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The Bell Jar Essay Outline

- I. In *The Bell Jar*, Sylvia Plath uses Esther's account of her social experience allegorically to expose the superficiality of human interaction and isolate one's own consciousness as the sole feature of value in one's life.
- II. Esther's initial description of her experience in New York debases the significance of sociality through exhibiting the notion that one can find themselves *most* isolated while surrounded by people.
 - A. "He held out a hand to Doreen, and without a word they both started to jitterbug, still hanging on to their glasses." (p. 16)
 1. Although Doreen and Lenny seem comfortable and flirtatious, their interaction is completely enabled by alcohol.
 2. This is one of many unnatural and forced relationships Esther encounters in New York, including her own relationship with many of the girls at the Amazon.
 3. The sheer number of artificial relationships in *The Bell Jar* proves sociality to be mainly vapid and cosmetic.
 - B. "I felt myself melting into the shadows like the negative of a person I'd never seen before in my life." (p. 10)
 1. Esther feels excluded in social situations, even when engaging in conversation with those around her.
 2. Furthermore, this exemplifies how far removed she is from her social persona.
 - C. "I never feel so much myself as when I'm in a hot bath." (p. 20)
 1. Esther finally feels herself when she is *alone*.
 2. She is forced to become a separate person when surrounded by people, and thus only feels comfortably in touch with her mental reality when alone.
- III. Esther's false portrayal of Elly Higginbottom reinforces the authenticity of the mind by reflecting that *socially* one can be whomever they'd like whereas *mentally* one can never escape their true selves.
 - A. "'My name's Elly Higginbottom,' I said. 'I come from Chicago.' After that I felt safer." (p. 11)
 1. Social situations seem to *endanger* Esther, only finding safety in taking on another identity.
 2. Moreover, this shows how sociality can be completely fabricated unlike personal psychology.
 - B. "I thought if I ever did get to Chicago, I might change my name to Elly Higginbottom for good. Then nobody would know I had thrown up a scholarship at a big eastern

women's college and mucked up a month in New York and refused a perfectly solid medical student for a husband who would one day be a member of the AMA and earn pots of money. In Chicago, people would take me for what I was. I would be simple Elly Higginbottom, the orphan. People would love me for my sweet, quiet nature." (p. 132)

1. Instead of coming to accept her flaws, Esther chooses to push them aside through creating a false persona.
2. Evidently, this unhealthy behaviour presents another flaw in sociality: the ability to disregard personal issues and turn a blind eye to the truth, something nearly impossible to achieve in one's own mind.

IV. Esther's leap towards recovery after Joan's death shows that one is more inclined to make an improvement *alone* than with a social confident, once again proving psychology stronger than sociality.

A. "For a long time afterward I hid them away, but later, when I was all right again, I brought them out, and I still have them around the house. I use the lipsticks now and then, and last week I cut the plastic starfish off the sunglasses case for the baby to play with." (p. 3)

1. One may rebut the notion that Esther has "recovered", but this statement proves that she has come to some sort of recuperation seeing as she is "all right again" and assumedly has a family.

B. "Joan fascinated me [...] Her thoughts were not my thoughts, nor her feelings my feelings, but we were close enough so that her thoughts and feelings seemed a wry, black image of my own." (p. 219)

1. Esther projects her broken mentality onto her social confident Joan, demonstrating yet *another* hazard of sociality.

C. "I am, I am, I am." (p. 243)

1. Note that Plath uses this phrase in two different contexts, this one revealing that Joan's death forces Esther to face her own mental faults. Although she has many psychological holes to mend, Joan's death rightfully propels her to study her mental complex to solve her issues instead of her social one, proving effective for recovery.
2. Ultimately, sociality does nothing but harm unless a strong and healthy mentality is present, deeming sociality valueless in comparison.