buddy represents both Esther's struggle with men and their weaknesses, and her accomplishment in overcoming his influence.

**Mother:** Esther's mother is both a symptom and a cause of her problems. Her mother is constantly nagging her about what she is going to do with her life. She never leaves her alone. She also avoids problems. She doesn't want to admit that her daughter needs to be in an asylum and wants to pretend that it never happened. She did not cry when her husband died, and lives in a fantasy world that may be as damaging as Esther's 'bell jar.' Esther heals the most when her mother is not allowed to see her. Her mother is



burdened with financial concerns and sees her daughter's lack of concern for her future as a liability.

**Joan:** Joan is Esther's second female associate in the novel. She is not like Doreen, because she is more of a follower than a leader. Joan is easily influenced and very fragile. She comes to the asylum after feigning suicide because she read articles about Esther. It is through Joan that Esther learns to help herself. She never really loves Joan but likes her as a companion. She goes to Joan when her first sexual experience goes badly. Joan's suicide is an example to Esther of a life wasted. It is only after dealing with this that she is ready to leave the asylum.

### Minor Characters

**Jay Cee:** Esther's boss at her editorial internship. Jay Cee is one of Esther's many maternal relationships. She is harsh to Esther when she doesn't know what she is going to do with her life, but empathizes with her and tries to give her advice. Esther likes Jay Cee and is hurt badly by her.

**Betsy:** One of the other girls. Betsy is from the west. She is always trying to get Doreen and Esther to go out with the rest of them. Esther is with Betsy when she gets food poisoning from eating crab. Betsy also gives Esther clothing to wear on the train home after she had thrown all of hers off the hotel roof. Betsy is a 'normal' girl that Esther doesn't really like, but she gets along with.

**Frankie :** The shorter friend of Lenny Shepherd. Frankie comes along with Lenny, Doreen, and Esther as Esther's date. When she refuses to dance with him, he leaves. Esther is left alone with the new couple.

**Lenny Shepherd:** A recording engineer with whom Doreen falls in love. He beckons to them when they are in a taxi cab and takes them to a bar. After the bar, they go to his apartment and Esther watches the two kiss for the first time. She leaves the apartment. After this, Doreen spends almost all her time with Lenny. This makes Esther lonely. Near the end of their stay in New York, Lenny introduces Esther to his friend Marco.

**Mrs. Willard:** Buddy Willard's mother. She grew up with Esther's mother and went to college with her. She wants Esther and Buddy to be together even though she introduces Esther to Constantin. She doesn't work because she takes care of her son and husband. She is "the model of woman" and this frightens Esther.

**Hilda:** One of the other girls. Hilda is a hatmaker and she is always wearing some new and fashionable hat. Doreen and Esther frequently make fun of her.

**Philomena Guinea:** The financial backer of Esther's scholarship. Esther meets her after she writes her a thank-you letter for the scholarship. It is Mrs. Guinea who makes it possible for Esther to go to the better private hospital instead of the state institution. She is interested in Esther's writing. It is at her house that Esther sees her first fingerbowl.



**Constantin:** The simultaneous interpreter to whom Mrs. Willard gave Esther's number. He takes her out to eat and although he is not exactly handsome, Esther decides that she wants to have sex with him. He does not seem to be interested. When Esther lies down on his bed, he lies down next to her and they both go to sleep. When Esther writes the letter saying that she wants nothing more to do with Buddy, she tells him that she is engaged to a simultaneous interpreter.

**Eric:** The law student with whom Esther has a conversation about sex. She is interested in him, but sex doesn't interest him because he had a terrible experience with a prostitute when he was in high school.

**Mr. Willard:** Buddy's father. He drives Esther up to Buddy's sanatorium. He tells her that he wants her to be his daughter. She is surprised when he leaves her with Buddy.

**Marco:** The woman-hater introduced to Esther by Lenny Shepherd. He forces Esther to dance and gives her a diamond pin when he first meets her. Outside, he tells her that he is in love with his cousin but cannot be with her because she is going to become a nun. He pushes her on the ground and tries to force himself on her, but she punches him in the nose. He demands the pin back.

**Dodo Conway:** The Catholic woman in Esther's home neighborhood who is on her seventh child. She drives Esther and her mother to the hospital when Esther needs her first shock treatment.

**Teresa:** The family doctor who refuses to give Esther stronger sleeping pills and advises that she go see a psychiatrist.

**Dr. Gordon:** The first psychiatrist Esther sees. He is young and nothing what she expected him to be. He doesn't really listen to her or take her seriously. After her second visit, he thinks she should have electroshock therapy. He administers this and it goes quite badly. He is so oblivious to her that he gives the same anecdote about his college days whenever she mentions where she goes to school. After her first shock treatment, Esther refuses to go back to him.

**Jody:** Esther's friend from school. Esther was supposed to stay with Jody in Cambridge, but cannot when she doesn't get into the writing class she wanted. Jody takes Esther to a lake with her boyfriend and a boy named Cal. This is the lake where Esther tries to drown herself. Jody is another reasonably normal girl.

**Cal:** The boy introduced to Esther by Jody. Cal is a nice and intelligent guy that Esther admits she would like if she were her normal self.

**George Blakewell:** The roommate of a guy Esther once dated at Amherst. George comes to see Esther when she is first in the private psychiatric ward. His appearance and interest in her insanity upsets Esther.

**Dr. Nolan:** The doctor at the private hospital. Dr. Nolan is one of Esther's maternal figures. She gains Esther's trust and gets her to start talking about her problems. She



deceives Esther about electroshock therapy, but Esther forgives her. Dr. Nolan's therapy and influence helps Esther recover.

**Valerie:** The normal looking girl Esther first encounters in the asylum. Valerie seems normal but is actual a lobotomy patient. She will most likely never leave the asylum. This frightens Esther.

**Mrs. Norris:** The silent woman to whom Esther attaches herself in her first few weeks at the asylum. Mrs. Norris never talks and is eventually moved down to another part of the hospital.

**DeeDee:** The piano playing woman who has a romantic relationship with Joan. This relationship both intrigues and disgusts Esther. After Joan's suicide, DeeDee gets worse.

**Irwin:** The young professor who Esther meets and with whom she loses her virginity. Esther has difficulty, however, and hemorrhages badly. He doesn't take it too seriously, but she ends up in the emergency room. She calls him only to get him to pay the emergency room bill. He represents her liberation from sexual ideas that had haunted her.



## Objects/Places

**Rosenbergs:** The American couple executed in 1951. They were executed for allegedly acting as spies for American enemies, passing on nuclear secrets. The execution is primarily a touchstone in Esther's memory. She does not comment about their deed or whether or not they are guilty. She merely says that she is glad they are dying.

**New York City:** Home to most publishing houses, this is where Esther must go when she wins a contest with a magazine. In New York, she meets many people and experiences things she would never have imagined. What might first have been a symbol of freedom and hope for Esther before moving there, New York becomes a dark and hated place by the time she leaves.

**Amazon:** The hotel for women where the young assistant editors stay. Men are not allowed to enter the building. All the girls have their rooms clustered together as if it were a college dormitory.

**TB:** Tuberculosis is a serious disease that was all but eliminated by medicine and vaccines by the end of the 20th century. If it is detected early on, it is painful but treatable. Buddy Willard contracted it working as a medical student. He was shipped to a sanatorium, where he continued to study medicine while he healed. It is his TB that prevents Esther from dumping Buddy earlier.

**crabmeat:** The eleven assistant editors were served crabmeat at the Ladies' Day magazine food testing banquet. They all ate it and became seriously ill. Esther lies in the bathroom puking all night. Her food poisoning marks the first of many falls in her downward spiral.

**Ladies Day Magazine:** Ladies' Day Magazine is a woman's magazine like Good Housekeeping. It is at their banquet that the girls get food poisoning. As an apology, they send the girls gifts. Esther receives a book of short stories in which she reads the story of the Jewish man, the nun, and the fig tree.

**Diamond Pin:** Marco, Lenny Shepherd's friend, gives Esther a diamond pin when he is introduced to her. The pin is supposed to impress her. It seems that Marco expects the pin to guarantee sex or at least some sort of sexual encounter, because when Esther punches him in the nose, he asks for it back.

**Shock Therapy:** A therapy practiced by psychiatrists in the fifties, sixties and early seventies. A certain amount of electric current is run through the temporal lobes. The temporal lobes produce anger and anguish, and psychiatrists believed they could be 're-calibrated' with electric current. Esther's first experience with this is disastrous and it may have contributed to her deepening mental instability. Her later experience seems to have been successful. Modern psychiatrists dismiss electroshock therapy.



**Occupational therapy:** Another type of therapy. Occupational therapy is any sort of activity that involves peacefully using your body. In this book, it primarily means some sort of arts and crafts. It can mean anything that involves rudimentary or complex motor skills.

**Wymark:** The lowest 'level' of housing at Esther's private hospital. Wymark is where the worst cases go.

**Caplan:** The middle or 'entry' level at the private hospital. From Caplan, a patient can either improve and move up to Belsize, or founder and move down to Wymark.

**Belsize:** The highest level at the private hospital. Patients at Belsize have more privileges than others. This is the last step before they enter normal society.

**Walton:** The hospital in Esther's home town where Dr. Gordon administers her shock treatment. Walton confuses her because it looks like a normal house, yet it houses people with psychological problems.



## Quotes

Quote 1: "Doreen singled me out right away. She made me feel I was that much sharper than the others, and she really was wonderfully funny. She used to sit next to me at the conference table, and when the visiting celebrities were talking she'd whisper witty sarcastic remarks to me under her breath." Chapter 1, pg. 4

Quote 2: "There is something demoralizing about watching two people get more and more crazy about each other, especially when you are the extra person in the room." Chapter 2, pg. 14

Quote 3: "After Doreen left, 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." Chapter 3, pg. 24

Quote 4: "The sickness rolled through me in great waves. After each wave it would fade away and leave me limp as a wet leaf and shivering all over and then I would feel it rising up in me again, and the glittering white torture chamber tiles under my feet and over my head and all four sides closed in and squeezed me to pieces." Chapter 4, pg. 36

Quote 5: "I hate handing over money for what I could just as easily do myself, it makes me nervous." Chapter 5, pg. 44

Quote 6: "Buddy kissed me again in front of the house steps, and the next fall, when his scholarship to medical school came through, I went there to see him instead of to Yale and it was there I found out that he had fooled me all those years and what a hypocrite he was." Chapter 5, pg. 50

Quote 7: "Of course somebody had seduced Buddy, Buddy hadn't started it and it wasn't really his fault." Chapter 6, pg. 57

Quote 8: "She was a fat middle-aged woman with dyed red hair and suspiciously thick lips and rat-colored skin and she wouldn't even turn off the light, so he'd had her under a fly-spotted twenty-five-watt bulb, and it was nothing like it was cracked up to be. It was as boring as going to the toilet." Chapter 7, pg. 64

Quote 9: "So I began to think maybe it was true that when you were married and had children it was like being brainwashed, and afterward you went about as numb as a slave in a totalitarian state." Chapter 7, pg. 67

Quote 10: "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." Chapter 8, pg. 76

Quote 11: "Show us how happy it makes you to write a poem." Chapter 9, pg. 83



Quote 12: "Billy wrote that he was probably falling in love with a nurse who also had TB but his mother had rented a cottage in the Adirondacks for the months of July, and if I came along with her, he might well find his feeling for the nurse was mere infatuation." Chapter 10, pg. 97-8

Quote 13: "I had decided I would put off the novel until I had gone to Europe and had a lover." Chapter 10, pg. 100

Quote 14: "But when I took up my pen, my hand made big, jerky letters like those of a child, and the lines sloped down the page from left to right almost diagonally, as if they were loops of string lying on the paper, and someone had come along and blown them askew." Chapter 11, pg. 106

Quote 15: "I decided to walk to the bus terminal and inquire about the fares to Chicago. Then I might go to the bank and withdraw precisely that amount which would not cause so much suspicion" Chapter 11, pg. 113

Quote 16: "There was a uniformity, as if they had lain for a long time on a shelf, out of the sunlight, under siftings of pale, fine dust." Chapter 12, pg. 15-16

Quote 17: "I knew my baby wasn't like that...I knew you'd decide to be all right again." Chapter 12, pg. 119

Quote 18: "I had removed my patent leather shoes after a while, for they foundered badly in the sand. It pleased me to think they would be perched there on the silver log, pointing out to sea, like a sort of soul-compass, after I was dead." Chapter 12, pg. 124

Quote 19: "It was just like a man to do it with a gun. A fat chance I had of laying my hands on a gun." Chapter 13, pg. 127

Quote 20: "The graveyard disappointed me. It lay at the outskirts of the town, on low ground, like a rubbish dump, and as I walked up and down the gravel paths. I could smell the stagnant salt marshes in the distance." Chapter 13, pg. 135

Quote 21: "Get out. Get the hell out and don't come back." Chapter 14, pg. 142

Quote 22: "'O Esther I wish you would cooperate. They say you don't cooperate. They say you won't talk to any of the doctors or make anything in Occupational therapy...'

'I've got to get out of here,' I told her meaningly. 'Then I'd be all right. You got me in here,' I said. 'You get me out.'" Chapter 14, pg. 146

Quote 23: "I'm not angry anymore. Before I was angry all the time." Chapter 15, pg. 158

Quote 24: "But you're all right now." Chapter 16, pg. 164

Quote 25: "I suppose you do" Chapter 16, pg. 166



Quote 26: "It wasn't the shock treatment that struck me, so much as the bare-faced treachery of Dr. Nolan. I loved her. I had given her my trust on a platter and told her everything and she had promised, faithfully, to warn me ahead of time if ever I had to have another shock treatment." Chapter 17, page 173

Quote 27: "the bell jar hung, suspended, a few feet above my head. I was open to the circulating air." Chapter 18, pg. 176

Quote 28: "I am climbing to my freedom, freedom from fear, freedom from marrying the wrong person, like Buddy Willard, just because of sex, freedom from the 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..." Chapter 18, pg. 182

Quote 29: "ever since I'd learned about the corruption of Buddy Willard, my virginity weighed like a millstone around my neck." Chapter 19, pg. 180

Quote 30: "Doctor Nolan said, quite bluntly, that a lot of people would treat me gingerly, or even avoid me, like a leper with a warning bell. My mother's face floated to mind, a pale reproachful moon, at her last and first visit to the asylum since my twentieth birthday. A daughter in an asylum! I had done that to her." Chapter 20, pg. 193

Quote 31: "There would be a black, six-foot-deep gap backed 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 newness in Joan's grave." Chapter 20, pg. 198



## Topic Tracking: Confusion and Insanity

Confusion and Insanity 1: Esther's confusion begins the novel. She has been swept up into a fast paced New York City life and cannot take it. She is no longer sure what decisions are her own and which are those of others. Half-heartedly, she follows the others girls to events and lets herself be led by Doreen to the bar with Lenny and Frankie. She falls asleep at Lenny's apartment and wakes to see the pair going at it. When she gets home, she is more lost than ever.

Confusion and Insanity 2: When Jay Cee badgers her about her future plans, Esther falls into a pit of confusion. She knows that she wants to write, but she has no clue if she is qualified, or how to go about becoming a successful writer. Jay Cee gives her more requirements than she thought she needed. This makes her feel more confused and helpless.

Confusion and Insanity 3: Even though she didn't want to go see Buddy, she was powerless to stop herself. She just couldn't say anything. She freely admits that she is always torn between conflicting desires. This confusion makes her unsatisfied about where she is. Buddy used to deride this but now that he is more desperate, he tries to embrace it. It is too late; she sees through his guise. She is not confused about whether or not she wants to be with Buddy Willard.

Confusion and Insanity 4: Esther finds herself crying in Jay Cee's office for no apparent reason. The tears just keep flooding in. They fall because she is overwhelmed with the weight of everything that has been bothering her. She doesn't want to leave her room and is overwhelmed by the fact that she has to pick up her clothing that is strewn about the floor. She is not confused about the fact that Marco was disgusted with her, but when she finally gets home, she is overcome by depression and anguish. She reacts by throwing all of her clothing from the roof of the building.

Confusion and Insanity 5: Esther's confusion and desperation from her last night in New York does not abate with her departure. When she gets home and finds out that she cannot take the writing course that she wanted to take, it only worsens. She thinks she is going to write a novel. When she can't, she almost decides to start learning shorthand. Then she tries to work on her thesis, but she is unable to focus. She decides to not write a thesis, but finds out that she has not completed the required courses to become a regular English major. All she has left is sleep, and it will not come.

Confusion and Insanity 6: Esther no longer wants to bathe or change clothing because it does not make sense to her. She cannot sleep, and when she tries to write a letter, her handwriting is foreign and strange. She begins to get interested in suicide. It is a simple alternative to the complex and confusing mental state in which she lives. Dr. Gordon only makes matters worse. He is a total mystery. Shock therapy frightens her but she can find no way to get away from it.



Confusion and Insanity 7: Esher tries to avoid the electroshock therapy, but she can't. When she has it, it is worse than she feared. This is the final strike. She is no longer able to put up any sort of resistance. She gives in to her despair and from that point on she seeks only her death. She experiments with a razor in the bath tub and goes to an island planning to kill herself. She no longer wants to live. The confusion has descended and it has overcome her.

Confusion and Insanity 8: Esther's madness and confusion have caused her to seek out death every moment of the day. She tries to hang and choke herself. When she goes swimming with her friends, she tries to drown on purpose. These things do not work. Esther is not completely insane. She knows she needs help, but she also knows that the kind of help she needs is too expensive. She has given up on life. She finally decides to kill herself by overdosing on sleeping pills and hiding herself in the basement wall.

Confusion and Insanity 9: In the hospital life does not become any more lucid for Esther. She claims that she cannot eat or sleep even though the doctors point out that she is doing both. She does not trust anyone and she overreacts to simple things. She kicks the black man, breaks the mirror, and kicks the box of medical tools near the bed. This makes everyone think that she is crazy. Esther does not find this behavior to be crazy. She is lost in a fog.

Confusion and Insanity 10: Esther does not really understand her surroundings. She thinks that Valerie is normal, only to find out that she has had a lobotomy. She attaches herself to Mrs. Norris and waits for her to talk, but she never does. When she is moved to a better part of the house, she doesn't understand it because she doesn't see herself getting better.

Confusion and Insanity 11: Esther meets Joan and sees someone else who is confused. To her, Joan's sickness seems bizarre and distant. She doesn't really understand her but she is interested in her nonetheless. She has an episode because of her mother and wakes up to find herself pounding on the bed and screaming. She slowly begins to understand that her mother causes some of her problems. She is happy when Dr. Nolan tells her that she will not be having any visitors for a while.

Confusion and Insanity 12: Esther is very sane during her experience with Irwin. Although she panics a little because she is bleeding, she does not lose her cool. No one understands Joan's behavior. For some reason or another she is brought back to the hospital. She disappears and they find her dead in the woods. Esther realizes that Joan's fate could have been hers. She learns the danger of her confusion in the hardest way.

Confusion and Insanity 13: Esther deals with Joan's death and goes to her funeral, handling it all with clarity. When she meets Buddy, she realizes for the first time that he is confused and self-absorbed. Her last worry is passing the exit interview. Right before, she calms down and has a moment of clarity as she enters the room and her new life.



## Topic Tracking: Maternal Relationships

Maternal Relationships 1: Jay Cee takes a special interest in Esther because she has promising talent. When she takes this interest, however, she becomes stern with her and badgers her about her plans. She points out to Esther that she is not as special as she thinks and will need to learn more and work harder to get ahead. The message that Esther gets is that she is not good enough and is just not special. Jay Cee tries to help Esther, but is too harsh, which only makes things worse.

Maternal Relationships 2: Even though Jay Cee hurt her feelings, she still compares her own mother to her. By some comparison, her mother is insufficient. Jay Cee may be harsh, but at least she supports Esther's dreams. Her real mother does not support these dreams and thinks that Esther is overestimating herself and setting her sights too high. Jay Cee, on the other hand, thinks that Esther is underestimating the amount of work she needs to do to attain her dreams.

Maternal Relationships 3: Esther's mother is a good friend with Buddy's mother. This puts a new sort of pressure on the relationship. Because the mothers are such good friends, it would seem only natural for their children to be together. Esther's mother was, no doubt, delighted when she found out that Buddy and Esther were dating. She would probably be very upset with her daughter if she ever found out that she was considering leaving Buddy for any reason. Buddy is a friend of the family as well as a future doctor.

Maternal Relationships 4: Esther is afraid of being married because it means giving up your life. Buddy has told her that she wouldn't want to write poetry once she was married. This frightens her. She actually supposes that marriage is a form of brainwashing. For Esther, becoming subordinate to a man means losing everything that makes her feel whole and significant. It is hard for her to get close to a man. How can she be sexually fulfilled from someone of the male gender, who only promises to take from her everything she loves? This possibility crushes her.

Maternal Relationships 5: Esther's mother does not tell her to act differently, but she is always nagging her and pushing her to do something different. She does not believe that Esther's English degree will get her anywhere and thinks she should learn shorthand or typing. She refuses to accept Esther's depression as real. Dodo Conway is another example of motherhood. She is a devout Catholic with seven children who will not use birth control. This image of motherhood terrifies Esther.

Maternal relationships 6: Dodo Conway takes Esther and her mother to the shock therapy. To her mother, Esther's sickness is only trouble that needs to be overcome and then forgotten. She has neither the financial resources nor the emotional faculty to deal with such a problem. She is more than happy to believe her daughter is better when she tells her that she wants nothing more to do with Dr. Gordon. It does not occur to her that this is because Dr. Gordon's therapy is making Esther worse.



Maternal Relationships 7: Esther's mother is still unwilling to believe that there is anything wrong with her. She is mad at Esther for breaking the mirror and making the people at the hospital move her to a psychiatric ward. She keeps asking Esther to get better. She does not understand the nature of Esther's problems. She is more than willing to believe that Esther merely needs to get out of the hospital to get better.

Maternal Relationships 8: Philomena Guinea's financial support of Esther's troubles is contingent upon the fact that Esther's troubles are not sexually related. Her mother cannot understand this and only complicates her confusion. Dr. Nolan is the first older woman she trusts. She is serious but gentle. She gains Esther's trust and promises that she will not have shock treatments until she is ready. Esther trusts her. This is her first step towards recovery.

Maternal Relationships 9: Esther's relationship with her mother reaches an all time low as her trust in Dr. Nolan deepens. Esther is only upset when her mother brings her flowers for her birthday. She begs her daughter to get better, not wanting to have a daughter who is in an insane asylum. She does not understand, nor does she wish to understand her daughter's problems. She only selfishly asks how she has failed as a mother. Esther says she hates her mother and Dr. Nolan understands.

Maternal Relationships 10: Esther feels that Dr. Nolan has betrayed her when she first hears that she is going to be give a shock treatment. She begins to act maniacal and slip into old habits, but when Dr. Nolan takes her hand and says she will be by her side, she calms down and faces her fear. This is what Esther needed her mother to do, to accept her and support her.



## Topic Tracking: Sexuality

Sexuality 1: Sexuality permeates the first chapter. Esther is intrigued by Doreen's sexuality: her natural good looks and the way she shamelessly augments them with clothing. She follows her into a bar. Doreen is matched with a charming man; the only man who is interested in Esther is short and dull. She puts him off. She dutifully follows her friend to Lenny's apartment but flees when they begin to make out.

Sexuality 2: From the beginning of college, Esther has trouble with boys. This is not because she is ugly, but because her intelligence and individuality can set men ill-at-ease. Her earlier disappointments coupled with her teenage idolization of Buddy, make her more than willing to fall for him. She wants him to love her, not because she loves him, but because she wants to feel loved. They slip into a relationship after just a few kisses.

Sexuality 3: Esther is unimpressed when Buddy shows her his naked body, and she refuses to return the 'favor.' She is upset, however, when she finds out that Buddy has had sex on multiple occasions. What upsets her is not that he had sex, but that he had always pretended to be innocent and acted as if she was more experienced. She finds his explanation that he was seduced pathetic. She questions him about his mother and whether she knows this. Buddy's mother is powerless to control her son's sexuality. Esther feels betrayed and this marks the beginning of her dislike for Buddy.

Sexuality 4: Buddy's betrayal suddenly makes Esther ready to have sex. Despite the advice her mother had given her, Esther doesn't buy the importance of chastity and looks to lose her virginity. She first tries to seduce Eric, whose own sexual experience was sordid and harmful. She thinks that Constantin would be a good choice, even though he is short. Esther attempts to seduce him, but he falls asleep. This hurts her badly. She idealizes the Russian woman because she is smart and beautiful. After she leaves Constantin's apartment, she feels sexually defeated.

Sexuality 5: Although they do not talk about sex when they talk about marriage, sexuality is still a subtext. Not only does Esther not want to be tied down to one man emotionally, but she does not want to be attached to one man sexually. She is still bitter towards Buddy because of his sexual betrayal.

Sexuality 6: Marco is a kind of man that Esther has not encountered before. He is a woman-hater and she is powerless to stop him from making her dance. He gives her a diamond pin at the beginning of their 'date' and it is the first diamond Esther has ever been given. When he throws her on the ground, she musters the strength to fight him off. She punches him and he demands the pin back. It is as if he expected that the diamond pin required some sort of sexual exchange.

Sexuality 7: As soon as she gets back from New York City, Esther sends Buddy a letter telling him that she is engaged to someone else. She cannot tell him that she would rather be alone than with him, so she lies. When she decides that she needs more life



experience to write a novel, she immediately associates living with having sex. She cannot conceive of a whole person who is not in some way sexual.

Sexuality 8: Esther is still pursuing the loss of her virginity. She uses her old pseudonym when she meets the sailor and must construct elaborate lies to hide her own paranoid behavior. She has become more desperate in her search for what she thinks might be normalcy. She wants to write but thinks she cannot write until she has had sex.

Sexuality 9: Esther is still fixated by sexuality. She has no interest in seeing Buddy, but she defines DeeDee and Joan in terms of what sort of men they would be able to attract and keep. When she finds DeeDee and Joan in bed together, she is both disgusted and intrigued. She reacts with disdain when Joan admits that she likes her, but does not challenge Dr. Nolan's validation of their attraction. She is surprised that Dr. Nolan supports her need for a sexual experience and she goes to get a diaphragm to free her from the worry that she will get pregnant.

Sexuality 10: Esther has sex with Irwin, the first eligible man she meets. She does not become attached to him, and is only interested in losing her virginity. When she bleeds, her relief at having her first sexual encounter makes her overlook the severity of her hemorrhaging. When she finally realizes that she is in trouble, she rushes to Joan's and then to the emergency room. When she finds out that she will live, her only concern is whether or not she will be able to have sex again. She is happy when she learns she can.

Sexuality 11: Esther's sexual demons have left her after her first experience. She successfully meets Buddy and feels nothing for him. In the same way, she coolly puts off Irwin and makes him pay for her emergency room bills. She has overcome her fear of sex and in doing this, she has overcome her fear of men.



## Part 1, Chapter 1

It is the summer that the Rosenbergs are executed. The weather is hot and terrible in New York City and Esther Greenwood cannot get their faces out of her head. During the day, she works at an internship as an editorial assistant. Thinking of her picture in a glamorous women's magazine, Esther feels that she is no longer in control of her life. She floats from work to home without any real intent.

There are eleven other girls working as assistants. They all won positions through a contest in a fashion magazine. Esther received a make-up kit as one of her prizes, but she never really uses it. The girls are staying at a woman's hotel called the Amazon and their rooms are all clustered together like a dormitory. Esther thinks that the other girls are awfully boring. They make her sick as they tan and paint their nails. One of the girls is Doreen who has bleached blond hair, blue eyes and a southern accent.

*"Doreen singled me out right away. She made me feel I was that much sharper than the others, and she really was wonderfully funny. She used to sit next to me at the conference table, and when the visiting celebrities were talking she'd whisper witty sarcastic remarks to me under her breath."* Chapter 1, pg. 4

Doreen comes from a very fashion-conscious college where they make purses to match their dresses. At night she wears lace and nylon bedclothes while the other girls wear flannel and cotton nightgowns. She doesn't understand why Esther works so hard. Their boss is Jay Cee who Doreen thinks is ugly. There is a knock on their door and it is Betsy, who is always trying to get them to go to some party or something. She wants them to go to a party with boys from Yale. This makes Esther think of her boyfriend Buddy Willard who went to Yale before he went to medical school. They get dressed and get in a cab. Esther thinks that Doreen looks great but that she looks yellow in complexion. When the cab stops, a man comes up to its window and asks the girls if they want to go for a drink. His friends snicker. Doreen and Esther get out and follow him. He pays their fare and one of his friends, named Frankie, joins them. The bar is dark and Esther is confused about what she should order to drink. She orders straight vodka because she remembers a magazine ad that made it look crisp and tasty. Doreen smokes a cigarette and the man introduces himself as Lenny Shepherd. Esther tells them that her name is Elly Higginbottom and that she is from Chicago. Frankie asks her to dance but she won't. He leaves. Lenny and Doreen dance together. Later, Doreen convinces Esther to follow them back to Lenny's place. Esther thinks that the whole night is unfolding like a car accident.

Topic Tracking: Sexuality 1

Topic Tracking: Confusion 1



## Chapter 2

Frankie's place is decorated like a western ranch, even though it is in the middle of the city. He puts on music and shows off all his very expensive recording equipment. Doreen thinks he is great, but asks Esther to stay around in case he tries anything. Lenny offers to get another man to entertain her, but she says it doesn't matter. Lenny and Doreen dance as Esther thinks, "There is something demoralizing about watching two people get more and more crazy about each other, especially when you are the extra person in the room." Chapter 2, pg. 14. The pair kiss and as Esther falls asleep, Doreen bites his ear and he screams. Esther looks up and sees Doreen's breasts hanging out of her dress. Doreen and Lenny are making out. Esther leaves quickly, embarrassed, and steps out into a wall of heat. She is forty-three blocks from her hotel. When she finally gets there, it is empty. The silence depresses her. She looks at the telephone, half expecting it to ring. She had given her number to Mrs. Willard, Buddy Willard's mother. Buddy has never called her. He is in a sanitarium getting cured for TB. She takes a hot bath and feels better, more like herself. When there is a knock at the door, she opens it to some woman who is supporting a very drunk Doreen. Doreen falls to the ground and vomits. At this, Esther decides she will have little more to do with Doreen. She gets up in the morning and leaves before Doreen wakes. She steps over the discolored spot on the carpet.



## Chapter 3

Esther goes to a banquet for Ladies' Day magazine with the other eleven girls. There is a lot of food and she is happy to be able to eat. Before she came to New York, she had never been in a real restaurant. The other girls are always dieting, and Esther eats the most. She is very thin. The banquet is for testing new recipes. Doreen didn't come because she decided to go out with Lenny Shepherd. Esther heaps a pile of caviar on her plate. She had caviar when she was younger when her grandfather was the head waiter at a country club. She knows that even though she can't tell which fork to use for what, as long as she acts confident no one will question her. She thinks of a writer whom she had lunch with while accompanying Jay Cee. He ate salad with his fingers and no one looked at him funny. She eats a plate of chicken and then moves on to the avocados and Crabmeat. She asks Betsy about a fur show they went to that morning. Hilda is wearing a mink scarf from the show. Hilda is a hat maker; She wears a new hat every day. Esther misses Doreen. She had invited Esther to go with her and Lenny to Coney Island, but Esther didn't want to go. Something had happened between Esther and Jay Cee that morning:

*"After Doreen left, 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."* Chapter 3, pg. 24

The telephone rang as Esther was thinking these things and Jay Cee asked her to come into the office. Esther realizes that she is crying as she eats her dessert. She eats Betsy's dessert too.

When she went to Jay Cee's office, Jay Cee shut the door and asked her if she was interested in her work. Then she asked her what she was going to do after she graduated in a year. Esther said that she didn't know and Jay Cee told her that she needed to learn more languages because there were hundred of girls like her coming to New York every year. Esther lied about an accelerated German course. She thought about her courses. She had some trouble when she took physics and was worried about chemistry. She had done well in botany and in the first part of chemistry she had convinced the registrar to let her take it without credit. She went to the class every day and did well.

Topic Tracking: Maternal Relationships 1

Topic Tracking: Confusion 2



## Chapter 4

She thought of her chemistry teacher as Jay Cee handed her manuscripts to look over for the morning. Esther read them and commented on them. Jay Cee was going to lunch with a famous male writer and a less famous female one. At noon, Jay Cee sent Esther to the banquet. Esther wishes her mother were more like Jay Cee, because her mother doesn't support her. She washes her fingers in the fingerbowl, an object she first saw at her lunch with her scholarship supporter Philomena Guinea. Philomena is a writer who became very wealthy. She went to Esther's school and pays for her scholarship. Esther had gone to her house because she wrote her a letter thanking her for her scholarship.

After the banquet they go out onto the rainy streets and to a movie in Technicolor. It is a bad romance about war and a football hero. Afterwards, Esther feels like puking because she ate so much. She and Betsy get into a cab to go back to the hotel. Betsy is also sick. They start puking in the cab. They rush out into the building and into their rooms. Esther lies down on her bed but then gets back up to go to the bathroom:

*"The sickness rolled through me in great waves. After each wave it would fade away and leave me limp as a wet leaf and shivering all over and then I would feel it rising up in me again, and the glittering white torture chamber tiles under my feet and over my head and all four sides closed in and squeezed me to pieces."* Chapter 4, pg. 36

She is on the floor of the bathroom for a very long time. Then she hears someone pounding on the door. She flushes the toilet and cleans up the puke with a towel. Her next sight is a black shoe near her face. Someone tells her that she is all right and comments to someone else that there are eleven girls sick in all. They take Esther back to her room and tell her that she was poisoned by the crabmeat. Later, Doreen is standing by her pillow. She gives her some amber liquid to drink. After she drinks, she feels better. Ladies' Day magazine sends the girls special presents the next day. No one has opened them when Esther opens hers: a book of short stories. She eats Doreen's soup.

Topic Tracking: Maternal Relationships 2



## Chapter 5

The telephone rings and it is not Jay Cee. Esther had already received a telegram from her telling her to take the day off from work. The name of the caller is Constantin. He is trying to arrange some sort of meeting between them and asks if she would like to see the U.N. or go out to eat. Constantin, a simultaneous interpreter, was given Esther's number by Mrs. Willard. She tries to think positively about the date, but can't. She looks down on Buddy Willard, whom everyone assumes she will marry once he gets out of the TB clinic. When she first met him she didn't know he was a hypocrite. Soon after she found out, and intended to break up with him, he got TB and was shipped off to a clinic. She orders room service and reflects on the difficulty of tipping people correctly, "I hate handing over money for what I could just as easily do myself, it makes me nervous." Chapter 5, pg. 44. She mis-tipped the bell-hop, waiter, and taxi-driver.

There is a card from the Ladies' Day magazine. Inside the book of short stories, she reads a story about a nun and a Jewish man. They accidentally touch each other's hands after seeing a bird hatch in a fig tree they have been harvesting for many years. The next day, a different nun comes out, and the Jewish man is hurt. Esther thinks that she and Buddy are like this: he has watched her turn from a baby into a woman. Buddy told her once that a poem is a piece of dust. He thought he was very clever. Esther thought for a long time before she came up with any sort of a comeback. She never said anything to him about it and rarely ever disagreed with him about anything. She had first kissed him at Yale's junior prom. Their mothers were good friends. They had both married college professors and settled down in the same town. The year of their first kiss, Esther was a freshman and had terrible luck with dates all year. Buddy stopped by her dorm because he was at her college to take another girl to a dance. Upset, Esther told him that she had two dates. He left her a note asking her to go with him to his junior prom. She was very excited by this.

At his prom, they danced very far apart. On the way home, she was disappointed because she thought that he was going to fall in love with her. He asked her up to the chemistry lab to see the view. He kissed her once and was very happy. Her told her that he could only come up to see her every third week:

*"Buddy kissed me again in front of the house steps, and the next fall, when his scholarship to medical school came through, I went there to see him instead of to Yale and it was there I found out that he had fooled me all those years and what a hypocrite he was."* Chapter 5, pg. 50

Topic Tracking: Maternal Relationships 3

Topic Tracking: Sexuality 2



## Part 2, Chapter 6

At medical school, Esther asked Buddy to show her something interesting in the medical labs. There were jars of stillborn babies and cadavers. They went to a lecture on sickle cell anemia and then to a hospital to see a baby get born. The intern at the hospital told Esther that if she sees a birth, she will never want to have a child herself, but Esther laughed at him. The woman screamed in pain, and Buddy told Esther that she was on a drug that would make her forget the pain afterwards. Esther thought that this was exactly the sort of drug a man would invent. The baby's head appeared, but the doctor had to make a surgical incision. After the birth, the intern took the baby out to be cleaned. He urinated on the other doctor. Esther thought that the whole process was wonderful. She imagined herself, triumphant, after giving birth. She would feel heavenly, holding her new born child after such an ordeal. They went back to Buddy's room. Esther read a poem while Buddy drank some wine. He asked her if she had ever seen a man naked, and when she said she hadn't, he took off all his clothing and stood before her. She was not impressed and had to stifle her laughter. He asked her to do the same but she wouldn't. She drank wine and asked him if he had ever slept with anyone. He told her that he had. She was upset because she thought he was innocent and less experienced than her. She asked him to tell her about it, pretending not to be upset. "Of course somebody had seduced Buddy, Buddy hadn't started it and it wasn't really his fault." Chapter 6, pg. 57. He had slept with a waitress who seduced him. He worked with her at a country club the summer before. At first, Esther assumed that they only slept together once, but it was over thirty times. Esther asked other people if she should be mad, but most of the girls said it was normal for guys. Since Buddy wasn't 'pinned,' or engaged at the time, she couldn't really be mad at him. She was not upset about his sleeping with the waitress, but that he had always pretended to be so pure. She asked him what his mother thought, hoping to expose some sort of contradiction. He said that he told his mom the waitress was free to do as she liked. Esther had decided to dump him then, but he got TB. She didn't feel sorry for him when she found out, and used his illness as an excuse to stay in on weekends to do more work. Everyone thought that she was being a wonderfully loyal girlfriend.

Topic Tracking: Sexuality 3



## Chapter 7

Constantin is too short, but he is tan and has good teeth. Soon they are making fun of Mrs. Willard together. As they are outside in the sun, he takes Esther's hand and she is happy. She thinks that she has not been happy since before her father died. They meet another Russian simultaneous interpreter who is a woman. Esther idealizes the large Slavic woman and her ability to speak multiple languages. She dwells on all the things she cannot do: dancing, cooking, shorthand, singing, speaking another language. She decides that she never wants to work for a man. The inadequacy of men overwhelms her. She thinks of herself as a branch on the fig tree, watching her future lives fall away in the form of figs; she is starving because she does not know which one to eat.

They leave the Slavic woman and go to a restaurant. She feels so much better after she eats that she decides to let Constantin seduce her. As she makes this decision, she thinks of her previous, thwarted attempts to lose her virginity.

She had decided to sleep with someone after she learned about Buddy's waitress. She met a boy named Eric and talked with him about sex at a coffeehouse. He had gone to a whorehouse in high school. At his private school it was like a right of passage:

*"She was a fat middle-aged woman with dyed red hair and suspiciously thick lips and rat-colored skin and she wouldn't even turn off the light, so he'd had her under a fly-spotted twenty-five-watt bulb, and it was nothing like it was cracked up to be. It was boring as going to the toilet."* Chapter 7, pg. 64

Esther had tried to convince him that sex would be better with someone he cared about but he wouldn't listen to her. She wanted to have sex with him but it didn't work out. The more she thinks about having sex with Constantin the more she thinks it a good idea. Her mother had sent her an article by a woman lawyer praising the practical value of chastity. The article said that chastity was the only option for a discerning woman until she was married. It was very centered around the desires of men, despite being written by a woman. For Esther, the female world is divided into two sections: virgins and not virgins.

She goes to Constantin's apartment, but is disappointed because he seems to show no interest in her. After a while, she gets tired and lays down on his bed. He lays down next to her and they both fall asleep. She thinks he is beautiful and wishes that she were better looking so that he would not be able to resist her. She is upset because she doesn't think that she is able to get a man to fall in love with her. She wakes up later; it is three in the morning according to Constantin's watch. She thinks about being Constantin's wife and realizes that it would be disappointing. She knows that Buddy's mother gave up her life to act as wife to her husband and mother to Buddy. Her own father had expected the same sort of dedication from her mother. Buddy had told her that after she had children she wouldn't want to write poetry any more. "So I began to think maybe it was true that when you were married and had children it was like being brainwashed, and afterward you went about as numb as a slave in a totalitarian state."



Chapter 7, pg. 67. Constantin wakes and drives her home. Lying in her bed, her leg hurts from the rain. She had broken it because of Buddy Willard.

Topic Tracking: Maternal Relationships 4

Topic Tracking: Sexuality 4



## Chapter 8

Mr. Willard had driven her to Buddy's sanitarium. She had wanted to go alone, but she didn't have the heart to tell Mr. Willard. They ate a lunch packed by Mrs. Willard and he told her that he had always wanted a daughter. He couldn't hope for a better daughter than Esther. She cried, and Mr. Willard thought it was because she missed her own father. The sanitarium was dark and gloomy. There was a fountain in one corner of the waiting room. When she saw Buddy, Esther was surprised that he had gotten fat. This happened because of all the eating he had to do and his lack of exercise. He had a small room and he gave her an ashtray he made even though she didn't smoke. Mr. Willard left; this surprised Esther because she thought he was going to stay longer. Buddy gave her a magazine and pointed to a poem that he wrote in it. He was trying to be more like her to make her happy. She thought the poem was awful but didn't say so. He told her that she couldn't contract anything from him because he was not positive. Abruptly, he asked her if she would marry him. She laughed and he thought it was because he was fat. She told him that she never wanted to get married. Then she talked about how he once told her that she was neurotic because she wanted to live in the country and the city:

*"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."* Chapter 8, pg. 76

He told her that he wanted to fly from place to place with her.

Buddy took Esther skiing. He tried to teach her even though he didn't know how to ski himself. He was sure that he could teach someone because he had watched people learn many times. She borrowed equipment. He got her to go on the rope tow and promised they would get off half way up. She couldn't get off the rope tow and ended up going to the top of the mountain. She remembers that it never occurred to her to say no to Buddy. She looked down from the top of the mountain and saw Buddy way down below. She turned to face the bottom of the slope and just started going. She felt wonderful as she swooped down the mountain. Just as she neared Buddy, he stepped out in front of her and she crashed. On the ground, she told Buddy that she wanted to try again, but he told her that her leg had been broken in two places.

Topic Tracking: Confusion 3

Topic Tracking: Sexuality 5



## Chapter 9

She enters the hotel after being dropped off by Constantin and sees Hilda wearing a hat that is a hideous shade of green. Hilda made the hat that color because the fashion magazines are trying to push that color for the upcoming fall. They talk about the execution of the Rosenbergs and Esther thinks that she is happy they are going to die. Hilda yawns as they speak.

Esther goes to Jay Cee's office to get her picture taken. She is told to pose but she is afraid she is going to cry. They gave Esther a paper rose to hold because she had said she wanted to be a poet. The rose was the only thing the photographer thought could stand for poetic inspiration. The photographer says to her, "Show us how happy it makes you to write a poem." Chapter 9, pg. 83. She doesn't smile and suddenly begins to weep. The photographer and Jay Cee leave the room. When she stops crying, she tries to make herself look better in the mirror, but it is no good. Jay Cee comes back and gives her some manuscripts to look over. She tells her not to worry about the picture. As she reads, she thinks about sending Jay Cee a manuscript under a pseudonym and surprising her during lunch.

Doreen tries to convince Esther to go to a dance with her and Lenny Shepherd. She tells her that Lenny will bring a guy for her. Esther doesn't feel like she can do anything. Her clothing is strewn all over her room. Doreen helps her pick up and gives her a dress to wear. She decides to go. Lenny arrives with his friend Marco. Marco gives her a diamond pin and takes her arm too strongly. Her arm bruises in the places where his fingers touch her. She thinks he is like a snake and is sure that he is a woman-hater. All night long, Marco pays attention only to her, despite the fact that there are many dancers, singers, and models at the dance. When he asks her to dance, she says no, but he makes her. He leads and pulls her over the floor. She realizes that woman-haters are all-powerful and invulnerable like gods. They leave the dance floor and he smokes a cigar. She asks him if he is in love with someone. Marco says he is in love with his cousin but cannot have her for two reasons. First, she is his first cousin, and second, she is becoming a nun. He pushes her to the ground and gets her dress dirty. He calls her a slut and she kicks him and bites his ear. When she punches him in the nose, he is knocked back and demands the diamond pin back. She tells him that it is in her evening bag, which was thrown into the bushes. She rushes inside but cannot find Doreen. When she gets back to the hotel she goes to the roof and throws all of her fancy New York clothing away. There is blood on her face.

Topic Tracking: Confusion 4

Topic Tracking: Sexuality 6



## Chapter 10

In the morning, she thinks that she looks sick and unfamiliar. She had to borrow clothing from Betsy because she threw away everything she owned the night before. There is dried blood on her face but she doesn't bother to wash it off. She takes the train and meets her mother. She tells her that she didn't make the writing course at Harvard she thought she was going to be taking. Esther is nervous and she doesn't want to spend the rest of the summer in the suburbs. When she gets home, she goes to sleep. She wakes in the morning and sees her neighbor outside. She doesn't like the neighbors. Walking by is Dodo Conway. Dodo is a Catholic woman who went to a decent college, then married a Catholic man, and is now pregnant with her seventh child. Everyone in the neighborhood likes Dodo. Her children make Esther sick.

Esther crawls back into bed. The phone rings and it is her friend from school, Jody, who thinks that Esther is coming to live with her in Cambridge. Esther tells her that she didn't make the creative writing course. Jody tries to convince her to come anyway and take another course. Esther tells her to get another roommate for the summer. When she hangs up the phone she regrets this. She opens a letter from Buddy:

*"Billy wrote that he was probably falling in love with a nurse who also had TB but his mother had rented a cottage in the Adirondacks for the months of July, and if I came along with her, he might well find his feeling for the nurse was mere infatuation."*

Chapter 10, pg. 97-8

She simply turns the letter over and writes on it that she is engaged to a simultaneous interpreter and she never wants to see him again. She tapes the envelope back together and readdresses it. She decides to spend the summer writing a novel. She takes out a typewriter and a fresh piece of paper. The heroine of the story is going to be her, but in disguise. She writes three or four lines and then admires her own work even though she has a suspicious feeling that she has read part of it somewhere before. Her mother gets home and asks her why she hasn't gotten dressed. She writes two more lines and then thinks that she cannot write a novel until she has more life experience. By the end of dinner, her mother has her convinced she should study shorthand at night. She takes out a blackboard and begins to teach her. After a while, Esther says that she has a headache and tells her mother that she is going to bed. "I had decided I would put off the novel until I had gone to Europe and had a lover." Chapter 10, pg. 100. She thinks about working on her thesis for the rest of the summer, or delaying the next year of college, or going to Germany. She thinks that her life is like a line of telephone poles. She cannot see the next pole and feels disconnected. She sleeps in the same room as her mother and pretends to be asleep until she leaves for work in the morning. Her mother snores terribly and she is up most of the night. She tries to read *Finnegan's Wake* for her thesis, but she cannot focus. She doesn't understand any of it. She decides not to do a thesis and do the normal English track instead. When she looks at the requirements for the normal courses, she gets more discouraged. She hasn't met most of them because they are drastically different requirements. She feels bad because she always looked down on people in the non-honors track. She suddenly



realizes that some of them know more than she does. She gets more upset. She goes to the family doctor, Teresa, who is actually related by marriage, and asks her for stronger sleeping pills. Teresa doesn't think that Esther needs stronger sleeping pills; she thinks she needs to see a psychiatrist. She refers her to Dr. Gordon.

Topic Tracking: Confusion 5

Topic Tracking: Sexuality 7

Topic Tracking: Maternal Relationships 5



## Part 3, Chapter 11

Dr. Gordon has a large beige waiting room. It has been three weeks since she got back from New York City and Esther is still wearing Betsy's clothing. She has not washed her hair in as long. She thinks it is useless to wash hair because you just have to wash it again. She also thinks that she has not slept in all that time. She remembers all the hours lying awake at night. It makes her tired to think of washing her hair and changing her clothing.

Dr. Gordon tells her that her mother is very upset and worried about her. Esther is disappointed in the doctor. She thought he would be older and intelligent looking. Instead, he is young and sits behind his large desk looking very conceited. She doesn't trust him because he is good looking. She is irrationally infuriated by the photograph on his desk. It is of his beautiful wife and children. She doesn't think that someone with such a beautiful life could understand her problems. He asks her to tell him what she thinks is wrong. She is upset that he says 'think' because this implies that there is nothing *really* wrong. She tells him that she cannot sleep or eat but she omits her problem with her handwriting. Earlier, she had tried to write Doreen a letter asking if she could live with her:

*"But when I took up my pen, my hand made big, jerky letters like those of a child, and the lines sloped down the page from left to right almost diagonally, as if they were loops of string lying on the paper, and someone had come along and blown them askew."*  
Chapter 11, pg. 106

She tore up the letter and hid it in her purse. While she talks, his head is bent and his hands are folded in front of his face. He asks where she goes to school, and he reacts with some anecdote about when he was at her school during the war. Without reacting to anything she said, he tells her that he will see her the next week. When she goes outside, her mother sighs when she hears that Esther has to go back again the next week. Going to Dr. Gordon costs 25 dollars an hour.

While at the Boston Common, Esther meets a sailor and tells him her name is Elly Higginbottom and that she is from Chicago. She worries about running into Mrs. Willard who is often out shopping during the day. She thinks that life might be better in Chicago and she starts to try and figure out how she would get there. The sailor tells her that they should go over behind a monument where no one can see them and kiss. Esther thinks she sees Mrs. Willard coming and begins to tell the sailor very loudly to leave her alone. When she realizes that it couldn't possibly be Mrs. Willard, because she went to her cabin in the mountains, she explains to the sailor that she is an orphan. The woman who approached them looked like a woman from Chicago who ran the orphanage and was allegedly very cruel to her. She cries and the sailor thinks she is sad because she's an orphan.

She goes back to Dr. Gordon and repeats everything she said the week before, except that she includes the part about the handwriting. She empties the remnants of the letter



on his desk. Dr. Gordon asks her if it is all right if he goes out and talks to her mother. Esther says he can and while he is out of the room, she puts the scraps of the letter back into her bag so that no one can piece it back together and find out that she was planning to run away. When she gets in the car, her mother tells her that Dr. Gordon thinks she should have shock therapy. Esther panics because she doesn't believe in her mother's promise that she wouldn't have to stay at the hospital, Walton.

Later, Esther is reading the tabloid papers. She reads about a man who was stopped from throwing himself off a building by a police officer. The article doesn't explain why the man wanted to commit suicide or how the officer made him stop. She likes these papers even though she has never read them before. They are pulpy and honest. The only paper she had ever read was the 'Christian Science Monitor'. As she circles the public garden, Esther reads the names of the trees. Her favorite tree is the 'weeping scholar.' She thinks it must be from Japan. This makes her think of Japanese ritual suicide. Such an act seems honorable to her.

The next morning Dido Conway drives her and her mother to Walton. She thinks of running away but realizes that it would be useless to try.

*"I decided to walk to the bus terminal and inquire about the fares to Chicago. Then I might go to the bank and withdraw precisely that amount which would not cause so much suspicion"* Chapter 11, pg. 113

She went to the bus station but realized that the bank had already closed for the day and would not be open again until her appointment was over the next day. She resigns herself to the fact that she cannot escape the electroshock.

Topic Tracking: Sexuality 8

Topic Tracking: Confusion 6



## Chapter 12

Walton is on a grass hill. It looks more like a really nice house than a hospital. At the door, the nurse has them wait for Dr. Gordon to show up. Esther is upset because the house looks so normal even though it is full of crazy people. The living room is well laid out and she sees patients moving around. "There was a uniformity, as if they had lain for a long time on a shelf, out of the sunlight, under siftings of pale, fine dust." Chapter 12, pg. 15-16. She notices that some of the patients are moving strangely. A man is counting several decks of cards. A woman is playing with wooden beads. A girl looks up at Esther and tears some sheet music in half.

Dr. Gordon leads her away and she wants to ask what it will be like but her voice fails her. She hears a woman screaming. The woman has long shaggy hair and is being dragged by a nurse through the hallway. Esther is led into a bare room. The windows are barred. The nurse takes out her hair pins and lifts her watch off her wrist. She lies down on the bed and metal plates are attached to her temples. She shuts her eyes and there is a shrill sound. Her body writhes and she feels that her bones are wrenching. She wonders what she did to deserve this sort of punishment to her body.

She is sitting in a chair and thinking of items from her father's study. Her watch is on upside down. She looks at a lamp and thinks of a lamp she tore from the wall in impatience when she was little. This resulted in a shock as the blue electricity arched through the air. Dr. Gordon asks her how she is feeling and she lies. He asks her where she goes to college and responds with the same anecdote he gave her in his office. Her mother is worried about her, as the doctor tells her that Esther will need more shock treatments. The girl at the piano sticks out her tongue. Dodo Conway drives them home. Esther tells her mother that she wants nothing to do with Dr. Gordon. Her mother smiles and says "I knew my baby wasn't like that...I knew you'd decide to be all right again." Chapter 12, pg. 119. Esther feels around in her pocket for the picture portion of an article about a starlet who died. She thinks of Jay Cee and Buddy Willard's parents. She also thinks about a Yale law student who called her prude and a creative writing teacher who called her short story factitious. She hates all of them. She hasn't slept for 21 nights and thinks that the most beautiful part of life is a shadow. In the morning, she cuts her thigh with a razor blade in the bathtub to see how much it would hurt to cut her wrists. She knows it will hurt more because it has more steps. She thinks of the roman philosophers who bled themselves to death in a warm bath when life became too much to handle.

She tries to take a subway to Deer Island prison, near a beach she used to go to when she was little. When she finds out that she can't take a subway there, she breaks into tears. The attendant gives her directions on the bus. She tells him that her father is in the prison and she wants to go see him. She goes there and walks on the beach. A guard yells at her because she is on prison property. She tells him that she grew up in the area and flirts with him. She asks what kind of criminals are inside the prison and is disappointed when she finds out that there are no murderers. He salutes her as she walks away. She sits on a log near a sand bar she remembers from her youth. She sits



there for a very long time. Some people look at her because she has been there so long. She is the only person on the beach in a skirt and high heels. She thinks that this is amusing:

*"I had removed my patent leather shoes after a while, for they foundered badly in the sand. It pleased me to think they would be perched there on the silver log, pointing out to sea, like a sort of soul-compass, after I was dead."* Chapter 12, pg. 124

She realizes that she has razors but no warm bath. She thinks of renting a room, but cannot think of a way it would work out. A boy tells her that the tide is coming in. She tells him to go away but he doesn't until his mother calls him. He walks off kicking stones as Esther shivers. The waves begin to lap her feet and she knows that she is too much of a coward to die in the coming tide.

Topic Tracking: Confusion 7

Topic Tracking: Maternal Relationships 6



## Chapter 13

Esther talks to Jody about some boy Jody wants her to meet. The boy is named Cal and she thinks she might even like him if she were sane. They go to a lake with Jody and her boyfriend. Cal and Esther argue about some play, while the other two swim. Esther is sure that her mother called Jody and asked her to take her out. They eat hot dogs on the beach. Esther is very careful to cook hers well, but when no one is looking, she buries it in the sand. They argue about whether or not the mother in the play caused her son's death. Then she asks Cal how he would kill himself. He tells her that he would shoot himself. "It was just like a man to do it with a gun. A fat chance I had of laying my hands on a gun." Chapter 13, pg. 127. She asks him what kind of a gun he would do it with and he says he would use his father's shotgun, thinking that they were joking around.

The other two run up and the whole group starts to get on her nerves. She decides to go swimming and she thinks about drowning. She picks out a rock that is very far away and decides to swim there. Cal gives up part way and she paddles on. She had tried to hang herself that morning using a silk cord from her mother's robe. She wandered around the house and suddenly realized that there was nowhere to hang the rope. She tried to lay down and choke herself but every time she got close, she would pass out and the knot would loosen. She had looked through paperbacks from the drug store and decided that her symptoms of insanity were the worst kind. She knows that she needs help but she doesn't want to go to any of the doctors and her mother doesn't have the money.

She watches Cal swim back and realizes that if she ever gets to the rock, she will just lie there until she feels strong enough to swim all the way back in. Instead, she decides to drown herself where she is. She repeatedly dives down and tries to stay under water but she floats back up.

She had volunteered at the hospital at her mother's advice. Her mother thought that helping others would be the best sort of medicine. Esther hoped she would be assigned to a ward that contained the really desperate cases. This would either push her over the edge, or make her feel better. Esther is assigned to the maternity ward. On the first day, she is supposed to wheel in a cart of flowers. She doesn't like that some of the flowers are dead, so she picks out the dead ones and rearranges some of the bouquets. When the women see this, they freak out and yell at her. She runs out of the hospital.

Outside of the hospital, she asks the direction of the graveyard. She walks past the Methodist church she had not been to since her father died. After he died, she and her mother switched to the Unitarian church. Her mother had been Catholic, but she left the church when she got married. Esther had thought about becoming a Catholic because there is such an emphasis in their doctrine against committing suicide. Her mother laughed at her desire to become a nun, because she wasn't even Catholic. She entered the graveyard thinking she should pay more attention to her father's grave:



*"The graveyard disappointed me. It lay at the outskirts of the town, on low ground, like a rubbish dump, and as I walked up and down the gravel paths. I could smell the stagnant salt marshes in the distance."* Chapter 13, pg. 135

The newer stones in the yard are crude and cheap. The rain is beginning to seep through her jacket. She sees her father's stone and collapses in tears. She hadn't cried when he died. Neither had her mother.

She decides that she knows how to kill herself. She writes her mother a note saying that she is going on a very long walk and will not be back for awhile. She goes into her mother's room and finds the hidden sleeping pills. There are over fifty. She is very happy that there are so many. She pours herself a glass of water and goes into the basement. There is a hole in the basement wall where a breeze-way was added to the house. She wrenches her body into the hole and covers its dark opening with logs. She begins to take the pills and drifts off to sleep as she nears the bottom of the bottle.

Topic Tracking: Confusion 8



## Chapter 14

It is completely dark and Esther hears moaning. A weight and force smashes into her face. Voices permeate her chamber. Light bleeds around her and she hears someone say mother.

She is disoriented and in a large room. She can't really see anything. Someone tells her that she is blind, but that this is all right because there are many blind men in the world. Later she wakes and someone takes the bandages off her eyes. She can see. Her brother and mother come to see her later, but she doesn't want to see them.

A man named George Blakewell comes to see her. She just barely recognizes him, but can't place his face. He tells her that she once dated his roommate at Amherst. She realizes that he just wanted to see a crazy girl, so she yells, "Get out. Get the hell out and don't come back." Chapter 14, pg. 142.

Sometime later, Esther asks the nurse for a mirror, but the nurse tries to impress upon her that this is not a good idea. She tells Esther that she doesn't look very good now, but will later. She demands for the mirror and the nurse sighs as she gives her a mirror to hold. Her hair is shaved off except for certain patches. Her face is bruised and misshaped, puffy on the edges. Esther begins to grin and then drops the mirror. It shatters on the floor and another nurse runs into the room. Both the nurses, upset by her behavior, tell her that breaking a mirror is seven years' bad luck.

They take her in an ambulance to another hospital that has a psychiatric ward. Her mother is very unhappy with her. She doesn't understand why Esther cannot behave like a normal girl. Esther pretends to not understand where she is being taken. At the new hospital, she shares a room with an Italian woman with long, flowing dark curls. She tells Esther that they put her on the ward because she went crazy and attacked her mother in law. When Esther tells her that she tried to kill herself, she stops talking to her. A group of younger men and women come into the room in white lab coats. Esther begins to get very flustered when they approach her because she doesn't like to address groups. She tells them that she feels lousy when they ask her how she feels. One of them asks her why she feels lousy. She tells him that she cannot sleep and cannot eat. One of them points out that she just slept all night, and she looks down to realize that she has been eating. They go to question the Italian woman. She whispers to one of them and they draw the curtain between the patients.

Esther is sitting on a bench with her mother. She keeps telling her mother that the Italian woman is imitating her across the garden, but her mother doesn't believe her. When her mother looks away, the Italian woman makes a face. Some doctors come up to introduce themselves. Esther thinks that they have odd names. She cannot really understand what they are saying. Her mother says:

*"O Esther I wish you would cooperate. They say you don't cooperate. They say you won't talk to any of the doctors or make anything in Occupational therapy..."*



'I've got to get out of here,' I told her meaningly. 'Then I'd be all right. You got me in here', I said. 'You get me out.'" Chapter 14, pg. 146

Her mother says that she will try to get her out. At dinner a couple nights later, a black man brings food around to their table. The Italian woman used to help dish out the food, but she left. Esther starts to help. A red-haired woman is taken away from the table after she overturns a full bowl of food. The black man brings two kinds of beans to the table. Esther thinks that everyone knows you don't serve two kinds of beans at once. She is sure that the man is making fun of them. She goes behind him and kicks him really hard in the leg.

The nurse takes Esther's temperature and it is normal as usual. Esther feels an annoying pressure on her leg, so she kicks out and knocks over a full box of medical instruments. The thermometer shatters. Other nurses enter the room and restrain her, but as they wheel her away, she grabs the mercury from the thermometer. She likes the way it moves. She is moved into a higher security room.

Topic Tracking: Maternal Relationships 7

Topic Tracking: Confusion 9



## Chapter 15

She is in a Cadillac with Philomena Guinea who is paying for Esther to go to a private hospital. Mrs. Guinea made sure that Esther wasn't in trouble with any boys before she said she'd help her. Esther's mother thinks that she should be more grateful than she is. If it wasn't for Mrs. Guinea's help, Esther would be going to a state hospital where the care is very bad. She has her own room on the first floor and there are no bars on the windows. Esther realizes that she wouldn't even bruise herself if she jumped. Her doctor is a young woman named Dr. Nolan. When she is first in her room, many strange doctors enter and introduce themselves. She is reminded of the doctors at the last hospital. A male doctor tells her about pilgrims and indians and she knows that he is telling lies. He leaves and Esther is surprised to find out that she can wander around the place. She wanders into the lounge and meets a girl named Valerie. She tries to introduce herself but is not very successful. Valerie tells her that all of the other patients are out walking or at occupational therapy. Valerie reminds her of a girl scout leader she once knew. She cannot understand why Valerie is at the hospital. She is reading a fashion magazine and seems very normal.

When Dr. Nolan comes to speak to her, she asks if she is all right. Then she asks if she can smoke. Esther says she can, admitting that she likes the smell. She asks Esther why she didn't like Dr. Gordon. Esther tells her about her terrible experience with shock therapy. Dr. Nolan is upset about this and she tells Esther that it isn't supposed to happen like that. According to Dr. Nolan, most people feel that getting a shock treatment is like going to sleep. She assures Esther that if she gets any more shock therapy she will be warned ahead of time and that it will be much different. When Dr. Nolan leaves, Esther is happy to see that she has left matches behind. She thinks she may be being tested, but she hides the matches in the hem of her robe anyway.

A new woman moves into the room next to hers. Esther goes in to introduce herself and sits there for a long time. The woman, Mrs. Norris, stays silent and gets up. Esther follows her to the dining room where they sit and wait for dinner without talking. The nurses inject Esther with insulin every day and give her a sugary glass of fruit juice afterwards. They wait carefully to see if she has any sort of negative reaction. Esther begins to get fatter.

After a while, she is allowed to walk in the gardens, but Mrs. Norris is never allowed to go outside. Valerie walks around with her and shows her the scars on her temples. These are lobotomy scars. Valerie is proud of them she says, "I'm not angry anymore. Before I was angry all the time." Chapter 15, pg. 158. Valerie is probably never going to leave the hospital.

Esther is abruptly told that she is moving to the other side of the house. This denotes some sort of progress. Mrs. Norris is not moving up, she is moving down to Wymark house. The house they are in is Caplan. It is the middle house. Esther has been waiting for Mrs. Norris to talk for three weeks, but she hasn't. On the day of the moving, the

nurse tells her that someone she knows is coming to stay in the hospital. It is Joan, an ex-girlfriend of Buddy.

Topic Tracking: Maternal Relationships 8

Topic Tracking: Confusion 10



## Part 4, Chapter 16

Joan's room is just like Esther's. She was working in a job at a fraternity like the Masons. She hated it because it made her feet hurt after a day of work. They would swell up in her shoes that were probably not right for standing all the time. She didn't really quit the job, she just stopped showing up to work. She went to see a psychiatrist and before she knew it, she was sitting in front of people watching her counseling session. She told the doctor that she hated her job and wanted to kill herself. He prescribed group therapy for her. She sent the doctor a note of rebuttal. The day she sent him the note, she read an article about Esther's disappearance. She takes the article out and shows it to Esther. It has a picture from her time in New York. There are more articles. The next article tells of the discovery that the sleeping pills were missing, and the last one shows her rescue from the hole in the cellar. After reading these articles, Joan took a plane to New York and cut her wrists on a broken window. Esther replies to Joan's story with, "But you're all right now." Chapter 16, pg. 164. Joan says she is and believes that Esther is too.

Esther falls asleep after an evening meal and is woken up by somebody taking her watch off. They tell her that she had a reaction to the medication, and was pounding on her bed frame, screaming. After being restrained by two people, Esther calms down. Dr. Nolan asks her about the episode and is happy to find out that Esther feels better. Dr. Nolan has other news for her. Esther is afraid that she is going to be given bad news, but Dr. Nolan just tells her that she isn't going to allow her to have any more visitors for a while. Esther is happy about this. She has had too many visitors. From a high school English teacher to the Unitarian minister, she couldn't take any more visitors. They all made her feel nervous and more crazy. That afternoon, before the episode, her mother had come to visit her. Her mother always showed up when everything was going all right. She always ruined her mood. Every time she came, she begged her to get better, wanting to know what she did wrong as a mother. This made Esther sick. That day her mother had brought her flowers. At first Esther didn't understand why, but when her mother told her it was her birthday, she threw the flowers in the trash can. Esther tells Dr. Nolan that she hates her mother and Dr. Nolan doesn't scold her, instead she replies "I suppose you do." Chapter 16, pg. 166.

Topic Tracking: Confusion 11

Topic Tracking: Maternal Relationships 9



## Chapter 17

A nurse tells Esther that she is being moved from Caplan to Belsize. Esther is worried because she doesn't think that she deserves to be moved. Joan has already been moved up to Belsize, but Esther doesn't think that she wants to be around her. She represents things that make her uncomfortable. She tries not to think about it and feels a little better because she is sure that she will no longer have to worry about shock treatments at Belsize. She has heard that people at Belsize are beyond the shock therapy. She begins to get more anxious as the day passes.

At Belsize the women are fashionably dressed. They talk about husbands, doctors, and boyfriends. Esther finds Joan eating well and at ease among the other women. Esther doesn't understand why she isn't in Wymark. She thinks everyone in the room is talking about her and she compares the house's atmosphere to a college dormitory. A woman named DeeDee is playing the piano. Esther compliments her playing. Joan asks Esther if she is the girl in a photograph from a magazine. Esther denies it, but everyone insists it is her. Someone tries to get her to play bridge, but she just watches because she doesn't know how to play.

A nurse works both in Belsize and the state mental hospital up the street. She talks about how badly people are treated there. They don't get to go outside to walk. They never get to go to town. It is more like prison. People don't get better there. Esther is sure that the nurse was instructed to talk about the state hospital for her benefit. The hospital is Esther's only alternative to Belsize. Esther shivers.

She wakes the next morning and hears the nurse knocking on the door next to hers. The nurses come around in the morning and wake patients up. They give them a tray to go get breakfast unless the patient is scheduled for shock therapy. The shock therapy always happens in the morning. Her door opens and a nurse comes in without a tray. She doesn't recognize the nurse and she is convinced that the nurse must have her confused with somebody else. The head nurse comes in and double-checks the schedule in front of her. She confirms for her that Dr. Nolan has scheduled her for a shock treatment this morning. Esther looks at the people getting breakfast with envy. She walks into the hallway:

*"It wasn't the shock treatment that struck me, so much as the bare-faced treachery of Dr. Nolan. I loved her. I had given her my trust on a platter and told her everything and she had promised, faithfully, to warn me ahead of time if ever I had to have another shock treatment."* Chapter 17, pg. 173

Esther thinks that if she had been told, she could have dealt with the anxiety over night and would have been calm for the morning. When Dr. Nolan comes to her room, Esther yells at her. Dr. Nolan tells her that she will stay by her side the entire time. They go down a flight of stairs into the basement. She clings to Dr. Nolan's arms. They go in and wait for the electroshock nurse. The nurse leads her into a room. She sees the flat bed

and the ominous machine. With Dr. Nolan at her side, she lies down. They fasten the equipment to her temples and she begins to panic. She blacks out.

Topic Tracking: Maternal Relationships 10



## Chapter 18

Esther wakes to Dr. Nolan calling her name. She doesn't feel any pain or remember any of the wrenching agony she felt the first time she had electroshock therapy. Dr. Nolan leads her outside and she thinks, "the bell jar hung, suspended, a few feet above my head. I was open to the circulating air." Chapter 18, pg. 176. Dr. Nolan asks her if the experience was better and Esther tells her that it was. The doctor says she will be having the treatment a couple times a week. Esther eats and when she looks at a knife, she tries to think why she used to like knives so much but she can't. Joan and DeeDee are playing chopsticks on the piano. When she looks at them, she thinks that neither of them would be able to attract a man and keep him interested.

Joan has been hanging around Esther ever since she moved in from Caplan. Esther's shock treatments ended after five. Both of them have received letters from Buddy. They talk about the fact that they both dated him. They agree that the best part about dating Buddy was his family. Neither of them have anything good to say about Buddy. He wrote in his letter to Esther that he wanted to come see her. Esther doesn't like the thought of seeing Buddy again.

Later, she wants some sheet music, so she goes to DeeDee's door. She knocks a couple of times and when there is no answer, she opens the door to go in. She sees DeeDee and Joan together in bed. DeeDee's legs are showing and Joan is coming out from under the covers. Esther feels sick, and stutters, saying she just wanted sheet music. DeeDee and Joan aren't mad at her. She goes out, still sick by the sight, but a little interested in what they were doing. Later, she tells Dr. Nolan that she doesn't understand what women see in other women that they cannot get in men. Dr. Nolan suggests that they find tenderness. Esther has nothing to say to this. She thinks of a scandal at her school when a freshman and senior spent way too much time together. Everyone made fun of them. When Esther asked someone what they were found doing, they were just playing with each other's hair. Joan comes up to Esther and tells her that she likes her more than Buddy. Esther tells Joan that she makes her want to puke.

She goes to a gynecologist at Dr. Nolan's advice. She had been talking to Dr. Nolan about wanting to have sex, but being afraid of the repercussions of pregnancy. She told Dr. Nolan about the article she read about chastity and Dr. Nolan told her that it was propaganda. She advised Esther to get a diaphragm and have sex if she wanted to. Esther feels nervous in the doctor's office because there are pregnant and married women all around her. She is afraid that it isn't legal for her to use birth control in a state with so many Catholics in it. She goes into the room and is happy because the doctor doesn't ask her any questions. He just examines her and fits her for a diaphragm. She thinks to herself:

*"I am climbing to my freedom, freedom from fear, freedom from marrying the wrong person, like Buddy Willard, just because of sex, freedom from the 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..."* Chapter 18, pg. 182



She thinks it is ironic that she uses money given to her by Philomena Guinea to pay for the appointment.

Topic Tracking: Sexuality 9



## Chapter 19

Joan tells Esther that she is going to be a psychiatrist when she gets out of the hospital. She begins to talk about a bunch of Freudian stuff and Esther stops listening. Then she tells her that she is leaving and is going to live with one of the nurses in Cambridge. Esther congratulates her and Joan asks her if she will come visit her when she gets out. Esther says she will, but knows that she won't.

Esther is in the middle of having sex with a man named Irwin. It is hurting her quite a lot, and she doesn't understand why it would hurt so much. She met him in the front of a library that afternoon. His face is a little ugly, but he looks intelligent. She found out that he was a professor of math at age 26. He came up to her and asked her the time, even though he had a watch of his own. They went to have coffee, and she practiced her new normal personality. They drank three cups of coffee and then went back to his apartment for a beer. She saw his apartment and decided that she was going to seduce him. While they were talking, the doorbell rang. It was another woman. When he came back, she playfully accused him of being quite a ladies' man. He didn't deny it. She decided that she wanted to lose her virginity to him. She called up Dr. Nolan and told her that she wouldn't be back to the hospital until later, explaining why. She had practiced putting in her diaphragm earlier that day. Earlier that week, she had decided that she was definitely going to have sex because, "ever since I'd learned about the corruption of Buddy Willard, my virginity weighed like a millstone around my neck." Chapter 19, pg. 180. After being inside her for a while, Irwin gets up and goes to the bathroom to shower. Esther isn't quite sure what to think. She still hurts but feels happy that she is no longer a virgin. She is bleeding, but he told her that this happened sometimes. She begins to realize that she is bleeding too much, when the towel he gives her is sopping wet with blood. She puts it between her legs and rushes to Joan's place. By the time she gets there, blood is running down her legs. Joan is shocked. She calls doctors for her, but no one will come to the house because it is Sunday. Esther thinks she is going to die. Joan calls a taxi and they go to the emergency room. They look at her and tell her not to worry. They fix her up quickly, telling her that what happened to her happens to one in a million women. She is happy when she hears that she will be able to have sex again.

Back at the hospital, Joan's doctor comes into her room. Instead of talking about what happened to her, as Esther expects, the doctor asks her to help them find Joan. Joan had been brought back to the hospital, but was missing. She is not at her house or with any of her friends. Esther cannot think of where she would be. Later, the doctor stands in the door and waits for Esther to wake. She tells Esther that they found Joan. She had hanged herself from a tree near a frozen pond off the hospital grounds.

Topic Tracking: Sexuality 10

Topic Tracking: Confusion 12



## Chapter 20

Outside, there is fresh snow on the ground. It is near January and Esther is hopeful that she will return to school for the second semester. All she has to do is pass her exit examination. She is nervous because everyone at her school and in her town will know that she was in an institution.

*"Doctor Nolan said, quite bluntly, that a lot of people would treat me gingerly, or even avoid me, like a leper with a warning bell. My mother's face floated to mind, a pale reproachful moon, at her last and first visit to the asylum since my twentieth birthday. A daughter in an asylum! I had done that to her."* Chapter 20, pg. 193

Esther's mother had told her that they were going to pretend that her stay in the asylum was a bad dream. Esther thinks that to someone in the 'bell jar,' life itself is a bad dream. She remembers every part of her descent and her stay and she thinks that snowfall might cover them with forgetfulness. She doesn't want this to happen, because she thinks that her experiences are a part of her.

A nurse tells Esther that a man has come to see her. It is Buddy. She feels no emotion when she sees him. This disappoints her because she thought that she should feel something. They look at each other strangely for a moment. Buddy had driven through a snow storm to see her. He got his car stuck in a snow drift near the hospital. He stands a distance away from her. DeeDee was moved to Wymark after Joan's suicide. Esther gets a shovel from the grounds crew, and does most of the shoveling because of Buddy's TB. She feels very alive as she shovels out Buddy's car. Buddy looks as if he has changed in a serious way. He asks her if she thinks that he drives women crazy, mentioning that both she and Joan went to an asylum after dating him. Esther bursts out in laughter. He tries to restate his question and Esther is reminded of how Dr. Nolan assured her that she wasn't responsible for Joan's death. Dr. Nolan told her that many good psychiatrists lose patients to suicide no matter how hard they try. Esther tells Buddy that he had nothing to do with their problems.

Valerie talks to Esther about her leaving the hospital and Esther tries to convince her that it is not yet definite. Valerie tells her that they wouldn't give her the exit interview if they weren't almost completely sure. Esther reflects on her conversation with Buddy. She wonders aloud who would be willing to marry her after finding out she spent time in an asylum.

She calls Irwin and tells him to pay the bill from the emergency room. He is happy to hear from her and asks when he will get to see her again. She says never, and hangs up the phone. She is relieved that she will never have to speak to him again.

Joan's parents invite Esther to the funeral, because she was Joan's only remaining friend. Dr. Nolan tells her that she doesn't have to go, but Esther goes anyway. Everybody seems frozen at the funeral, Joan's body foremost.



*"There would be a black, six-foot-deep gap backed 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 newness in Joan's grave."* Chapter 20, pg. 198

The doctors meet for their weekly conference and Dr. Nolan assures Esther that she will do fine after she leaves. She feels that there should be a ritual for leaving an asylum, similar to getting married; it is a rebirth and a start of a new life. She pauses as she enters the room for her exit evaluation, taking a last glance at all the faces she saw on her first day. She steps into the room.

Topic Tracking: Confusion 13

Topic Tracking: Sexuality 11