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[Date]

Marcello Clerici and Esther Greenwood

Esther Greenwood and Marcello Clerici are both searching for meaning in their lives as they go through various events in their journey. Their lives are affected by people and experiences that affect their manner of thinking and inevitably leads them to make decisions that they believe will set them on the path to becoming the person they want to become. The contrast is clear between the two characters as Marcello wants to conform to society to be perceived as a normal person whereas Esther disagrees with people’s standards and desires to follow a different path than the ‘normal’.

Marcello Clerici is a young Italian man, who is bent on becoming a ‘normal’ person in the society. His desire to be perceived as normal is based on horrific and traumatic experiences he had in his childhood. At the forefront is his experience with a homosexual stranger, Lino who was on the verge of sexually assaulting Marcello. He also had some strange tendencies such as torturing and killing small animals that gave him some odd satisfaction. All of this led him to be strongly predisposed towards the idea that he wasn’t a normal person and as such he vied to become normal. Lino, the chauffeur who attempted to sexually assault Marcello is perhaps the most important influence on him, unconsciously driving his every decision. Marcello unknowingly follows the path that leads to the idea of normalcy, mostly because of the traumatic experience he had in his childhood with Lino. The Fascist setting of the story and the varying sexual tendencies and orientations of the characters in The Conformist represent the Fascist politics. Marcello feels very lonely in his life despite the fact that he has an apparently stable marriage, a bureaucratic job that gives him power as well as colleagues that he may consider ‘friends’. Despite all this, his desire to be seen as normal leads to a perpetual confusion that consumes his life.

Esther Greenwood, on the other hand, feels intoxicated by societal expectations and looks for newer things as she is confused about how to react and what to do in her life. This uncertainty is evident in a quote from the book*, “I felt very still and very empty, the way the eye of a tornado must feel, moving dully along in the middle of the surrounding hullabaloo”* (The Bell Jar, 3)*.* Whereas society expects her to remain a virgin until she is married off to a nice guy, she is bent on doing the opposite and wishes to lose her virginity before marriage. She is also inclined to compare herself to others in a variety of aspects and this inevitably leads her to develop a mental illness that sets her on the path to self-discovery. This constant indecision and confusion leads her to attempt suicide, which lands her in a mental health recovery institute. It is at this institution that she meets Dr. Nolan, her psychiatrist. Dr. Nolan becomes the parent figure Esther needs; something she couldn’t find with her mother. Also important is the character of Doreen, who shares Esther’s view of sexuality but unlike her, actually manages to do what she desires. Compared to Marcello, she has some decent company and guidance. Dr. Nolan is the parent figure that Marcello didn’t have – despite his parents being alive. Moreover, Doreen is a like-minded person whom Esther instantly connects with.

Marcello and Esther teach an important lesson: it is imperative that one finds balance in life. While Marcello is looking to conform at all costs, Esther is trying to do the exact opposite. Both of them struggle in their lives as they cannot strike a balance between society’s expectations and one’s own desires. The equilibrium between the two is essential for living a stable and happy life and the absence of this equilibrium leads people to do horrible things.