



THE BELL JAR

SYLVIA PLATH

READERS QUESTIONS

1. Esther says, 'I liked looking on at other people in crucial situations . . . I certainly learned a lot of things I never would have learned otherwise this way.' Do you think Esther is a good observer of human nature and other people? Is her habit of watching people enough to make her clear-sighted, or is there something else missing in her view of the world?
2. The narrator feels that she hasn't experienced happiness since she was nine years old. Is it ever possible to capture that type of happiness once into adult years? Is there anything in the book to suggest that Esther will experience happiness of different sorts in her future?
3. Why do you think Esther is so cynical about heterosexual romance and marriage? Does Buddy's behaviour after her skiing accident suggest she is just good at listening to her intuition, or is her cynicism related to her lack of positive male role models? And what do her feelings seem to be about non-heterosexual relationships?
4. Esther narrates that 'When I was nineteen, pureness was the great issue.' How much has that changed now? Society may look differently at young women having active sex lives, but is purity still something that is used to judge within peer groups and social circles?
5. Throughout the novel, Esther is moved from one bedroom to another: at the Amazon, to Constantin's, Buddy's and Irwin's, to the room she shares with her mother and the rooms she occupies at the asylum. Does it ever feel that Esther takes possession of any of the rooms? How does her final movement into a room, to speak with the board of doctors, compare to her previous room occupations?
6. As an educated young woman, Esther often uses phrases or assumptions modern readers may find prejudiced. How much does this book, first published in 1963, reflect a very different view on race in America and in fiction at that time?
7. When Esther loses her virginity to Irwin, she suffers an unusual haemorrhage which requires hospitalisation. She's previously mentioned blood in relation to both birth and death, in the delivery room to which Buddy takes her and when she deliberately cuts her leg. What do you think this bleeding signifies? Is it something positive or negative?
8. We see Esther looking in mirrors or at images of herself in magazines throughout the book. How often are these reflections and depictions accurate to what Esther carries in her head? Are the mirror and the camera useful ways of looking at alienation or detachment in a novel, particularly for a young woman growing up in her time?
9. Esther is often in a world of privilege, very different to the one in which she grew up, due to the opportunities she obtains through her work and her appearance; she also makes choices to ensure her freedoms, like visiting the doctor to obtain contraception. Do you think opportunity exists now for young people to socially and professionally progress, or are we more stagnant than 1950s America? Do young women have more choice now, or less?
10. We know from the very beginning of the book that Esther will go on to have her own family later on, once she is 'all right again'. How does this affect your reading of the book? After the paralysing choice of the fig tree, in which all her options are laid out before her and she can't choose which one to select and thus loses all the others, by the end of the book she says, 'All I could see were question marks'. Does this make you hopeful for Esther's future?