





The Bell Jar – Chapter 1: Assignment

 *Make a list of all the characters mentioned in chapter 1.*

 *Describe the setting.*

 *Show how the narrator's obsession with death is presented. Collect adequate quotes.*

 Find at least seven examples of comparisons (e.g. similes or metaphors).

 What is special about these comparisons? What is their effect?

The Bell Jar – Chapter 1: Quotes

Esther feels uncomfortable and out of place: “I didn’t know what I was doing in New York.” (1) “

She is obsessed with death: “I’m stupid about executions. [...] I couldn’t help wondering what it would be like, being burned alive all along your nerves.” (1)

She is not able to enjoy her time as a guest editor for a fashion magazine in New York: “I knew something was wrong with me that summer, because all I could think about was the Rosenbergs and how stupid I’d been to buy all those uncomfortable, expensive clothes, hanging limp as fish in my closet.” (2) Her mind is filled with morbid thoughts.

The American Dream is ironically alluded to: “Look what can happen in this country, they’d say. A girl lives in some out-of-the-way town for nineteen years, so poor she can’t afford a magazine, and then she gets a scholarship to college and wins a prize here and a prize there and ends up steering New York like her own private car.” (2)

Esther, however, feels entirely helpless: “I wasn’t steering anything, not even myself. [...] I should have been excited the way most of the other girls were, but I couldn’t get myself to react. I felt very still and very empty.” (2)

The novel is told in retrospective: “I still have the make-up kit they gave me.” (3)

The other girls on the one hand “looked awfully bored to [Esther]” (4) and on the other hand they make her sick, she is “so jealous [she] can’t speak.” (4)

A girl called Doreen, however, seems to be interested in Esther: “Doreen singles me out right away. She made me feel I was that much sharper than the others, and she really was wonderfully funny.” (4)

Esther is dutiful: “The only thing Doreen ever bawled me out about was bothering to get my assignment in by a deadline.” (5)

She feels uncomfortable thinking about sex; she is prude: “I always had a terribly hard time trying to imagine people in bed together.” (6)

Esther sees through the superficiality of the fashion world. Naive Betsy starts “to tell about the male and female corn in Kansas” (6) which is very funny but completely useless for the producer. Later on, however, Betsy is persuaded “to cut her hair and [be] a cover girl.” (6) Here Esther realises that intelligence is marginal but looks are relevant.

Esther realises that Buddy Willard “didn’t have one speck of intuition” (7), but Doreen makes her feel “wise and cynical as all hell.” (7)

She often feels insecure: “Ordering drinks always floored me.” (9)

Her only point of reference is Buddy Willard: “Buddy Willard and the other college boys I knew were usually too poor to buy hard liquor or they scorned drinking altogether.” (10)

Doreen makes new friends very easily: “those two looked as if they’d known each other for years by now.” (11)

Chapter 1 ends as morbid as it begins: “I liked looking on at other people in crucial situations. If there was a road accident or a street fight or a baby pickled in a laboratory jar for me to look at, I’d stop and look so hard I never forgot it.” (12)