

Doreen's rebellion
against social norms
in the bell jar by
sylvia plath



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In *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath, the protagonist, Esther Greenwood, gets accepted to a summer internship at a prominent magazine in New York City. There, she meets Doreen, her co-worker. Esther is different from her. Doreen goes against the boundaries that society pushes Esther and the other girls to follow. She is scandalous and adventurous in her sexual behaviour, she does not listen to or follow authority, and she is the total opposite of Betsy, Esther's co-worker. Esther admires her but is too afraid to fully embrace her and be like her since Esther is scared of the consequences she might face. In the story of *The Bell Jar*, Doreen represents the possibility of rebellion against social norms in 1950s America without facing the consequences that Esther fears, this may influence Esther to rebel against the society too.

Doreen ignores the society's rule for women regarding sexual purity. Due to Doreen's promiscuous behavior, Esther is attracted to her. When Esther is a good girl, she feels miserable and bored of her life. Therefore, when she sees Doreen behave this way, Esther is envious. Esther wants to feel free as Doreen. Because of this Esther follows Doreen and goes to a strange man's apartment. This would be considered quite risqué at the time. Esther also rejects Betsy's offer to share a cab in order to go with Doreen. On their way to a party, both of the girls meet Lenny who convinces the girls to abandon the cab and join him and his friends in a bar. In the bar, Lenny and Doreen openly flirt with each other. The journey of flirtation continues at Lenny's apartment. This happens in the story when Esther states:

I noted, in the routine way you notice the color of somebody's eyes, that Doreen's breasts had popped out of her dress and were swinging out slightly like full brown melons as she circled belly-down on Lenny's shoulder,

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thrashing her legs in the air and screeching, and then they both started to laugh and slow up, and Lenny was trying to bite Doreen's hip through her skirt when I let myself out the door before anything more could happen and managed to get downstairs by leaning with both hands on the banister and half sliding the whole way (Plath 16).

Doreen does not care how Esther or other people view her. Doreen knows the problem of their society and is able to acknowledge it and go against it and this attracts Esther. Later, Esther left Doreen and Lenny feeling she is separated from rest of the world. She feels numb as if the city is not there. She may have been feeling overwhelmed by seeing their interactions since she believes in sex after marriage. She tries to fix this feeling by taking a hot bath and purifying herself. Doreen has no problem having sex with Lenny before marriage, illustrating the level of Doreen's rebellion.

Even though Doreen also gets accepted to a summer internship, she ignores authority and decides to have fun for herself. From the beginning, Doreen tries to talk Esther out of doing her work for Jay Cee. Doreen does not take the magazine work seriously. Esther states, " Doreen lounged on my bed in a peach silk dressing gown, filing her long, nicotine-yellow nails with an emery board, while I type up the draft of an interview with a best-selling novelist" (5). Doreen is more focused on taking care of her nails than her work.

Therefore, Doreen can be lazy and have fun. She is not afraid of authority. She does not think of the consequences that may happen if she does not follow their instructions. There is another time where the magazine is holding a luncheon at Ladies' Day. Everyone attends except for Doreen. She spends the day with Lenny Shepherd. She spends most of her free time with him.

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She is a rebel and a risk-taker. She does not believe good girls will attract respectable men to marry and rewarded with happiness. It just depends on their luck. However, Doreen gets rewarded even though she defies the authorities and has fun instead.

In the story, Betsy and Doreen act as a foil to each another. Betsy is naive, virgin and sweet. She is someone who will work hard enough to succeed and get what she wants. She represents innocence and obedience within the society. However, Betsy does not know how dangerous the world can be. She does not see the reality like Esther and Doreen. She also shows little curiosity about the world but her cultural background may prevent or shelter her from seeing the world for what they are like Esther. Unlike Betsy, Doreen is able to see through the hypocrisies of their society. Esther states, "Doreen had intuition. Everything she said was like a secret voice speaking straight out of my own bones" (7). Doreen is able to understand what Esther is going through. Doreen is not like Buddy where he does not consider Esther's feeling. Doreen also smokes and drinks and not get pressured by the society and is able to go against it. In their idyllic world, they were taught good girls are rewarded with happiness where bad girls end up miserable. However, in the story, there is an example where even good girls were not rewarded for their hard work. Doreen is the only person who did not go to the party. She does not get food poisoning whereas all the girls who go to party like they supposed to, are poisoned. Even though Doreen is not innocent like Betsy, this example shows following the rules does not guarantee a reward.

In *The Bell Jar*, Doreen does not follow the societal conventions, causing her to represent the rebellion against social norms. Doreen does not care if she is a virgin or not because she is able to recognize the problem in the society. Doreen also is not scared of the authority figures. She is never serious when it comes to work; she would rather have fun. Also, Betsy and Doreen represent a different view of the society. Doreen having sex with Lenny before getting married, defying the higher ups and having different behaviors from Betsy, shows that Doreen represents the rebellion against societal norms.