

"the surrounded by
beautiful things. the
beauty



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" The Role Models of Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*; quot;;#9; Throughout the novel Esther Greenwood has trouble deciding who she wants to be. Her search for an identity leads her to look at her female role models.

These women are not ideal in her eyes. Although they represent a part of what she herself wants to be, Esther finds it impossible to decide which one she is to become. Jay Cee, Mrs.

Willard, Philomena Guinea, her mother and Doctor Nolan all act as role models for Esther Greenwood. The ways in which these women are portrayed reveals a lot about Esther's perspectives on identity and her search for an identity of her own. Jay Cee, Mrs. Willard, and Philomena Guinea are characterized as archetypes and therefore very limiting. Jay Cee is portrayed as hyper, abrupt and she speaks, " waspishly" (29). She is smart and talented but she is ugly. Philomena Guinea, on the other hand, says that she was stupid at college and is always described as being surrounded by beautiful things.

The beauty that Esther sees as the binary opposite of ugly seems to have been acquired through her " millions and millions of dollars" (38). Jay Cee has " brains, so her plug-ugly looks don't seem to matter; quot; (5). But, Philomena has money so nothing else matters. Mrs. Willard is portrayed as the ultimate wife and mother.

We are given the impression that Mrs. Willard embodies sensibility. She is what every little girl is supposed to grow up to be. But Esther sees differently. Mrs.

Willard represents the inevitable outcome of marriage and motherhood - to flatten out under the husband's foot like a kitchen mat (80). The way the women are described brings to light the kind of relationship she had with them. For example, Esther doesn't even find it necessary to reveal much of anything about the person, Philomena Guinea. Whenever she is mentioned it is about her black Cadillac or her exotic hat or her finger bowls. Esther doesn't embrace her the way she tries to embrace Esther. The only time Esther shows any kind of appreciation for Philomena is when she uses her money to get "fitted". It is then that Esther feels that Philomena buys her her freedom when actually she buys Esther's freedom many times over with college scholarships and proper treatment from Dr. Nolan, for instance.

Esther rarely refers to Philomena directly, preferring instead to mention her car, her hat, her letters, objects around her, actions of Philomena to other people, but never any direct interaction between Esther and her. This tells me that Esther felt no connection with this woman. Even though Philomena obviously cared a lot for her, she just couldn't connect. The older women in Esther's lives all want to adopt her as their own daughter and influence her or teach her ; quot; and for the price of their care and influence, have Esther resemble them; quot; (211). She complains about this always happening with her and older women, but she effectively internalizes the need to be them. Each of them represents a fig on the tree that Esther can't decide which one to pick. Not only does she consciously try to decide who to emulate, but she is also willing to have them as her mother.

She actually wishes she "had a mother like Jay Cee. Then she'd know what to do; quot; (36). None of these role models are her mother and she doesn't

know what to do. Esther's Mother is a powerful role model and has a lot of influence on her. However, Esther comes to the realization that she actually hates her mother. This is a source of intense struggle for Esther.

Unlike Philomena Guinea, the mother is described often and intimately. Their conversations are recounted many times and Esther frequently describes her mother's looks and actions. She does this more so than any of other older role model characters. These descriptions, though, are not generally favorable. Through Esther's eyes we see that her mother has no tact and no consideration for her daughter's feelings.

Esther is never good enough for her: " My mother kept telling me nobody wanted a plain English major" (72). Like the other women the mother is constantly trying to mold Esther into her own image. She symbolizes everything that Esther doesn't want to become.

But, since she is the person Esther is the most closely connected to, then Esther is terribly worried about becoming exactly like her mother. When Esther tells Doctor Nolan that she hates her mother she uncovers the recognition of her own self-loathing. This comes directly after Esther refuses to acknowledge her own birthday.

She doesn't want to celebrate being born and especially with the woman who made her who she is and continues to attempt to shape her in her own image. Esther's fear of being influence by her mother is not unfounded. Her mother is characterized as heartless, inconsiderate, and self-centered and even a martyr. Everything that her mother says always becomes directed at how she herself is being affected.

She is shortsighted and thoughtless. Esther herself shows similar characteristics. She leaves Doreen passed out drunk in the hallway of their hotel, she tells Joan that she doesn't like her, she's condescending and she acts like a martyr after being attacked by Marco by leaving the lines of blood on her face: They seemed touching, and rather spectacular, and I thought I would carry them around with me, like the relic of a dead lover, till they wore off of their own accord; quot; (108). There is also evidence that Esther actually does admire her mother. She talks about how she and her grandmother were ; quot; such good a cooks; quot; (71) and seems genuinely disappointed that she didn't learn the recipes that these women where trying to teach her. She admired her mom's history of speaking German and desired to learn it as well: ; quot; My mother spoke German during her childhood in America and was stoned for it during the First World War by the children at school; quot; (30). At one point Esther even briefly decides to learn shorthand. This need to be like her mother while at the same time hating her is enough to disturb Esther and stir up fears of being too close to what she ultimately wants to avoid.

;#9; Doctor Nolan is a positive influence on Esther. Before she came along Esther could only see the archetypes. She felt like she had to choose whom she was going to resemble, the poet, the editor, the wife or the mother. Doctor Nolan, however, represents something new all together, something she never even knew existed - a complete woman. A woman who doesn't sacrifice part of herself in order to fulfill a need. She is a professional.

She is loving, nurturing and maternal. She advocates sex for the pure pleasure, not procreation. She is attractive as well as being smart. She is

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cool and composed. Dr. Nolan never tries to control her like so many others have. The others try to adopt her and control her like her mother, but Doctor Nolan doesn't do that. She just tries to be there for Esther and Esther adopts her as her mother.

Doctor Nolan doesn't fit into Esther's preconceived notions of who a woman should be. Esther's indecision about who she should be and her self-loathing because of the apparent inevitability to turn into her mother are thrown for a loop. She starts to see things differently. She loves Doctor Nolan because she embodies everything her mother is not and everything that is possible for Esther to become. The description of Doctor Nolan as a complete woman reveals that Esther admires Doctor Nolan a great deal.

The way each of the women is portrayed reveals a lot about Esther's perspective. Esther stresses over the choices she feels like she has to make. Her role models contribute to the decisions that she ultimately must make. They don't contribute the way Esther thinks they intended to but rather by making the decision impossible they have collectively contributed to Esther leaving the role models behind and seeking out her own identity.