Zenia McLeod

Project #2- The Bell Jar

Sylvia Plath is the author for the novel, *The Bell Jar*. It is a story about a young woman named Esther who goes through a portion of her life suffering from a mental illness which drives her into a battle of living and dying. As she faces the multiple events in her life, she learns a lot about herself that helps her gain strength to live. The storyline has been something that people all over the world could relate to. Through the reprinting of this novel, there have been many interpretations about how the main idea can be expressed, specifically through the novel covers. Two covers in particular have successfully captured the ability that insanity can create conflict between a person and themselves.

The First Edition of The Bell Jar was published in London, 1963 by the Heinemann Publishing Company. It has the name ‘Victoria Lucas’ on the cover, suggesting that that was the name of the author. This, however, is Plath’s pseudonym, or false name. The artist designed picture of a woman sitting in a chair. She is resting her head on her hand, and her arm is resting on a table. Her face isn’t viewed, neither is what she is doing with the rest of her body because the image of her back is being captured. The overall image of the women is a bit obscured because she is displayed in a bell jar. It looks like the image is captured as ‘seeing double’ because the women’s body is clearly seen, but there is a shadowed outline that gives a doubling effect. The woman looks as if she is waiting or resting, and her body language expresses that she is calm. The woman isn’t trying to escape the bell jar, or showing that she needs help, she is just sitting in the chair.

The image of the young women represents different themes that surround the main character, Esther. The bell jar that the young girl is trapped in reflects Esther’s feeling of being trapped by her own insanity. In the last chapter, Esther talks about how she felt before her she got treatment for her illness. On page 237, Dr. Nolen tells her to think of everything she has experienced as a bad dream. Esther goes on to say “To the person on the bell jar, blank and stopped as a dead baby, the world itself is a bad dream.” This quote shows how Esther felt while suffering in her illness. The words “blank and stopped as a dead baby” describe the lifelessness that she felt. Esther was in a situation where her life was being held up because there was something wrong with her. On page 129, she is speaking to Dr. Gordon and reveals that she can’t sleep, read, eat and felt like everything people did was pointless because death was the inevitable end result. These thoughts prevented her from seeing the point of her life. Esther refers to ‘a dead baby’ from the time that Buddy took her to a hospital and showed her the bottled babies that died before birth. She mentioned this because the subject of a dead baby compared to how she felt lifeless like the baby and the way the baby was displayed for the world to see was how she felt about her life. Saying the the world is a bad dream only reveals the torture she felt because she thought that she was falling apart in front of everyone. She goes on to say that the events that took place were her landscape. This denounces the idea of everything that she experienced was a ‘bad dream’, because she the person she ended being was because of the situations in her life. The same way the curves and edges of a region makes up its landscape is the same way her good and bad experiences make up who she is. Esther also refers to the bell jar being her insanity when she was leaving the asylum by questioning “How did I know that someday -- at college, in Europe, somewhere, anywhere -- the bell jar, with its stifling distortions, wouldn't descend again?” on page 123. This quote acknowledges the concern that Esther had about her illness trapping her again. She acknowledges the fact that even though she feels well now, there is a chance that she might fall back under. The treatment that she received could just be a temporary fix to the vacuumed lies her illness enclosed her in, or a permanent relief to it. Either way, she has no way knowing.

The cover also reveals the lack of motivation that Esther has for her life. The body language of the woman is very calm, regardless of the fact that she is trapped in a giant glass jar. The calmness of the woman represents how Esther is uninspired about the direction she wants to take in her life. In chapter three, Jay Cee asks Esther what she wants to do with her life, and Esther says” ‘I don't really know,’ I heard myself say. I felt a deep shock, hearing myself say that, because the minute I said it, I knew it was true.” Regardless of the fact that she had an idea of things she might want to do, this quote showed that deep down she knew that she didn’t have a clear vision of what she was going to do with her life. She was shocked to realize her true feelings because she knew that she could no longer see herself doing the things she planned on doing. She compares this revelation to finding out that a person that has been in your life for a long time reveals that he’s your father, and you believe it automatically. Then the person you called father looks like a fake. The plans that Esther had for her life was now a fake, because she finally came to terms with something she knew all along. This moment ties into the events in chapter ten. The last solid plan that Esther had was taking a summer writing course that she was hoping to get accepted to. However, she didn’t get accepted. She thought up many ideas that she could go through with for the summer, but was not motivated to do any. The only one that stuck with her was writing a novel, but she felt that she hadn’t experienced anything to write a good novel. She decided to wait until she is in Europe and had a lover, hoping to have gained some inspiration from her life by then. When she was debating whether she should work for a year or be a waitress or typist, she stated “I couldn’t stand the idea of being either one” on page 125. She was uninspired because she couldn’t see herself doing anything productive for the summer. This struggle that she is facing in her life is very important because this is the moment that triggered her symptoms from her illness. In the next paragraph, she is asking her family doctor for sleeping pills and goes on to say that she and can’t sleep or read. Her lack of motivation has now contributed to a part of her that will eventually have no desire to live.

The second cover of *The Bell Jar* was published in 1971 by the Harper and Row Publishing Company. It was the first American edition. The artist of this cover designed a black and white distressed image. On the left side of the cover, there is a limp arm that looks lifeless, yet is sitting straight up. The arm also has a cut below the wrist. From the cut, there is light shining through, as well as a white flower with gray leaves that looking as if they are fading into the background. The left side of the cover is the lightest side, because the light from the arm is shining and bringing light to that part of the image. The right side of the cover is completely dark, except for the title in bold letters.

This cover symbolizes different situations in Esther’s life that occurred throughout the novel. The cut on the arm represents Esther’s first suicide attempt. She was going to slit her wrists and bleed out in the tub of warm water in chapter twelve. On page 147, she was about to go through with it, but stated “the skin of my wrist looked so white and defenseless that I couldn’t do it. It was as if what I wanted to kill wasn’t in that skin or thin blue pulse…but somewhere else, deeper, more secret, and a whole lot harder to get at.” The importance of this quote was the fact that she recognized that she had a problem with her internal self, not who she was on the outside. She knew that she wanted to end the illness that was causing her to feel like she was insane. The attempt to take her life was the quickest and easiest way to end the pain, rather than trying to find a way to kill the deeper issue. In this quote, Esther separates herself into two people, someone who wants to end her suffering and someone who doesn’t want to end her life. Esther wants to solve the main problem by ending her life. She plans out how she’ll proceed, what would be the best time, and what would be the best way for her. The other side of Esther is the innocent side, the one that has done no wrong. She is the person that Esther sees in the mirror that wouldn’t do anything. By not cutting herself, the ‘problem solver’ acknowledges that ending her life would be harder than she thought, because her innocence is fighting to live. The time taken up in contemplating whether or not she should end her life allowed Esther to change her mind at that time. This quote, however, doesn’t reflect a change of heart from Esther, because she has more attempts later before she gets help.

Both of these covers effectively depict themes or moments in the novel. They are similar because they both represent the battle between darkness and light that Esther is engulfed in. The darkness signifies Esther’s desire to die. She no longer wants to suffer from her illness, so she is willing to take her own life to be free. She attempts to commit suicide four times before being admitted to an asylum. Each time she tried, something or someone prevented her from succeeding. For example, her first attempt, on page 147, was ruined because she took too long to cut her wrists and the second, on page 160, was when she gave up trying to drown because she wouldn’t stay under. The light represents her body’s desire to live that prevented her from dying. Each cover had darkness that covered the face of the woman, and light somehow shining through. The difference between each cover is the different aspects of Esther that they represent. The first edition cover depicted the internal struggles of being trapped by insanity, not being seen for who she was (out of focus) and being uninspired. These three points were shown through the presence of the bell jar, the doubling view of the woman, and her relaxed position. The first American edition focused on Esther’s external solution of suicide and the light in her that wanted to live.

In conclusion, these covers both show a different aspect of Esther. Together, they represent her well. The kind of internal struggles she was facing is reflected in the way the covers were designed. Her insanity caused her to have conflict within herself. This conflict often spilled over into outside life, whether it was her multiple attempts of suicide, or her finally being admitted to an asylum to help with her condition. The covers did the novel justice in sticking to the main idea of the story by showing Esther life being trapped in the bell jar of her insanity, or the battle she faced between her darkness and her light.