

Identity in the bell jar



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

“ She wants...to be everything” A sense of individuality is essential for surviving the numerous emotional and physical obstacles encountered in daily life. A unique identity is perhaps one of the only true characteristics that defines an individual and is definitely a key principle for understanding and responding to one’s atmosphere. In the “ Bell Jar,” Esther battles not only a deteriorating mental stability, but also a lack of a sense of individuality. Esther is a young, sensitive and intelligent woman who feels oppressed by the obvious social restrictions placed upon women, and the pressure she feels regarding her future. Undoubtedly these emotional burdens result not only in Esther’s social and intellectual isolation, but also her impending mental breakdown. Clearly, Esther is deeply troubled by the hypocritical and often vicious world encompassing her, and feels overwhelmed and powerless to break free of her inner world of alienation. Instead of firmly establishing a genuine sense of self, Esther adopts and scrutinizes the images and personalities of the women in her life, which neither fit nor reflect her legitimate character. Throughout the novel Esther is faced with numerous possibilities regarding her future aspirations. Although she is an extremely perceptive and bright woman, Esther has no sense of imminent direction, and instead imagines herself becoming and achieving an abundance of successes simultaneously. Upon meeting her boss, Jay Cee, Esther is immediately impressed with her flourishing balance of a career and marriage, and begins to imagine herself attaining similar achievements: “ I tried to imagine what it would be like if I were Cee...Cee, the famous editor, in an office full of potted rubber plants and African violets my secretary had to water each morning.” (pg 36) Esther idolizes Jay Cee for her wisdom and prosperity, however, she is indecisive and paranoid about

choosing a single path to follow in life. Esther envisions her life as a fig tree in which she cannot choose a single branch: “ I saw my life branching out before me like the green fig tree...I saw myself sitting in the crotch of this fig-tree, starving to death, just because I couldn't make up my mind which of the figs I would choose. I wanted each and every one of them, but choosing one meant losing all the rest, and, as I sat there, unable to decide, the figs began to wrinkle and go black, and, one by one, they plopped to the ground at my feet.” (pg 73) Jay Cee symbolizes the urbane and polished accomplishments which Esther desperately wishes to embody, despite her inability to resolve on striving for a particular aim, she eventually learns of Esther's incompetent decisiveness as she states: “ She wants...to be everything” (pg 97). As a scholarship recipient, Esther feels obligated to impress everyone, and live up to the standards which the outside world has placed upon her. Consequently, Esther drives herself to a state of utter depression and disillusionment, feeling that she could not possibly measure up to the standards expected of her. Even while institutionalized Esther cannot escape from the intense pressure of her visitors: “ I kept feeling the visitors measuring my fat and stringy hair against what I had been and what they wanted me to be”. Detached and isolated from her inner self, Esther focuses her hopes and dreams on the anticipations of others. Esther exists in a perceptive and cerebral world which consequently segregates her from many social aspects in her life. Essentially an outcast, Esther's numerous attempts at social conformity fail, as her image of herself is incomplete and contradictory. Esther views herself as a pure and naive “ good girl”, and feels exhilarated while experimenting with Doreen's lifestyle. She sees Doreen as a worldly, sophisticated, clever and experienced “ bad girl”, and is

enchanted at the prospect of constant emotional and sexual freedom. As Esther states: "...being with Doreen made me forget my worries. I felt wise and cynical as hell" (pg 7). Doreen symbolizes Esther's need to revolt against her obsession with sexual purity and obeying the rules, and for a short time she enjoys her adaptation to this way of life. Although Esther appears captivated with Doreen's lifestyle, she quickly determines that she cannot harmonize with Doreen's flirtatious nature and wild escapades, and instead aspires to join the pure and simple natured Betsy. In many ways the lives of Esther and Betsy are very similar. Both are young, scholarship winning women who, to a certain degree, exist in a world of purity and innocence. However, unlike Betsy, Esther does not appreciate her femininity as she refuses to get married or have a family. Just as Esther cannot adapt to Doreen's world of seduction and rebellion she cannot adjust to the womanly role of mother and wife which Betsy welcomes. Betsy is a sweet and innocent woman who joyfully accepts the role of women in society, which Esther periodically wishes she could also embrace. Instead she bitterly rejects Betsy's beliefs and sarcastically refers to her as " Pollyanna Cowgirl" (pg 108). Esther's insecurity is ultimately the cause of her division from the environment of both Betsy and Doreen. Throughout the novel Esther is distraught over the sanctimony of society, and the role in which women have been designated to follow. Esther despises the superiority that men retain over women and the maternal role which women are expected to fulfill. Although Esther does not endeavor to imitate the attitudes of her mother and Mrs. Willard, Esther is nevertheless affected by their ideology which she is constantly subjected to. Moreover, Mrs. Willard and Esther's mother merely suggest roles that Esther should play. Esther's philosophy revolves

around feminism, where women should be given the same opportunities and privileges as men. Unfortunately, Esther ascertains the realities of a deceitful civilization in which her opinion and naive ideals are shattered. Mrs. Willard is a wise and sensible woman that has devoted her existence to being a dutiful wife and mother. She preaches to Esther that: "What a man is is an arrow into the future and what a woman is is the place the arrow shoots off from" (pg 67) Disgusted and enraged by this concept Esther is astounded that the needs and interests of a woman in society are constantly neglected. Mrs. Willard also injects the idea into Esther that both men and women should remain pure for one another until they are married. Tragically, Esther is devastated when she learns of Buddy's love affair with an older woman, and feels betrayed by the notion of a double standard for men and not for women. Mrs. Willard personifies the very sentiment which Esther rejects. Not only does Mrs. Willard devote her life to a husband and children, her distinct emotions and actions are disregarded, as Esther states: "And I knew that in spite of all the roses and kisses and restaurant dinners a man showered on a woman before he married her, what he secretly wanted when the wedding service ended was for her to flatten out underneath his feet like Mrs. Willard's kitchen mat." (pg 80) Coherently, Esther repels the comparable ideals of her mother. Esther's mother is also a capable wife and mother and in addition teaches shorthand classes to young women. Instead of following the advice of learning shorthand, Esther cannot comprehend why she would type for a man and not for her own assignments or ideas. In addition Esther is agitated by her mother as she approves of Buddy Willard, who in Esther's mind is a selfish and insensitive fraud. Both Esther's mother and Mrs. Willard symbolize the type of woman Esther refuses to become. She rebukes their

advice and philosophies, but later finds them relevant in the real world as she discovers with Marco. Disillusioned and overwrought with Marco's treatment of women, Esther begins to fall in a downward spiral that leads her to the edge of her sanity. Obviously, it is Esther's insecurity over her identity that causes her to comply with the personalities of others, but she also retains a deeper meaningfulness. Her rejection and failure at conformity shows the harsh, the bitter, the unforgiving, and the sanctimonious world that torments her very existence. Not only does Esther feel rejected from social atmospheres, but also her intellectual atmosphere. It is Esther's imaginative mind that first illuminates part of her true identity and separates her from those around her. It is not until she is rejected from both the social and intellectual worlds that Esther's world completely dissipates. Perhaps Esther's many attempts to fit into the "inner circle" of society depict the costly consequence of emotional and social detachment, yet Esther does not begin to recover until she realizes the differences between her creative world and the outside society. Furthermore, it is Esther's lack of identity that dramatizes the irony and symbolism in the novel. Only when Esther begins to stand outside her own world of the bell jar, does she truly begin to see inside herself.