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# ”Blankly Performing a Memorised Task”: Sally Rooney’s Conversations With Friends and Normal People in Dialogue with James Joyce’s Dubliners

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**“Blankly Performing a Memorised  
Task”:**

**Sally Rooney’s *Conversations With  
Friends and Normal People* in  
Dialogue with James Joyce’s  
*Dubliners***

Clémence LEGRAND

Sous la direction de Mme Anne GOARZIN

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## INTRODUCTION

In a culture where the aesthetic experience is denied and atrophied, genuine religious ecstasy rare, intellectual pleasure scorned—it is only natural that sex should become the only personal epiphany of most people, and the culture’s interest in romantic love take on staggering size.<sup>1</sup>

In their stories depicting ordinary comings-of-age and relationships in a contemporary Irish society, Sally Rooney’s novels *Conversations With Friends* and *Normal People*<sup>2</sup> engage contemporary Irish fiction in a dialogue with James Joyce’s *Dubliners*, with its powerful but imprisoning tropes which explore varied expressions of paralysis, despair, and futility, and which have marked the Irish literary landscape since their publication in 1914. Her novels lean on similar tropes of social and moral disorientation, the anguish of class division, depression, and the internalization of oppression.

However, in depicting an Ireland transformed and globalized over the past century, the novels do resist conventional tropes of Irishness, even appearing to escape the long shadow of *Dubliners*. In reality, they enter into an extended dialogue with *Dubliners*, one that reveals that Ireland remains locked in a two-tier machinery similar to Joyce’s, operating on the societal level and on the intimate level. Critic Alexandra Schwartz, in her review of *Conversations With Friends* for *The New Yorker*,<sup>3</sup> highlights the parallels between the Catholic Church and capitalism in Ireland. She says, “Capitalism is to Rooney’s young

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<sup>1</sup> SNYDER Gary, *Earth House Hold*, Binghamton, NY: New Directions, 1969, p.19.

<sup>2</sup> Respectively published in 2017 and 2018 by London-based Faber and Faber, who also published Rooney’s short story *Mr Salary* in their collection *Faber Stories* in 2019.

<sup>3</sup> SCHWARTZ Alexandra, ‘A New Kind of Adultery Novel’, *The New Yorker*, 31 July 2017. Retrieval from <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/07/31/a-new-kind-of-adultery-novel> – Last accessed on 8 May 2020.

women what Catholicism was to Joyce's young men, a rotten national faith to contend with, though how exactly to resist capitalism, when it has sunk its teeth so deep into the human condition, remains an open question." The imprisoning societal machinery has changed; Catholic Ireland has given way to globalized, neo-liberal Ireland. But the intimate machinery, caused by past traumas passed on from one generation to the next, remains.

Rooney's characters are to a certain extent intellectually aware of their social predicament, but they remain blind to their personal emotions: they try to abstract and avoid them, and thus remain blind to how these two levels of machinery interlock and interact to run their lives. They are unconscious that they are "blankly performing a memorised task" (*Normal People*, 180). In suggesting that the Joycean sense of blind imprisonment no longer prevails in the contemporary, globalized moment, Rooney's literary project presents its own quandaries. Her two acclaimed novels exemplify an ambition to enshrine in her fiction a 21<sup>st</sup>-century Ireland largely liberated from received notions of Irishness, yet the books lay bare that shaking off the influence of Joyce's *Dubliners* depiction of Irishness is in fact a daunting task.

Joyce's *Dubliners* depicts the banal lives of his contemporaries—his own 'normal people'—in early 20<sup>th</sup> century Ireland. The collection of stories refutes sentimentalized notions of Irishness and Irish literature, which were at the time steeped in patriotism and grandiloquent Celticism. Rooney's *Conversations With Friends* and *Normal People* suggest that the Joycean exposé of Irish trauma, abuse, injustice, mediocrity, and paralysis has itself become sentimentalized, as it came to be nearly inseparable from literary Irishness.

Rooney's character arcs do not lead to Joycean epiphanies—acute moments of understanding, for the character or for the reader, that pierce through the bleakness but offer no resolution. Rather, through mundane yet pivotal moments allowing characters to seemingly set aside inertia and despair, the plots of her novels trace the characters' attempts to



escape from social conventions and metaphorical prisons. The overarching, ideologically powerful prisons have changed as Ireland's society has opened up but are still confining, and the intimate, interior dynamics of the old Ireland of *Dubliners* persist, unchanged. Rooney even goes as far as to reject at least some Irish literary forebears as part of such confinement. In a 2017 interview with the Irish Independent, for instance, she openly denigrates W.B. Yeats:

“I hate Yeats!” she shrieks. “A lot of his poems are not very good but some are obviously okay. But how has he become this sort of emblem of literary Irishness when he was this horrible man? He was a huge fan of Mussolini, he was really into fascism, he believed deeply in the idea of a ‘noble class’ who are superior by birth to the plebs. And he was in the Senate.

“He wasn’t just this harmless weirdo who wrote poetry. People misinterpret him in this country, and when we’re taught about him in school, it’s just hagiography.”<sup>4</sup>

Her opinions have ways of entering the stories, as in this conversation between Frances and her married lover Nick in *Conversations With Friends*: “He told me he loved Yeats, can you believe that? I practically had to stop him reciting “The Lake Isle of Innisfree” in the bar. [...] No one who likes Yeats is capable of human intimacy.”<sup>5</sup>

By resisting inherited modes of ‘Irishness,’ Rooney attempts to look at a broader picture than that of Ireland solely; but she nevertheless uses Ireland as a setting for her characters to perform her stories. Yet her narratives seem unable to discard those literary and thematic conventions; and her characters remain mired in them, as she only offers a narrow and sterile escape from a more traditional futility into a global futility of self-absorption and abstraction. Rooney’s main characters’ interior lives are yoked to pain and discomfort; truly positive emotions are relegated to miscommunications, chance, or one-dimensional secondary characters. The protagonists’ experience is punctuated by the sort of culturally determined

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<sup>4</sup> WHITE Hilary, ‘I hate Yeats...how has he become this emblem of literary Irishness?’ *The Irish Independent*, May 28 2017. Retrieval online from <https://www.independent.ie/entertainment/books/i-hate-yeatshow-has-he-become-this-emblem-of-literary-irishness-35757310.html> – Last accessed on 8 May 2020.

<sup>5</sup> *Conversations With Friends*, p. 213.

personal epiphanies diagnosed in the above quotation by American poet and cultural critic Gary Snyder—epiphanies that Rooney’s stories present as the only ones of value in a contemporary context.

Thus it seems that the hollowness of Irish daily existence Joyce mercilessly anatomized remains—only slightly different in its form, adapted to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Joycean miscommunications get transposed to the medium of the Internet and instant messaging; social class remains a boundary of division, but is based no longer solely on financial means, but also on Bourdieusan cultural capital available to anyone. While the larger machinery of despair and confinement has changed, the more intimate machinery of familial dysfunction has not, and it is linked with the country that the characters fruitlessly attempt to transcend. Rooney’s narratives are not as embedded in darkness, and they have become mainstream or ‘normal’.

Normalcy is a persistent theme in Rooney’s novels. It can be understood as ‘ordinary, usual, and expected’<sup>6</sup>, applying to societal norms, opposing ‘abnormal’ and ‘extraordinary’, and playing with the dynamics of either fitting in or being excluded from the community that defines the norm. But instead, the characters each have an individual idea of normalcy, which comprises whatever happens to them or appeals to them. From the outset, Frances, Marianne, and Connell are presented as outside the norm—they are disconnected enough to identify it, clever enough to assert critical detachment, but also enmeshed in emotions that oscillate between despising banality and aspiring to belong among normal people. Frances is a clever Trinity undergrad who has an affair with a married man ten years her elder; Marianne and Connell are also clever millennials who have an intermittent romantic relationship which spans from their last year of secondary school through their college education at Trinity. As main characters, they embody behaviors and characteristics which Rooney foregrounds as

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<sup>6</sup> As per the definition of ‘normal’ contained in the Cambridge English Dictionary.

normal. Rooney never attaches a permanent definition to normalcy; ‘normal’ is constantly shifting, subjectively definable at any given moment, and therefore has no underlying reality. The characters reject mainstream normalcy, consumerism, or materialism, which they see as insipid, and yet trade it for something every bit as insipid as they consume people and experiences. The new ‘normal’ foregrounded by Rooney is vacuous.

The tone of the novels is conversational; they present colloquial and simple accounts in proximity with the characters’ judgments about their environment. Stripped down in form and content alike, Rooney’s novels avoid complex linguistic elaborations, appearing to eschew self-conscious literary style and present the experiences contained in the narratives as matter-of-factly as possible. This spare style moves away from embellishment and sentimentalism; it aims at a clarity that implicitly critiques Joyce’s meticulous yet rich style in *Dubliners* as lacking directness. One may argue that *Conversations With Friends* and *Normal People* have a clinical<sup>7</sup> take on literature: one that purports to be rational and to assert the normalcy staked out by Rooney’s narratives, simultaneously revealing a vacuity in Irish society. The novels depict characters aware of, and posturing as though they are standing up against, a certain societal imprisonment caused by globalization and consumerism, but characters who also refuse to be aware of a similar imprisonment operating on the personal level. In stating what they are against rather than affirm what they are for, the characters show cowardice in conviction.

Without giving up referentiality, the novels locate their characters as much in a globalized culture as in a distinctively Irish environment, appealing in the process to a similarly globalized literary sensibility and readership. Indeed, Sally Rooney’s novels have met with both critical acclaim—*Normal People* was long-listed for the 2018 Man Booker

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<sup>7</sup> Rooney’s ‘clinical’ approach borrows from all meanings of the term: an emotionless and cold examination.

Prize—and popular praise on social media<sup>8</sup>, gaining Rooney global fame. This globalization is linked, in Rooney’s novels, with rampant commodification. Literature itself is exposed as a mere commodity, flattened in—and for—its very consumption. This flattening closes off access to different levels of understanding, specifically deeper ones. Rooney herself has leveled the same charge as the narratives she puts forward:

There’s a scene in the second novel where Connell, one of the protagonists, goes to a literary reading, and he feels incredibly alienated from what he sees. He sees writers turn up to events full of people from a particular class, with a particular educational background and essentially the writer sells them the product, which is cultured existence in the form of a commodity, and the commodity is the book. And people can purchase this book and therefore purchase their way into a seemingly cultured class. And all of the money that changes hands in the book industry is essentially people paying to belong to a class of people who read books. And yeah that is definitely something that I do think about and feel implicated in. [...] I guess the reason that I feel sceptical of all that is because it makes me feel that books have no potential to speak truth to power, they have no potential as political texts because of the role they play in the culture economy that’s already determined how people are going to read them.<sup>9</sup>

In an interview from 2018 with the *Irish Independent*<sup>10</sup>, Rooney also says, “There is a part of me that will never be happy knowing that I am just writing entertainment, making decorative aesthetic objects at a time of historical crisis. But I am not good at anything else. This is the one thing that I am good at.” Her novels thus come out of the accelerating economic and cultural globalization which contemporary Irish society has undergone since the late 1950s. Ireland’s retailers, its fashion trends, and its media culture are the same as in many other Western countries, and even small towns offer a variety of ‘world foods’. Irishness gets

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<sup>8</sup> Rooney’s novels have become phenomena on platforms such as Instagram, or Twitter. *Normal People* featured for instance on Barack Obama’s end-of-year list of literary recommendations published on Twitter on 28 December 2019.

<sup>9</sup> ‘Sally Rooney Interview: Writing with Marxism’ Posted on YouTube on 26 February 2019 by Louisiana Channel, from the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art in Denmark. The interview took place in August 2018 during a literary festival. Retrieval online on <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z1S5bOdJq3U> – Last accessed on 8 May 2020.

<sup>10</sup> BARRY Helen, ‘How Sally Rooney became millennial fiction’s most important voice’, *The Irish Independent*, 8 September 2018. Retrieval online from <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/sally-rooney-millennial-fiction-ireland-abortion-referendum-a8522256.html> – Last accessed on 8 May 2020.

diluted in a wider cultural pool, inducing an increasingly disoriented and uncertain sense of identity. Rooney's depiction of this disorientation reflects the reality on High Street. Yet it does not make the novels realistic—the main characters accrue professional or academic successes that materialize as if out of thin air, without much effort, and offer immediate pleasures. The only further fulfillment offered to Rooney's millennials is romantic love, or the fantasy of it. The characters cannot see past their 'relationship issues.' Even when in a foreign context, outside of Ireland, they do not widen their gaze.

Joyce famously said to Arthur Power, "For myself, I always talk about Dublin, because if I can get to the heart of Dublin I can get to the heart of all the cities in the world. In the particular is contained the universal."<sup>11</sup> His universal is informed by myth, by a Neo-Scholastic intellectual rigor, and by a refusal of easy consolations. His unflinching analysis aims at reaching a human truth. Rooney's titles *Conversations With Friends* and *Normal People* also seek a form of universal—albeit a different one, in line with the leveling effects of globalization and a cultural trend of collecting personal experiences as decorative accessories.<sup>12</sup> Writer Will Self<sup>13</sup> shared his considerations on Rooney with *The Times*:

You only need to look at the kind of books being lauded at the moment to see how simple-minded they are. What's now regarded as serious literature would, 10 or 20 years ago, have been regarded as young-adult fiction. I read a few pages of the Sally Rooney book. It may say things that millennials want to hear reflected back at them, but it's very simple stuff with no literary ambition that I can see. I don't mean to be overly critical, but in terms of literary history, it does seem a bit of a regression. If you consider that Nabokov's *Lolita* was on the *New York Times* bestseller list for nine months, it's a different order of literature.

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<sup>11</sup> POWER, Arthur, *Conversations With James Joyce*, London: Millington, 1971.

<sup>12</sup> KETTER Eran, 'Millennial travel: tourism micro-trends of European Generation Y,' *Journal of Tourism Futures*, January 2020. "For the Millennials, building life experiences is a top priority, and living a meaningful and happy life is about creating memories made through a spectrum of experiences." Retrieval from <https://doi.org/10.1108/JTF-10-2019-0106> – Last accessed on 8 May 2020.

<sup>13</sup> MARRIOTT James, 'What I've Learnt: Will Self', *The Times*, 9 February 2019. Retrieval online from <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/what-ive-learnt-will-self-wgkmlcd3q> – Last accessed on 8 May 2020.

Rather than seeking the universal in the particular, Rooney instead looks to a globalized normalcy as expressed through her contemporary characters, who dilute their localized and particularized experience from Yeats country<sup>14</sup> in the contemporary and globalized Ireland of Dublin. Rooney's young protagonists have an intellectual pose of seeing little or no redeeming value in their roots in the West, and they tend to deflect or ignore any guidance on offer from their elders, instead regarding themselves as their own best teachers. This complacency distorts their attempts to shed the status of 'Culchie' and enjoy more cosmopolitan experience, leaving them largely rootless and leading them to confine themselves in different but no less debilitating ways. The reality beneath that pose is that they refuse to face their roots and learn from them—and that attempt to jump free of their pasts keeps them imprisoned in the dysfunction of their early lives.

*Normal People* and *Conversations With Friends* attempt nothing less than renewing Irish fiction as it has been influenced by Joyce's *Dubliners*—which depicts the Irish as mired in paralysis, despair, and futility. But their attempts reveal the Irish in the 21<sup>st</sup> century to be equally confined in forms of paralysis, despair, and futility that may be more globalized and abstract, but are just as withering as those in *Dubliners*.

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<sup>14</sup> Marianne and Connell are from Co. Sligo; Frances and Bobbi are from Ballina, on the border between Co. Mayo and Co. Sligo.

## 1. Joyce's *Dubliners*, Setting a Standard for Irish Fiction

First published in 1914 after Joyce spent several years struggling to find an editor, *Dubliners* showed the reality of Dublin as a city where moral and material misery prevailed, a characteristic that Dublin's inhabitants received externally but then chose to perpetuate internally, so that misery would be a lens coloring all their actions. The collection of short stories has since ceaselessly influenced Irish fiction and society.

*Dubliners* unabashedly criticizes the capital's modalities of despair; their scrupulous analysis of Irish society describes a country locked in darkness and paralysis. Joyce himself, turning away in his life from what he had illumined in those stories, emigrated to live in continental Europe, seldom returning to Ireland. Nonetheless, he maintained a profound and unsentimental love for the city in which he grew up: "[H]ave I ever left it? When I die, Dublin will be found engraved upon my heart," he writes in a letter to his brother Stanislaus. *Dubliners* paved the way for the groundbreaking modernity of Joyce's later writing, encoding entropy in content and form alike. In the space of fifteen short stories,<sup>15</sup> which evolve chronologically from childhood to adolescence, adulthood, and public life, Joyce diagnoses the ailments specific to Irish society. They became defining literary tropes not only in Irish literature but also in the country's other cultural media.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Or rather, fourteen short stories and one novella with 'The Dead'.

<sup>16</sup> Such as film for instance, where, as written in this *Irish Times* article, "They were more often than not rural dramas with tragic backstories, brooding male heroes, shattered families, and somewhere in the background the lurking influence of the Catholic Church." BARTON Ruth, 'Is There Such a Thing as an Irish Film Anymore? Does It Matter?' *The Irish Times*, 29 June 2019. Retrievable online from <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/film/is-there-such-a-thing-as-an-irish-film-anymore-does-it-matter-1.3935680> – Last accessed on 8 May 2020.

### a. Joycean Tropes

Joycean tropes include the display of social and moral disorientation; the anguish of class division; depression; and the internalization of oppression. Joyce also exposes the rampant alcoholism and toxic relation with the sacred that Irish people maintain through the Catholic Church. These leitmotifs are of course present throughout the collection, but most visibly so in several of the stories.

Social and moral disorientation leads to immoral behavior, and to an inability to be consistently virtuous. Such disorientation stands out in ‘Two Gallants,’ arguably Joyce’s most painstakingly inauspicious tale, in which Corley and Lenehan extort money from a maid while under the pretense of a love interest.<sup>17</sup> The story concludes, “Then with a grave gesture he extended a hand towards the light and, smiling, opened it slowly to the gaze of his disciple. A small gold coin shone in the palm” (65). The success of the two men’s immoral enterprise shows that *Dubliners* is not a collection of fables with a moral, but rather a collection of realistic short stories, where the characters’ internal distrust and disorientation match their behaviors. This disorientation is also displayed in ‘Ivy Day in the Committee Room’, in which the canvassers laugh at the recollection of Charles Parnell, “We all respect him now that he’s dead and gone – even the Conservatives” (148). In doing so, the characters fail to honor the man’s memory and to see in themselves the same capacity for morally reprehensible behavior or personal shortcomings that Parnell showed while alive.<sup>18</sup> They do so both individually as people but also together as part of a political group—showing that moral disorientation is not restricted to the individual but also a systemic trait of Irish society. Moral disorientation is also associated with lack of faith. In the same short story, ‘Ivy Day in

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<sup>17</sup> A fishy analogy of Corley as a shark and Lenehan as his remora was astutely used by David Norris, who wrote *Introducing James Joyce*, Duxford: Icon Books, New York: Totem Books, 2000.

<sup>18</sup> Charles Parnell was an Irish politician from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century who lost all his credibility after his affair with one of his colleagues’ wife was publically revealed. The Joyce family, specifically the father, was a renowned Parnellite.



the Committee Room,' suspended priest Father Keon is introduced as such: "A person resembling a poor clergyman or a poor actor appeared in the doorway" (140). Despite the prevalence of the Catholic Church throughout *Dubliners*, the Church appears as a façade, devoid of faith and truth, as underlined here by the term 'actor', which blurs the difference between priest and performer.

Joyce suggests that class division and its resulting anguish stem not only from the structure of society at large, but also from abuse of power. In order for this structure to remain in place, there must be a form of compliance on the part of both abuser and abused. Cultural status is as important as social status, and both can be intertwined. For instance, in 'After the Race', the main character Jimmy returns to Ireland after having completed expensive studies in England—the colonizing rival—at his father's expense; a focus is constantly present on money and how well the characters are reputed because of it. Jimmy falls into a careless display of denial: he pretends not to care about money, and thereby loses all of it gambling with friends. He ponders, "He knew that he would regret in the morning, but at present he was glad of the rest, glad of the dark stupor that would cover up his folly" (51), before realizing that the morning is here and so are the regrets. In 'A Little Cloud', where social class takes the shape of social poise and being able to travel to the continent and beyond, the character humorously named Little Chandler is obsessed with his supposed shortcomings in likeability and productive creativity—shortcomings which are confirmed by the end of the narrative:

A dull resentment against his life rose within him. Could he not escape from his little house? Was it too late for him to try to live bravely like Gallagher? Could he go to London? There was the furniture still to be paid for. If he could only write a book and get it published, that might open the way for him.<sup>19</sup>

Little Chandler fails to demonstrate any social poise, both in his interaction with Gallagher and in his private life. Resentment and dullness are all that Little Chandler can muster in his

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<sup>19</sup> *Dubliners*, p. 91.

attempt at sophistication and poise; his reading of poetry before his sleeping child wakes the latter up, crying—an ominous sign for the publishing future of Little Chandler. Looming class distinctions prevail in ‘Counterparts’ as well, as indicated by the title, specifically as exemplified by a class divide of language—“a piercing North of Ireland accent” (95)—and religion between the character and his work superior from Ulster. Farrington’s resentment of his boss’s power over and legitimate anger towards him is imperfectly reflected in his abuse of his own power over his child at the end of the story:

‘I’ll teach you to let the fire out!’ he said, rolling up his sleeve in order to give his arm free play

The little boy cried ‘*O, pa!*’ and ran whimpering round the table, but the man followed him and caught him by the coat. The little boy looked around him wildly but, seeing no way of escape, fell upon his knees.

‘Now, you’ll let the fire out the next time!’ said the man, striking at him vigorously with the stick. ‘Take that, you little whelp!’<sup>20</sup>

Farrington passes on his own anguish to his son, but without the logic or reason provided by the structure of responsibility in his relationship with his boss. Abuse of power crosses all boundaries, be they social or cultural.

While all narratives in *Dubliners* are informed by a state of misery, depression is predominant in ‘A Painful Case.’ It is a depression caused by loneliness and rejection, which leads to the suicide of the isolated Mrs. Sinico, and to the numbness of Mr. Duffy. Upon learning of her death, he comes to an epiphany where he realizes his own depression and loneliness:

He gnawed the rectitude of his life; he felt that he had been an outcast from life’s feast. One human being had seemed to love him and he had denied her life and happiness: he had sentenced her to ignominy, a death of shame. He knew that the prostrate creatures down by the wall were watching him and wished him gone. No one wanted him; he was an outcast from life’s feast.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> *Dubliners*, p. 109.

<sup>21</sup> *Dubliners*, pp. 130-131.

Mr. Duffy is not so much an ‘outcast’ as he has cast himself out. Depression expresses an internal paralysis and incompleteness of the mind, and is the result of Mr. Duffy’s choice of pushing away Mrs. Sinico. Depression is also present in ‘Grace’ in the person of Mr. Kernan, who is literally a fallen man from the beginning of the story: “He lay curled up at the foot of the stairs down which he had fallen” (169). He needs the help of his friend Mr. Power to be able to regain the comfort of home, and to be able to have some sense of being part of a community, however performative that community may be.

The internalization of oppression is evident in ‘Eveline’ which concludes, “No! No! No! It was impossible. Her hands clutched the iron in frenzy. Amid the seas she sent a cry of anguish. [...] She set her white face to him, passive, like a helpless animal. Her eyes gave him no sign of love or farewell or recognition” (42-43). Eveline fails to extract herself from her miserable environment and leave Ireland, not because of external forces, but because of her own internal, ingrained despair. Similarly, ‘A Mother’ presents the same logic of transmission of oppression: from the large structure of the nationalist movement, which imposes the choice of not paying, to the mother’s own family—she orders them about and they follow meekly. Oppression embodies Ireland itself, not merely because Ireland’s social structure is oppressive and backward, but because the familiarity of certain Irish customs provides a form of comfort that conceals the underlying systemic oppression.

‘Counterparts’ and ‘Grace’ feature rampant alcoholism as a form of corruption of body and mind. ‘Grace’ opens with the accident of Mr. Kernan, who falls down the stairs of a bar and hurts his mouth badly, rendering his speech unintelligible. The cause for his fall is soon revealed by his wife, “He’s been drinking since Friday” (174). Alcoholism is itself a violent act, and provides an excuse for violence, as in ‘A Little Cloud’ or ‘Counterparts,’ where fathers brutalize their children verbally or physically upon getting home from drinking.

Other characters seldom question drinking—only characters that are older, and ‘ridiculed’ for their old-fashioned ways voice an opposition to or open disgust at alcoholism. For example, Aunt Julia in ‘The Dead’ does not keep up with the latest fashion and does not know that “galoshes” are overshoes; and she certainly will not have the character of Freddy come “in a state.” Despite her protestations, Freddy arrives drunk. No protestations can prevent the reality of alcoholism.

‘Grace’ contrasts spiritual and social means of grace. The word is ironically applied to Kernan and Fogarty with their absurd posturing. Mr. Kernan swears by his silk hat and gaiters: “By grace of these two articles of clothing, he said, a man could always pass muster” (173). Likewise, his friend Mr. Fogarty, who comes to their meeting with a bottle of whisky, “bore himself with a certain grace, complimented little children and spoke with a neat enunciation” (188). On the other hand, the priest’s usage of the word is no more than a call for bourgeois social respectability, along with a spiritually and theologically bankrupt sense that grace is a matter of personal accounts that can be described in economic terms and managed—rather than experienced—by an individual: “Well, I have looked into my accounts. I find this wrong and this wrong. But, with God’s grace, I will rectify this and this. I will set right my accounts” (198). Joyce exposes the emptiness of religion in Ireland. Just like alcohol, it only provides a simultaneously toxic and soothing distraction from any factual truth.

All of these tropes are interconnected. They all stem from a form of entropy, as pointed out by Sydney Bolt in his *Preface to Joyce*: “*Dubliners* is a collection of stories about people who are too timid and conformist to see things as they really are. The stories are case histories, all pointing to Joyce’s diagnosis of ‘moral paralysis’ [...]”<sup>22</sup> This moral paralysis is an interior dishonesty, which gives rise to an inability to assess facts appropriately, and

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<sup>22</sup> BOLT Sydney, *Preface to Joyce*, Harlow: Pearson Education Limited, first published 1981, second edition 1992. To Joyce, this comparison system was a direct display of the connection between plain truth and imagined truth.

ultimately to the destructive outward behaviors of the inhabitants of Dublin. But the paralysis is also caused and conditioned by societal machinery. Joyce explores the ins and outs of the paralysis in Dublin, the different ways it can express itself. In unfolding tropes of moral paralysis, Joyce indicates occurrences and recurrences of trauma, abuse, injustice, mediocrity, and paralysis within early 20<sup>th</sup> century Irish society. Paralysis encompasses all ‘Irish miseries’ as both a cause and an effect of them, in a vicious circle. In identifying the symptoms of paralysis in Dublin—and by extension in Ireland—Joyce emphasizes rampant miscommunication and a wish to conform. Submission and compliance harken back to English oppression and present a behavior that has a similar logic to that presented in ‘A Mother’: a sort of complacency or righteousness within one’s misery.

As a modernist, Joyce explored troublesome and taboo subjects, including sex. His exploration of sex is less present in *Dubliners* than in his other works; however, it can be seen as “emetic but nowhere aphrodisiac.”<sup>23</sup> According to bibliographical references, Joyce’s view on sex is one of the things that separated him from the Catholic Church, as the latter failed to address the realities of the physical world. His characters are “incomplete, lonely, paralyzed, spiritually, physically, and morally impoverished, betrayed and betraying – [...] damaged by dishonesty, be it their own or that of others.”<sup>24</sup> These Dubliners do not have moments of grandeur or heroism; but Joyce never considers them with complacency or disdain, placing himself and the reader in proximity with them, sharing in this common acknowledgement of physical desire.

The publication of *Dubliners* led to a long battle over the moral problems depicted in the collection, specifically because the book featured the names of actual Dublin streets and businesses. But the shape of the streets, the size of the buildings, and Dublin itself matter little

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<sup>23</sup> NORRIS, David, *Introducing Joyce*, New York: Totem Books, 1994.

<sup>24</sup> Introduction to the John Wyse Jackson and Bernard McGinley illustrated and annotated edition of James Joyce’s *Dubliners*. London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1993.

in *Dubliners*; what matters is the way in which the characters inhabit the city. And that is what remains universal. As Joyce himself writes in a letter to his brother Nikolaus, no other way of writing is worthwhile: “Has the author really come to understand something about human life? If not, consign it mercilessly to the rubbish heap of history.” The merciless display of paralysis, corruption, and death thus comes as an understanding of at least some aspects of the human condition. Much like paralysis, corruption takes various forms: simony, truancy, pederasty, drunkenness, child and spousal abuse, gambling, prostitution, petty thievery, blackmail, and also suicide.

At the time of its publication, the book’s instances of swearing were also deemed “not proper.” However, propriety was a lie to Joyce, and the equivalent of sentimentalizing, embellishing, the reality of Dublin. He wanted to cast a light on the darkness of the city and its reality. This gave way to his terse and blunt realism.

## **b. Refusal of Embellishment**

In ‘How the Short Stories became Novels,’<sup>25</sup> literary scholar R.F. Foster writes: “In the late twentieth century Irishness became fashionable on a level unknown since the cultural renaissance at the turn of the twentieth century” and further argues that “the lure of a re-created history and a sophisticated cultural "package" remains potently seductive.” Foster focuses on a trendy, even commercial, Irishness, both superficially dark and superficially lofty. While Foster refers to the Celtic Tiger period,<sup>26</sup> this sentimentalized notion of Irishness

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<sup>25</sup> FOSTER, R.F., *Luck and the Irish: A Brief History of Change, 1970-2000*, Chapter ‘How the Short Stories became Novels’ London: Penguin Books, 2008. pp. 149 -158 (Kindle Edition).

<sup>26</sup> For instance with early 21<sup>st</sup> century touristic advertisements for the Republic of Ireland, playing on similar sentimentalized notions of Irishness as the Celtic revivalists did a century prior: Ireland as a Celtic land of legends and hospitality, were great storytellers lived.

prevailed in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and remains present even now.<sup>27</sup> A century after *Dubliners*, the cliché of Irishness persists, conflating despair with depth and promoting social pleasantness as a means of weathering oppression.

With *Dubliners*, Joyce refuses this cliché categorically. He never embellishes his prose either, keeping it reflective of the simple accounts of mundane Dubliners' lives. For Joyce, a realistic depiction of Dublin was the best way of promoting and elevating true Irishness—something that several authors of the time sought to do in different ways.

The idea is to be immediately accessible, to provide Dubliners and all readers with the possibility of change after confronting facts about human nature, set in a specifically Irish context. In a letter dated the 5<sup>th</sup> of May 1906 and addressed to Grant Richards, whose editing house was supposed to publish Joyce's text, Joyce protested against the editor's hesitations and openly stated his goal:

My intention was to write a chapter of the moral history of my country and I chose Dublin for the scene because that city seemed to be the centre of paralysis. I have tried to present it to the indifferent public under four of its aspects: childhood, adolescence, maturity and public life. The stories are arranged in this order. I have written it for the most part in a style of scrupulous meanness.

The phrase 'scrupulous meanness' and an ensuing reputation followed Joyce throughout his career and accounts for his careful choice of displaying reality as it is, without making excuses for the characters, who reflect the 'indifferent public'. Joyce further elaborated: "It is not my fault that the odour of ash pits and old offal hangs around my stories. I seriously believe that you will retard the course of civilization in Ireland by preventing the Irish people from having one good look at themselves in my nicely polished looking glass." Similarly, the

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<sup>27</sup> Anecdotically, this sentimentalization can be evidenced by viral world cup videos depicting the Irish as a drunkenly wild group yet simultaneously 'so nice.'

‘polished looking glass’ is a phrase that has become associated with the Joycean scrupulous analysis.

1916 was the year of the momentous Easter Rising in Ireland, which was accompanied and prefigured by the Celtic Revival, a romantic exploration and renewal of Celtic myths that constructed a particular notion of national identity. William Butler Yeats, Douglas Hyde, and J.M. Synge<sup>28</sup> were the then vanguards of Irish literature<sup>29</sup>. Ireland in 1914—the year *Dubliners* was released—was still under English occupation. To help shape and perform a notion of Irishness, efforts were made to enhance and promote the greatness, positivity, and beauty of Ireland.<sup>30</sup> Joyce was appalled that intellectual figures would wear such blinders; to him insubstantial public discourses failed to address the reality of Irish society. He despised the process of looking to myths and legends for nationalist purposes instead of looking to the existing society or the truthful aspects of those myths. Yeats recalled Joyce’s words during their first meeting: Joyce “began to explain all his objections to everything I had ever done; politics, folklore, historical settings of events and so on. Above all, why had I written about ideas? These things were all the signs of the cooling of the iron, of the fading out of inspiration... his own little book of poetry owed nothing to anything but his own mind which was much nearer to God than folklore”<sup>31</sup>. Despite keeping a rather negative impression of Joyce as a person after the latter notoriously told him, “There is nothing I can do for you, you are too old,”<sup>32</sup> Yeats nevertheless put the young Joyce in contact with influential characters—

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<sup>28</sup> Synge was neither accused of nor credited with romanticizing the Irish; the nationalists did not promote him as an Irish writer although Yeats admired him profoundly. He was however, one of the popular and foremost writers of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in Ireland.

<sup>29</sup> As defined on the Encyclopædia Britannica website for instance, <https://www.britannica.com/art/Irish-literature/The-20th-century> – Last accessed on 8 May 2020.

<sup>30</sup> This Celtic revival promoted great artists and writers—the point is to know that it played with fantasy, not facts.

<sup>31</sup> JOHNSON Anthony J., ‘How Joyce Bit the Yeats Hand that Fed Him,’ *The Irish Independent*, 29 August 2015. Retrievable online from: <https://www.independent.ie/opinion/analysis/how-joyce-bit-the-yeats-hand-that-fed-him-31488044.html> – Last accessed on 8 May 2020.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*



including American poet Ezra Pound—and continuously supported him in his own works. Their debate on the purpose of literature was a good-natured one, for both writers admired each other.

*Dubliners* avoids taking an explicit moral stance, yet makes modern tales that illustrate a truth in the vignettes it depicts. Despite its matter-of-fact realism, its ambiguity leaves room for interpretation. There are few direct metaphors or comparisons in *Dubliners*. Joyce renders the suffocating atmosphere through sounds, colors, and repetitive motifs: the distinctive darkness, the prevalence of yellow over white or any brightness, the mud-invoking brown. The characters never have a mind of their own. Circles do not represent life but are rather metaphors of imprisonment. The repetition of these motifs, much like that of the tropes, has a didactic purpose. As scholar and writer David Norris observes about *Dubliners*:

Joyce deploys a concentrated vocabulary in which words like “vain”, “useless”, “tiresome”, “hopeless” etc., recur from story to story. The effect of this is to sensitize the reader subliminally to the moral texture of each story. Another key word is “confused”. Even where it does not appear, the confusion itself is invariably an indicator of paralysis. Characters become confused and immobilized like frightened rabbits whenever they have to confront the risk of choosing a positive life. [...] The action of the stories is minimal, and the characters are seen as victims of a system that breeds paralysis. At the end of a story, the reader should view its slight events with eyes subtly changed by the process itself of reading that story.<sup>33</sup>

Relying on simple vocabulary and syntactic structure as well as repetition, Joyce downplays his own authorial presence in the texts, and therefore the decorative elements often expected in literature. The limited action of the stories participates in displaying and denouncing paralysis. He counters the minimal action with an access to the characters’ thought and with revealing dialogue.

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<sup>33</sup> NORRIS, David, *Introducing Joyce*, New York: Totem Books, 1994, p. 67. Written with illustrator Carl Flint.

Joyce's plain style uses dialogue<sup>34</sup> as a means to contrast with the tone of the narration, and to oppose the arrogance and education of certain characters with the humility of others. For instance, Gabriel in 'The Dead' belongs with the overeducated people whom he pompously decries:

He then took from his waistcoat pocket a little paper and glanced at the heading he had made for his speech. He was undecided about the lines from Robert Browning, for he feared they would be above the heads of his hearers. Some quotation that they would recognize from Shakespeare or from the melodies would be better. The indelicate clacking of the men's heels and the shuffling of their soles reminded him that their grade of culture differed from his. He would only make himself ridiculous by quoting poetry to them which they could not understand. They would think that he was airing his superior education.<sup>35</sup>

Gabriel is constantly lost in his thoughts, fails to see things for what they are, and to engage with people honestly. It is not the fact of being more educated than others that prevents him from engaging and making a good impression on others, but the belief that he is better educated than and simply superior to anyone around him. He changes the quotations not for others' sake but for his own, showing condescendence rather than helpfulness. Similarly, the boy in 'An Encounter' shifts the register of his language when meeting the pervert, and uses his brains to get out of a dangerous situation. But his comment on his friend running to his rescue—" [I]n my heart I had always despised him a little" (28)—also shows that he is tainted by spite or loathing and ultimately no better than the strange man. No one is innocent in *Dubliners*. No character is completely guilty, either, but everyone blames others, and this foundational dishonesty characterizes the paralysis Joyce diagnoses in early 20<sup>th</sup> century Dublin.

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<sup>34</sup> The contrast aimed at is even more revealed in the form of dialogues originally wanted by Joyce: instead of using inverted commas like the Anglophone convention required, he wanted to use French-style dashes before and after each speech intervention. Professor and researcher Valérie Bénéjam has given a conference on this topic at Nantes University Library in January 2020; the talk is retrievable from Youtube at the following address: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kihic3qQ9bc&t=578s> – Last accessed on 8 May 2020.

<sup>35</sup> *Dubliners*, p. 203.

### c. The Normal People in *Dubliners*

Joyce's subject is simultaneously ordinary people as well as more affluent people, who think of themselves as grand when in truth they do not differ from the common folk in their occupations, interests, and behaviors. The characters look for distraction, they think about having a family, sex, drinking, etc. David Norris states that Joyce demonstrates "experiences that are by and large the commonplace, unheroic ones of humanity in general,"<sup>36</sup> and that:

What sets him apart from his peers is the single-minded integrity and searing honesty of his response to these experiences, whether they be [...] finding his way toward sexual identity as an adolescent, or writing self-indulgent poetry as a young man. Most significantly, Joyce demonstrates how an individual conscience can be formed and can create its own system of values, independent of the prevailing hypocrisy and half-truths of society.<sup>37</sup>

Not only does Joyce picture normal, mundane people, but he also displays the mechanics behind these people's actions. And in his writing, he demonstrates how such behaviors of paralysis are not wholly determined—*Dubliners*, and by extension people, have a choice. Although the texts expose systematic and systemic behaviors, they do not explicitly blame institutions for such behaviors; Joyce makes it clear that the characters are in fact responsible for their own actions within the conditioning of societal machinery.

The characters in *Dubliners* are presented *in medias res*, without narratorial background, explanation, or any overall physical description—rather, they function as fragments that serve the narrative. This has the effect of presenting characters as familiar, and results in the sense that they are types of people more than specific individuals, however rich their personas. The boys from the three opening stories even remain unnamed: they could be anyone and no one—or the same one.

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<sup>36</sup> NORRIS, David, and Carl FLINT, *Introducing Joyce*, New York: Totem Books, 1994, p. 77.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*, p.78.

Iterating on the notion of normality, the characters in *Dubliners* come from all sorts of backgrounds, but mostly qualify as lower-middle class. They belong to dysfunctional and unbalanced families, and cover a wide age spectrum, representing the cycle of life from the newborn baby in ‘A Little Cloud’ to the dying old priest in ‘Three Sisters’. Describing their life as survival suggests the precariousness of their everyday reality. Even by 1914 standards, their ‘getting-bys’ are largely grim, morally and financially. The families are rarely complete: a parent is usually dead, missing, or gone, or one parent is somewhat malevolent or corrupt: drunk, prone to envy, or violent. As a result, children are formed as much by the absence as by the presence of their parents. Joyce himself, despite receiving a good education in boarding schools and then in college, was born to a large upper middle-class family; yet his family would move houses on a yearly basis because of growing financial issues.<sup>38</sup> The young Joyce had no sense of abiding attachment or belonging, which gave him the opportunity to know Dublin inside and out, both the posh side south of the Liffey and the shantytowns on the north side of the river. His education allowed him into higher circles of the cultural elite though his own class situation was rather low. He was able to channel this breadth of experience into his *Dubliners* accounts.

The banal activities of the characters in *Dubliners*—going to real Dublin pubs or theatres to have a drink and socialize, listening to real-life popular songs, and reading ‘pulp fiction’ and crime stories—provide the mirror in which Joyce intends for readers to see themselves. The relatable nature of the narratives’ mundane actions also gives rise to a sort of comic relief. The little failures of needing to ask a parent or tutor for money in ‘Araby’, longing to explore on an adventurous afternoon with friends in ‘An Encounter’, going to an

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<sup>38</sup> Joyce’s father was a gambler and a drinker, and as the years went by, the quality of life for the family deteriorated. Joyce was born in the rather bourgeois neighbourhood of Terenure and Rathgar in South Dublin, but soon they had to move to the slum-like districts of North Dublin.

aunt's party and failing to eat the cake she made in 'The Dead'... These events ultimately reveal a much larger failure of free movement and a stationary, revolving aspect of life.

Although Joyce is not just an "Irish" author and has impacted literature globally, his writings have had a profound – and indeed defining – impact on Irish literature since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Though he himself left Ireland, his writings speak directly to his countrymen. Joyce addresses his contemporaries through his characters, using irony to underline the characters' own contradictions—and ultimately his contemporaries'. For instance, Gabriel's speech in 'The Dead' ironically refers to others as being thought-tormented:

A new generation is growing up in our midst, a generation actuated by new ideas and new principles. It is serious and enthusiastic for these new ideas and its enthusiasm, even when it is misdirected, is, I believe, in the main sincere. But we are living in a sceptical and, if I may use the phrase, a thought-tormented age: and sometimes I fear that this new generation, educated or hypereducated as it is, will lack those qualities of humanity, of hospitality, of kindly humour which belonged to an older day.<sup>39</sup>

For Gabriel, the generation he describes operates on the basis of new ideas and new principles, that have not necessarily been tested. Its members' enthusiasm endangers society, because acting on these ideas and principles without their prior validation could lead to unforeseen negative consequences. Underneath the exciting new-fangled intellectualism remain essential principles and values of humanity, hospitality, and kindly humor that allow people to live together harmoniously. Gabriel, in his complacency, embodies the intellectuals, artists and decision-makers Joyce saw around him. Gabriel sees himself as alienated from the masses because of his intellectual qualities, but he does not feel he lacks true sensitivity or joviality. Looking at history, notably at the place occupied by W.B. Yeats or E.M. Synge in the Celtic Revival, there is indeed a sense that artists have been consistently either upholding and promoting the mainstream culture or on the contrary decrying it.

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<sup>39</sup> *Dubliners*, p. 232.

#### d. Experiences of Darkness

While exploring the depths of Dublin, and the depths of one specific aspect of Irish society after another, Joyce unveils a darkness manifested in distinctly Irish ways, but present in its underlying form in each and every human being. Joyce reaches “the universal contained in the particular” which he mentioned to his friend Arthur Power.<sup>40</sup> Late scholar Sydney Bolt states in his *Preface to Joyce*,

The truth could be seen as valuable for its own sake, and this was Joyce’s view. Art, in his view, should be conducive neither to desire nor to loathing. Works which had such effects were pornographic or journalistic. A work of art should promote ‘stasis’ – a state of mental satisfaction resulting from contemplation of the truth – in the reader, not ‘kinesis’, a state of unrest.<sup>41</sup>

In universally applicable ways, Joyce describes the failures and frailties of Dublin society: ambient corruption, sins and pettiness, worthless efforts against a systemic paralysis, pridefulness, bigotry, and futility. These are not necessarily the first qualities that come to mind when thinking of Dublin. They correspond to the human world as a whole, but manifest through specifically Irish examples in Joyce’s prose. In *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*, American poet T.S. Eliot writes, “Poetry makes us from time to time a little more aware of the deeper, unnamed feelings which form the substratum of our beings, to which we rarely penetrate; for our lives are mostly a constant evasion of ourselves, and an evasion of the visible and sensible worlds.”<sup>42</sup> Denis Donoghue wrote in *Words Alone* a line that could also apply to Joyce here, stating that the goal of Eliot’s poetry is “to make our illusions

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<sup>40</sup> POWER, Arthur, *Conversations With James Joyce*, London: Millington, 1971. The opposite process of universalism goes for Rooney’s texts: they go from the common to the specific, describing experiences presented as common and adorned with many material details.

<sup>41</sup> BOLT Sydney, *Preface to Joyce*, Harlow: Pearson Education Limited, First published 1981, Second Edition 1992, p. 32.

<sup>42</sup> ELIOT, T.S., *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*, Harvard: Harvard University Press. First part of the Norton Lectures in 1933, First Edition 1964, Second Edition 1986.

uninhabitable.”<sup>43</sup> Joyce’s prose accomplishes a similar objective, drawing readers’ attention to emotions and subtle realities that are ever present, but often avoided. Through his manipulation of language, Joyce makes them unavoidable. Sydney Bolt elaborates on Eliot’s words in his *Preface to Joyce*:

Joyce shared this belief that literature was an instrument to promote awareness, and the subject of *Dubliners* was precisely the constant evasion of themselves and the world they lived in practised by his fellow citizens, an affliction which he diagnosed as ‘paralysis’ or ‘hemiplegia of the will’. But their aesthetic inheritance was useful to these new writers because it enabled them to insist that art must be independent of other disciplines. A work of literature must not be judged as a philosophical or ethical statement. Its value lay in the perspicuous representation of human experience. The artist’s job was not to tell people what to believe, but to make them see things.<sup>44</sup>

*Dubliners* allows Joyce to display human experiences both specific to the particular people of Dublin and yet fundamentally common to all.

Human understanding comes through characters’ epiphanies, which Joyce foregrounds in *Dubliners*. These epiphanies do not necessarily carry a religious weight for Joyce—his stand in relation to Catholicism remains controversial among scholars<sup>45</sup>—but are indubitably spiritual, and sudden, and they combine the mundane with the lyrical. Joyce describes them in *Stephen Hero* as “a sudden spiritual manifestation, whether in the vulgarity of speech or of gesture or in a memorable phase of the mind itself.”<sup>46</sup> Throughout the stories in *Dubliners*, there is a constant tension between the underlying reality and facades maintained by the characters. When Eveline realizes on her way to the ship that she does not want to leave Ireland, she does not come to any new conclusion. The opening of the story presents her to be

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<sup>43</sup> DONOGHUE Denis, *Words Alone – The Poet T.S. Eliot*, Yale: Yale University Press, new ed. 2002.

<sup>44</sup> BOLT Sydney, *Preface to Joyce*, Harlow: Pearson Education Limited, First published 1981, Second Edition 1992, p.28.

<sup>45</sup> Even Encyclopaedia Britannica states: “His religion and his complex, critical relationship to it—in which early devotion gave way to a deep agnosticism that was yet indebted to the symbolism and structures of Catholicism—remained a central preoccupation.” Retrievable from <https://www.britannica.com/art/Irish-literature/Joyce> – Last accessed on 8 May 2020.

<sup>46</sup> JOYCE James, *Stephen Hero*, Binghamton NY: New Directions, 1944, p. 211.

enclosed, “She sat at the window watching the evening invade the avenue. Her head was leaned against the window curtains, and in her nostrils was the odour of dusty cretonne” (37). Her posture of leaning against the window demonstrates her passivity and comfort in her current state. This gets confirmed halfway through the narrative, “It was hard work – a hard life – but now that she was about to leave it she did not find it a wholly undesirable life” (39). Her desire to remain had always been there; by the end of the story it has merely come to her conscious attention. The tension between this ever-present reality and the conflicting outward actions—notably all her preparations to leave the country—finally dissolves. The epiphanies throughout *Dubliners* create a cathartic effect, liberating both the characters and the reader through acknowledgement of internal or subtle realities.

As with water, Joycean Dublin appears darker the deeper one looks. Dark colors are prevalent in *Dubliners*. They can be purely black or variants of brown and yellow: the colors of mud and tainted, soiled teeth—or eyes, like in ‘Counterparts’: “his eyes bulged forward slightly and the whites of them were dirty” (95). Characters working with or depicted in relation to light, such as the gas-light worker of ‘The Dead’, or Mangan’s sister who is part of a convent in ‘Araby’, are out of reach: they are either dead, or committed to callings the main characters fail to comprehend. Light is occasionally present but always unattainable—not as a fatality but because characters are too enmeshed in and clinging to their paralysis. The boy in ‘Araby’ sets his heart on a girl out of his league and unattainable, and he concludes, “Gazing up into the darkness I saw myself as a creature driven and derided by vanity; and my eyes burned with anguish and anger” (36). He remains in the darkness yet is able to assess his situation from there: the foolishness of his enterprise, to Araby and regarding Mangan’s sister. Light can also prevent movement: the snow in ‘The Dead’ is a misleading bright and shiny cover for the dark ground and dirt lying underneath. The beautiful snow all over the country



prevents characters from confronting the filth beneath their thin and temporary veneers and thereby moving forward.

The moral and psychological landscape of Dublin dooms the characters, who perpetuate the cycle of paralysis and depravity by passing it on to the next generation. Joyce gives the impression that a change is under way, only to reveal that any movement is circular and leads nowhere. This sense of doom is present throughout *Dubliners*, giving it a tragic dimension. The stories are depressing, because the characters are unaware of their agency and therefore of how they pass on paralysis from one generation to the next.

In order to make the catharsis of *Dubliners* complete, Joyce needs to end the collection with a story that highlights the invisible darkness of mental and emotional trauma and paralysis. Whereas earlier stories show characters engaging with external events and other characters that can be physically observed, 'The Dead' serves to portray the result of those traumas after they have been internalized, buried, and denied over the course of many years. 'The Dead' is in itself uneventful, yet buzzes with tension on account of the hidden past actions and experiences of the characters that color their own mental states and projections on those around them. Gabriel fails to assess his environment, and even drastically misreads the internal state of his wife, sentimentalizing what is later revealed to have been for her an excruciating moment: "There was grace and mystery in her attitude as if she were the symbol of something. He asked himself what is a woman standing on the stairs in the shadow, listening to distant music, a symbol of. If he were a painter he would paint her in that attitude." Gabriel is characterized by phrasing sentences containing an idea of grandeur that is immediately countered; here 'grace and mystery' are immediately downplayed by the vagueness of 'something' and his ensuing wondering. Gabriel's inability to understand or even merely grasp his wife's inner life is an expression of paralysis and self-deception, as are the superficiality and vanity of his musings.

Echoing the title of the story itself, 'The Dead' presents characters who, even when mentioned, are absent from the narrative, inactive, and paralyzed. The first time Gabriel is mentioned, he is not actually there: 'There was no sign of Gabriel or his wife.' At the end of the story, Gabriel himself expresses his own invisibility and lack of life: 'one by one they were all becoming shades'. Surviving is not real life, and mental and emotional paralyses pervade Dublin society even when physical traumas are not immediately present – something easily overlooked or denied, but which Joyce forces his readers to recognize and confront.

'The Dead' also relates back to the first story of *Dubliners*: Gabriel shows us what awaits the young boy from the first story, an adult version of the unnamed pupil of the dead priest. The boy is ordinary with positive qualities, notably sensitivity and intelligence. He is sensitive to the extent that he experiences a wide array of feelings, specifically unexpected combinations like fear and longing, anger and perplexity, and a surprising "sensation of freedom" after his mentor's passing. His sensitivity informs his intelligence, which is not limited to intellectual absorption of information, but also features some intuition as to what other human beings around him feel and how they think and act. We only see this intuition through the boy's own narration. He does not want to show his feelings to anyone around him. Years of this emotional suppression lead us to Gabriel, who lacks true sensitivity, as is demonstrated by his choice of eating a stick of celery when his aunt Julia made the pudding for dessert; he seems to have buried his emotions under a snow-like blanket of propriety. No emotional intelligence appears in Gabriel: he fails to understand all the female characters with whom he interacts. If Gabriel is the result or the future of the little boy, then *Dubliners* serves as a warning with regard to what will become of supposed innocence. This progression should be a painful revelation and cautionary tale of what one becomes after a lifetime of consciously suppressing one's interior state.

Joyce's *Dubliners* has had a tremendous impact on Irish fiction ever since its publication. As pointed out by R.F. Foster<sup>47</sup>, not all Irish fiction coming after and derived from Joyce had the same impact locally as it had globally:

Tóibín instanced Francis Stuart, Aidan Higgins, Sebastian Barry, John Banville and John McGahern, who worked with strategies derived from Joyce, Flann O'Brien and Beckett – and in the process denied themselves an audience, which did not, in any case, exist in Ireland. [...] There was no audience here for such books. It was not just that Ireland did not offer a shelter between history and destiny for the novelists to pitch their tents, thus causing them to write at one remove from what was happening. But there was no-one to read the books, no set of educated, curious, open-minded literate people.

Irish authors writing of times and societies close to their own and of the absurd, futile paralysis of people in such times and societies can be singled out as contemporary to Joyce, to the late 20<sup>th</sup> century Celtic Tiger period, and to post-2008-crash Ireland. Foster also explains the latter waves of popularity with social reasons:

Historians might prefer to look at developments in education at second and third level since the 1960s (North and South); the relaxation of censorship; perhaps too the passing of a generation since the deaths of Joyce and Yeats, who in their respective disciplines had left such extraordinary and inhibiting legacies (Austin Clarke compared it to growing up under the shadow of a huge oak tree).<sup>48</sup>

Coming from different societies, locations, and eras, Flann O'Brien, Samuel Beckett, Edna O'Brien, Colm Tóibín, Francis Stuart, Aidan Higgins, Sebastian Barry, John Banville, Anne Enright, Paul Lynch, and Eimear McBride to name a few, were and are all popular Irish authors—admired in Ireland and beyond—whose work has benefitted from the influence of Joyce. Each of them has demonstrated a tendency for stylistic minimalism, with various aesthetic effects, and also approached similar distressing themes involving broken families. Looking at them in detail, however, would go beyond the scope of this thesis.

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<sup>47</sup> FOSTER, R.F., *Luck and the Irish: A Brief History of Change, 1970-2000*, Chapter 'How the Short Stories became Novels' London: Penguin Books, 2008.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid

There is something compelling about the darkness Joyce sets out in his *Dubliners*—not the darkness per se, but the effects it creates on readers, who in becoming thirsty for light and air, see the narratives for the truth they contain, and value clarity. Sally Rooney's *Normal People* and *Conversations With Friends* are in a dialogue with this specific Joycean tradition that was born with *Dubliners*.

## 2. Rooney's 21<sup>st</sup> Century Take on Joycean Tropes

Rooney's novels and *Dubliners* present the characters as trapped in two interlocking and interacting layers of machinery: first, a societal machinery; and second, an intimate, familial machinery. Both of these entrapments feed each other and are internalized by individuals. Rooney works with similar tropes to those of Joyce, and like him ties these tropes to normalcy; but in contrast to *Dubliners*, her novels *Conversations With Friends* and *Normal People* attempt to show that there is a way out of the darkness and misery that have long dominated Irish writing. In the process, Rooney highlights characters groping for their next move, obsessed with power relations, and showing an inertia, which she calls 'confusion', similar to that of Joyce's early 20<sup>th</sup> century characters.

Rooney's narratives face difficulties in depicting a contemporary escape from Joycean futility, and enacting resistance to Joycean tropes: the characters are imprisoned in a new prison of self-absorption and complacency in their emotional lives. Rooney's novels may be set in Ireland, but she makes little reference to Irish identity or literary heritage. Rooney's universal, unlike Joyce's, is a globalized, consumerist culture, in which Irishness is deracinated and homogenized rather than rooted in local particulars.

### a. Trying to Set Aside Inertia and Despair

*Dubliners* is inseparable from literary Irishness, and participates in the cultural *rayonnement* of Ireland in the world. Sally Rooney's novels participate in a more recent approach to Irish literature, one that has been commented on by social historian and cultural critic R.F. Foster:

In literature particularly, the inhibitions imposed by the achievements of the great early innovators seemed to lift, or to be converted into, an enabling example. The scale changed; the 'classic' Irish short story, revolving around an emblematic or epiphanic episode, was replaced by the expansive, teeming world of the novel.<sup>49</sup>

In Rooney's approach, romantic relationships provide the main avenue for personal growth, and the therapeutic environment in which to work on ingrained traumas and improve communication. Nevertheless, the characters are bound and limited by problematic circumstances linked to their pasts: family settings are unhealthy, giving rise to the characters' disabilities, much like in *Dubliners*. As argued by Marilyn French in her essay 'Missing Pieces in Joyce's *Dubliners*',

All of the characters exist in isolation. The few friendships that are depicted (all of them between males) are tainted by power relations—even that between the young boys of "An Encounter"—or by shallowness. Relations between spouses are uniformly functional rather than personal, and, on the whole, oppressive. Little intimacy or affection is suggested between spouses or among families as a whole. The most affectionate feelings in the volume are those of Mrs. Sinico for Mr. Duffy, expression of which causes the end of the relationship. Drunkenness and brutality shadow the background of many stories, and female piety is shown to be largely a mode of ignoring reality. There are no enlarging or enriching relationships, and not even a suggestion that such a thing is possible.<sup>50</sup>

*Conversations With Friends* and *Normal People* suggest that enlarging or enriching relationships exist. But the novels offer only the appearance of a solution; they tend to present romantic relationships as the one accessible escape route from all entrapments.

As a direct illustration of this supposed escape, the characters in *Conversations With Friends* go on a holiday to France, which turns out to be a headlong rush rather than a restful retreat:

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<sup>49</sup> FOSTER, R.F, *Luck and the Irish: a Brief History of Change, 1970-2000*, Chapter 'How the Short Stories became Novels' London: Penguin Books, 2008.

<sup>50</sup> FRENCH Marilyn, 'Missing Pieces in Joyce's *Dubliners*', *Twentieth Century Literature*, Vol. 24, No. 4 (Winter, 1978), Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Before that summer I had no idea I was the kind of person who would accept an invitation like this from a woman whose husband I'd repeatedly slept with. This information was morbidly interesting to me.<sup>51</sup>

The narrator Frances exemplifies a strong dissociation from her emotions in her 'morbid interest'. Rather than unflinchingly face her unmitigated emotional experience, she abstracts and intellectualizes it, leaving her unable to feel for other characters or within herself. Frances, like other characters, is repeatedly pictured dissociating from her feelings: "I tried to make myself think about things logically. Anxiety was just a chemical phenomenon producing bad feelings. Feelings were just feelings, they had no material reality" (169). Connell too refers to his depression in chemical terms. This rationalizing of all possible emotion demonstrates that the characters believe they can intellectually decide and act upon what they feel, thereby dissociating from feelings and avoiding to actually feel them.

The trips in *Conversations With Friends* and *Normal People* serve as a catalyst for social interactions and new plot twists, which are in fact repeated expressions of the characters' previously demonstrated attitudes. It is also remarkable that the account of the holiday includes no encounter with local people or locales—the characters simply continue to revolve around their own so-called relationship issues. Their lot of problems and sufferings follow them regardless of their surroundings. For example, Frances acts impulsively and shuts people away in an attempt to force them to show their care. A similar process takes place in *Normal People*, where the characters meet for a short while in a mansion in Italy and enact the same tensions they had back in Ireland.

In the globalized and flattened social consciousness of Rooney's characters, there is no significant divide between parallel settings in Ireland and France; the cultural and commercial machinery is much the same. While the point could be that these torments are not contextual

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<sup>51</sup> *Conversations With Friends*, p. 95.

but ‘global’, one may argue that on the contrary the issues the characters carry within and alongside them are linked to their innate Irishness. The characters remain fixated on their relationship dramas, which are rooted in intimate family dysfunctions and traumas, and therefore in the localized pasts they believe they are leaving behind. Returning to their home country, Rooney’s characters’ relationships and persistent pain remain. In Rooney’s fiction, the boy’s conclusion in Joyce’s ‘An Encounter’—“[R]eal adventures, I reflected, do not happen to people who remain at home: they must be sought abroad” (20)—does not apply, because Frances, Marianne, and Connell encounter little that is foreign and remain absorbed in themselves and their romantic relationships regardless of their location. Going abroad does not cure the characters’ recklessness nor cause any adventures.

This failure to see beyond themselves while abroad is only one manifestation of how Rooney’s characters barely manage to treat the symptoms rather than the roots of their inertia and despair. The novels portray troubled personalities in the course of growing up, but most of the suffering is presented as generic to the ‘confusing’ trials of adolescence and early adulthood. In refusing to depict her characters’ traumas as intrinsically Irish, Rooney suggests, reasonably, that certain kinds of suffering and confusion are in fact normal and universal. This is arguably her version of Joyce’s revealing the universal in the particulars of ordinary people’s suffering. But her characters, so astute in their intellectual assessments of the larger, ideologically driven machinery of society, consistently refuse to face themselves emotionally. In this sense, Rooney’s characters are quick to discern the universal, but deeply reluctant to confront their own particulars; they therefore tend to displace their emotional particulars onto abstract universals. In *Normal People*, Connell exemplifies this evasiveness when he attends a book signing:

It was culture as class performance, literature fetishized for its ability to take educated people on false emotional journeys, so that they might afterward feel



superior to the uneducated people whose emotional journeys they liked to read about.<sup>52</sup>

Connell here critiques Joycean catharsis, but offers no alternative. How literature about the lives of the working classes might achieve commercial success without being mere 'class performance' in his estimation remains unclear, and Connell's own class-consciousness blinds him to the possibility that such texts might serve as occasions for empathy and human solidarity. For Connell, people's emotional journeys seem secondary to the vast machinery of class. That position is the natural extension of his refusal to acknowledge how far his own struggles, though informed by class, are at bottom intensely personal and emotional. He has the capacity to be genuinely moved by literature, to feel "the pleasure of being touched by great art" (68) but distrusts anyone else is capable of having such an experience.

In Joyce, the emotional journey is central and universal; class and education are important but still secondary. Joyce's scrupulous dissection of his contemporaries' lives does not limit itself to the emotional journeys of the working classes; he does not spare his own level of education, notably in 'The Dead' where Gabriel epitomizes the righteous, self-centered person believing himself intellectually superior to all around. However, an evolution appears in the character, as presented by Marilyn French:

"The Dead" thus shows an expansion both in vision and in technique. The death of Gabriel's tenuous superiority seems to me—much as I mistrust criticism dependent upon biographical details and hypotheses—to signify the death of Joyce's tenuous sense of superiority to his characters in the earlier stories, to express his recognition that we all deceive ourselves and each other, we are all paralyzed in some way, and that before death, in death, we are all equal and cast into oblivion. The implication of the conclusion of "The Dead" is that the awareness of death is the reality humans shy away from, the awareness of death that is the only certitude humans can know.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> *Normal People*, p. 153.

<sup>53</sup> FRENCH Marilyn, 'Missing Pieces in Joyce's *Dubliners*', *Twentieth Century Literature*, Vol. 24, No. 4 (Winter, 1978), Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

When his ‘tenuous superiority’ crumbles in the final scene, Gabriel is able to empathize with others—his wife, her former late suitor—and to feel, not just intellectually acknowledge, that they are subjects with lives of their own rather than supporting characters in his life. Suggesting this subtle change in Gabriel, Joyce simultaneously recognizes human weakness and the potential for realization, even if the realization is the painful estrangement from one’s own life.

The main characters in *Conversations With Friends* and *Normal People* are arts students fond of literature. Rooney’s characters constantly make cultural references to signal that they are educated and cosmopolitan. Yet those references are mostly to foreign literature, with the exception of the attack on Yeats. In *Conversations With Friends*, Frances struggles through George Eliot’s *Middlemarch*, and in *Normal People*, Connell feels deeply moved by Jane Austen’s *Emma*. References are made to American poets such as Patricia Lockwood<sup>54</sup> or Frank O’Hara—whose prose opens Rooney’s debut novel as an epigraph<sup>55</sup>. The fact that only ‘The Lake Isle of Innisfree’ is mentioned as an Irish work is puzzling considering Rooney herself must have been surrounded by Irish literature since she was a child. As a secondary school student who took her Leaving Certificate in 2008,<sup>56</sup> she studied Brian Moore, Seán O’Casey, Eugene McCabe, and Oscar Wilde as part of her curriculum. Her mother being the then-director of the Linenhall, the local arts center and cultural venue in Castlebar, Rooney would also have been immersed in an Irish cultural milieu. She has served as the editor of

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<sup>54</sup> *Conversations With Friends*, p. 6.

<sup>55</sup> Frank O’Hara, ‘In times of crisis, we must all decide again and again whom we love.’ From the poem ‘To the Film Industry in Crisis’

<sup>56</sup> CHIEF EXAMINER’S REPORT – 2008 Curriculum. For single text-study: most popular texts: Brian Moore, *Lies of Silence*; Jennifer Johnston, *How Many Miles to Babylon*; Seán O’Casey, *The Plough and the Stars*. Less popular texts: William Shakespeare, *Othello*; Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*; and Eugene McCabe, *Death and Nightingales*. Least popular texts: Kazuo Ishiguro, *The Remains of the Day*; Arthur Miller, *The Crucible*; Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*. For comparative study: Chrity Brown, *My Left Foot*, Brian Friel, *Philadelphia, Here I Come!*; Baz Luhrmann, *Strictly Ballroom*; Mark Haddon, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*; Giuseppe Tornatore, *Cinema Paradiso*. There were two comparative modes for answering: Relationships or Social Setting. Poets to be studied: Adrienne Rich, Derek Mahon, John Donne and Philip Larkin, Hamlet.

Dublin-based literary magazine *The Stinging Fly* since 2017. But Rooney's novels only pay lip service to Irishness. Her lack of Irish references indicates a deliberate distance from her Irish literary inheritance. R.F. Foster puts this fact into perspective:

The idea of marketing recurs; and it is worth bearing in mind Joep Leerssen's brilliant coinage of 'auto-exoticism' for the Irish ability effortlessly to see themselves as 'other' and endlessly analyse their uniqueness. This might be applied to many aspects of the post-modern cultural consciousness that supposedly characterizes the new Ireland. [...] International academic criticism of the Irish literary phenomenon, as Edna Longley has also remarked, emphasizes individual talent rather than tradition, and thus may miss a number of important clues (including historical ones).<sup>57</sup>

Rooney's novels pointedly reject the auto-exoticism some critics see as a perennial feature of Irish literature. Dublin, the most globalized piece of Ireland, is the perfect locale for trying to escape the characters' emotional particulars by doing intellectual and cultural globalization. It suggests that Dublin is a bubble separated from 'real' Irishness, where characters seek to shed their Culchie status and bury past traumas.

Within the insularity of Dublin however, the characters carry on their dissociative and abstracting approaches. Frances, for example, writes her essays using a kind of cut-and-paste model of academic writing:

Over the summer I missed the periods of intense academic concentration which helped me relax during term time. I liked to sit in the library to write essays, allowing my sense of time and personal identity to dissolve as the light dimmed outside the windows. I would open fifteen tabs on my web browser while producing phrases like 'epistemic rearticulation' and 'operant discursive practices'. [...] Afterwards I'd print the essay out without even looking over it. When I went to get my feedback, the notes in the margins always said things like 'well argued' and sometimes 'brilliant'.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> FOSTER, R.F., *Luck and the Irish: a Brief History of Change, 1970-2000*, Chapter 'How the Short Stories became Novels' London: Penguin Books, 2008.

<sup>58</sup> *Conversations With Friends*, p. 34.

This sense of intellectual superiority is reminiscent of Gabriel's speech in 'The Dead', which he tries to 'dumb down' for his fellow partygoers. Rooney's characters use their intellectual posturing as a dissociative escape from their emotional experience.

Narratives and characters only address problems superficially because they are so dissociative. For instance, *Normal People's* Connell cannot bring himself to tell Marianne about his precarious housing situation, suggesting instead that they should put their relationship on hold since he cannot stay in Dublin. This quick-fix attempt at a solution creates additional problems that further imbalance their relationship rather than solve anything. Marianne's answer—"[I]n a voice that struck him as truly cold, Marianne said: Sure" (124)—, highlights his miscommunication, demonstrated when she comes back to this moment: "You told me you wanted us to see other people, she says. I had no idea you wanted to stay there. I thought you were breaking up with me" (151). What they voice are false issues and considerations: in this example, the characters are more concerned with fulfilling some notion of 'realness' in suggesting that they should see other people and be fine with it, than they are with admitting to their frailties and dependencies. Their inability to communicate, contradicts the supposed intelligence of the characters. The novels give the impression that a certain kind observant and concise description indicates emotional intelligence and sensitivity to others. This observant description appears not only in Rooney's characters, but also in her narrators.<sup>59</sup> Rooney's novels resemble *Dubliners*, in that the characters refuse to be honest with themselves in a way that will allow them to move beyond the confinement of their emotional machinery, the product of their pre-Dublin backgrounds. The complacency is their belief that their intellect and education will free them from their pasts, or make their pasts irrelevant. And yet they seek fulfillment in relationships.

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<sup>59</sup> It functions as a lure to distract readers from deeper problems and make readers feel as though they, too, possess a perspicacity of human nature that makes them somehow emotionally intelligent, profound, or woke; and resultingly superior.

Unlike in *Dubliners*, there are no epiphanies in Rooney's novels, but rather mundane yet pivotal moments for the characters. The texts depict normalcy as an anti-climactic way to evade inertia and conventionalized forms of confinement. Specifically, Rooney says of *Normal People*, "My ethos when choosing scenes was to zoom in when something changes or shifts in their dynamic. Every time we meet them, I want to meet them at a moment of crisis or change."<sup>60</sup> The characters are assumed to experience inertia in the ellipses between the chosen moments of narration, after the change or way out has been announced. In the following example, the account of Connell's experience of immobility and paralysis is muted by the opening of the section, when readers learn he is using the psychological support offered by college.

It was Niall who told him about the service. What he said specifically was: It's free, so you might as well. [...] Last night he spent an hour and a half lying on the floor of his room, because he was too tired to complete the journey from his en suite to his bed. There was the en suite, behind him, and there was the bed, in front of him, both well within view, but somehow it was impossible to move either forward or backwards, only downwards, onto the floor, until his body was arranged motionless on the carpet. Well, here I am on the floor, he thought. Is life so much worse here than it would be on the bed, or even in a totally different location? No, life is exactly the same. Life is the thing you bring with you inside your own head. I might as well be lying here, breathing the vile dust of the carpet into my lungs, gradually feeling my right arm go numb under the weight of my body, because it's essentially the same as every other possible experience.<sup>61</sup>

Here, the pivotal moment takes the form of a friend's intervention, which is downplayed by the addition of "it's free, so you might as well," as though the cost of an appointment were more important than getting help for what has literally become a paralyzing depression. Although mental health is addressed in a remarkably direct way, reflecting an increased awareness in 21<sup>st</sup> century Irish society where the *Darkness Into Light* walk-race, or the *Cycle*

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<sup>60</sup> HART Michelle, 'Sally Rooney Gets Real About *Normal People*, Her New Novel—and Finding Literary Stardom,' *O, The Oprah Magazine*, 18 April 2019. Retrievable online from <https://www.oprahmag.com/entertainment/books/a27182301/sally-rooney-normal-people-interview/> – Last accessed on 8 May 2020.

<sup>61</sup> *Normal People*, p. 201.

*Against Suicide* and the ensuing *Orange Week* in schools raise awareness on suicide rates in the country,<sup>62</sup> in *Normal People* the topic of depression is simply dropped, and nothing much follows. Depression remains vaguely in the background without being explored. It comes and goes like a passing cold, the result of chance and fate—or at least external circumstances—not something that can be controlled or influenced by the characters themselves. Emotional problems are externalized, and therefore their possible roots in the past need not be properly accounted for and confronted.

Joyce's 'A Painful Case,' where Mr. Duffy internalizes and makes his own the isolation and suffering which Mrs. Sinico went through, contrasts with *Normal People*, where there is no real acknowledgement of any reality to Connell's depression, neither in him nor in his relations with others. Even the psychologist remains vague when first assessing Connell's issues: "I'm seeing that you're feeling very negatively towards yourself, you're having some suicidal thoughts, things like that. So those are things we'd have to take very seriously" (208). The 'suicidal thoughts' are downplayed by the use of 'some' to quantify them, 'things' to refer to them, and the implied combination of doubt and obligation with 'would have to'. The psychologist, who remains the sole character in the novel with knowledge and wisdom which the protagonist lacks, is disregarded. There is no learning experience; no moment of understanding comes with an apparent moment of change.

These pivotal moments may appear brutal or violent at first, but because they remain unresolved, providing no healing or change afterwards, the issues mentioned are in fact not taken to heart. For instance, in the following passage from *Normal People*, Marianne is

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<sup>62</sup> According to the Irish Central Statistics Office, 554 people committed suicide in 2011—year when *Normal People*'s narrative kicks off—among which 83% were men. Statistics retrievable online from <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/er/ss/suicidestatistics2011/> *Darkness Into Light* was created in 2009 while *Cycle Against Suicide* was created in 2013 and claims over 800 lives are lost to suicide each year in Ireland. Website last accessed on 8 May 2020.

shocked that someone might believe that love may actually be expressed through BDSM (Bondage, Discipline, Submission, Sado-masochism):

He returns to his camera, back turned to her, as if to disguise some expression. Malicious laughter at her distress? she thinks. Rage? He could not, it's too appalling to consider, actually have hurt feelings? He starts to remove the device from the tripod. She opens the door of the apartment and makes her way down the staircase. Could he really do the gruesome things he does to her and believe at the same time that he's acting out of love? Is the world such an evil place, that love should be indistinguishable from the basest and most abusive forms of violence? Outside her breath rises in a fine mist and the snow keeps falling, like a ceaseless repetition of the same infinitesimally small mistake.<sup>63</sup>

The shock is followed by an epiphany she has reached only gradually: that these practices cannot be an expression of love. Marianne, however, only looks at things in terms of pain and pleasure; because BDSM is no longer pleasurable, but rather linked to self-harm, it cannot be 'love.' There is an evolution in her understanding of love and sex as two separate activities, but she does not see past pleasure to real care. The snow in this scene is reminiscent of Joyce's 'The Dead', in which the final passage describes how snow brings Gabriel out of himself to the west, back to his wife's roots, and to the recognition of his own insignificance.<sup>64</sup>

'He watched sleepily the flakes, silver and dark, falling obliquely against the lamplight. [...] It was falling on every part of the dark central plain, on the treeless hills, falling softly upon the Bog of Allen and, farther westward, softly falling into the dark mutinous Shannon waves. [...] His soul swooned slowly as he heard the snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead.'<sup>65</sup>

The snow in the last paragraph of 'The Dead' brings Gabriel back to a sentiment of unity with 'all the living and the dead', of not being as special as he has believed himself to be. Marilyn French argues,

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<sup>63</sup> *Normal People*, p. 199.

<sup>64</sup> This has been argued by numerous Joyce scholars but notably Sydney Bolt at p.32 of his *Preface to Joyce*, Harlow: Pearson Education Limited, 1981, 1992.

<sup>65</sup> *Dubliners*, final paragraph.

The conclusion separates "The Dead" from the others. It functions as an Apologia, providing the sympathy that is lacking in the harshest of the stories, suggesting the possibility of a broader perspective. It suggests also that isolation and blindness can be subtly alleviated by human sympathy, by an understanding and acceptance of the given terms of human tenure on earth.<sup>66</sup>

In *Normal People*, the snow metaphor snow serves to anchor Marianne in her individuality and brings her back to her own responsibility in what she has indeed chosen for herself. She remains 'confused' and lost, with no sense of a bigger picture or of her place in the world. Rather than immediately feel the 'appalling' dynamic in her relationship, she quickly spirals out of her personal situation into abstract speculation and ultimately into aestheticism—projecting her own drama on the snow, 'the same infinitesimally small mistake.' Although it could be argued that the indirect free discourse ends just before this sentence, leaving way to the narrator's commentary, the closeness between the narrator and the character allows making such a statement.

Later in the narrative, Marianne asks Connell, whom she supposedly loves and is loved by, to hit her. His refusal, and more so his consideration in the following chapter, that "ever since school he has understood his power over her" (248) where he equates mental power with physical power, have been criticized by feminist scholars. Helen Charman writes, "Within that acceptance of difference there could be room for a more radical 'otherness' that allows for the complexities of violence to have equally complex remedies and restitution; instead, the novel ends on an ambivalent conflation of love and 'good' power."<sup>67</sup> This demonstrates how Rooney's characters remain imprisoned by emotional legacies they refuse to confront as more than abstract ideas.

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<sup>66</sup> FRENCH Marilyn, 'Missing Pieces in Joyce's *Dubliners*', *Twentieth Century Literature*, Vol. 24, No. 4 (Winter, 1978), Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

<sup>67</sup> CHARMAN Helen, 'Sally Rooney's *Normal People*' *The White Review* —online edition only, October 2018. Retrievable from <https://www.thewhitereview.org/reviews/sally-rooneys-normal-people/> – Last accessed on 8 May 2020.



## b. Yoked to Pain and Discomfort

Sally Rooney herself, as an author, has been marketed relentlessly as the voice of today's generation.<sup>68</sup> In that regard, her novels seem to suggest that intimate relationships, as depicted in *Normal People* and *Conversations with Friends*, offer fulfillment for millennials in contemporary Ireland. But at the same time the novels fail to critique the self-absorbed complacency and consumerist mindset that her characters bring to their relationships—as well as their careers, in academia or in their side jobs.

On a societal and ideological level, the structures and machineries of imprisonment have changed since 1914. Catholicism is to the characters of *Dubliners* a pervading system of taboos and a conflation of power, sex, sin, and religion<sup>69</sup>; and capitalism supplants Catholicism as the ideology of oppression in more general terms for the characters of Rooney's novels, as exemplified by critic Alexandra Schwartz in her piece for *The New Yorker*.<sup>70</sup> *Conversations With Friends* and *Normal People* demonstrate that the first tier of abusive machinery from *Dubliners* has transformed into something more abstract and pervasive, and yet something to which the characters are no longer oblivious. Rooney's millennials are intellectually aware of the consumerist capitalism and neo-liberalism in which

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<sup>68</sup> There is a similarity between Rooney and O'Brien in 'generational hailing'. See this quote from COUGHLAN Patricia, 'Killing the Bats: O'Brien, Abjection, and the Question of Agency', in *Edna O'Brien: New Critical Perspectives*. Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2006, pp. 171 – 95.

“The real struggle [...] in the work as a whole, is not between, on the one hand, repression, regulation, the alcoholic failed father, prudery, coercive virginity, the Irish countryside as a cultural and emotional nowhere, and, on the other, urban modernity, relative anonymity, apparent freedom, and sexual opportunity. It is between the different forms of alienation represented by *each* of these opposites, which are both still under the Law of the Father, and the possibility for a woman of autonomy, the right to attempt self-completion, and the capacity to play out one's life for oneself, to seek love and recognition: in a word, agency.”

<sup>69</sup> As discussed by scholar Marilyn French: “All of the central stories in *Dubliners* deal to some extent with the sexuality which has been, in the early stories, both condemned (associated with sin and punishment) and enhanced (associated with power, mystery, adventure, freedom, enduring exaltation).” FRENCH Marilyn, 'Missing Pieces in Joyce's *Dubliners*', *Twentieth Century Literature*, Vol. 24, No. 4 (Winter, 1978), Published by: Duke University Press.

<sup>70</sup> SCHWARTZ Alexandra, 'A New Kind of Adultery Novel', *The New Yorker*, 31 July 2017. Retrievable from <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/07/31/a-new-kind-of-adultery-novel> – Last accessed on 8 May 2020.

they evolve, but they are not aware of how it has infected their private spheres. In fact, such machinery is expressed through their body rather than identified in their behaviors. In *Conversations With Friends*, Frances states, “The inside of my body hummed like a piece of machinery” (257) while Connell describes a similar process in *Normal People*: “Connell feels certain about what he’s doing, but it’s a blank certainty, as if he’s blankly performing a memorised task. He finds that his fingers are in Marianne’s hair and he’s stroking the back of her neck calmly. He doesn’t know how long he has been doing this” (180). In both of these examples, the machinery takes over the characters’ independent wills. The characters act unconsciously.

In light of this unconsciousness to their machineries, the main characters of *Normal People* and *Conversations With Friends* have both interior and public lives yoked to pain and discomfort: Frances gets diagnosed with severe endometriosis; parental or general family abuse looms over all characters. For most, it is psychological violence, from mental pain to willful emotional harm, like Marianne revolving in a painful solipsism in this passage:

Marianne wonders what it would be like to belong here, to walk down the street greeting people and smiling. To feel that life was happening here, in this place, and not somewhere else far away. [...] In just a few weeks’ time Marianne will live with different people, and life will be different. But she herself will not be different. She’ll be the same person, trapped inside her own body. There’s nowhere she can go that would free her from this. A different place, different people, what does that matter?<sup>71</sup>

Instead of looking realistically at what a physical displacement with a ‘different place, different people’ would or could entail, Marianne chooses to see her present condition and future one in a fatalistic light. Her interior monologue is very similar to Connell’s, when he is paralyzed on the floor from depression. Both characters are sure that a change of venue does not effect personal change—or maybe they believe in the moment that no meaningful change

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<sup>71</sup> *Normal People*, p. 49.

is possible at all. The characters never escape their intimate emotional prison, partly because they refuse to face such prisons, and partly because they do not believe there could be a way out of them, except through romantic and sexual relationships. The fatalism at display here is one more way of avoiding confronting how Marianne must change within herself—it is another intellectual escape hatch. Marianne’s language is reminiscent of Mr. Duffy’s in ‘A Painful Case,’ who assesses experience according to a predetermined mindset, “For what? he asked her, with careful scorn. To compete with phrasemongers, incapable of thinking consecutively for sixty seconds? To submit himself to the criticisms of an obtuse middle class which entrusted its morality to policemen and its fine arts to impresarios?” (123) Both characters reject their plight, but Marianne sees herself as a victim while Mr. Duffy does not—in both cases, setting themselves apart from other people.

But there is also physical violence in Rooney’s novels: beatings, alcoholic or absent fathers, an obsession with power roles in relationships, and BDSM, most of which recall the traditional oppressors in Joyce’s collection. Marilyn French notes,

Farrington has similarities and important differences from Chandler; both make them counterparts. Farrington is large, Chandler, small; he is brutal, Chandler, gentle; he avoids his work, Chandler works assiduously. But both are sexually deprived; both channel sexual frustration into other areas; and both, finally, take out their frustration and rage on their children. [...] It does not suggest that the characters are ludicrous or contemptible because they do not follow Reason or Virtue or because they hypocritically pursue pleasure or profit while pretending to piety. Quite the contrary. The book is a gallery of sketches of characters who have given up their own desires, who cannot conceive of acting for their own pleasure, but who live in some degree of misery precisely because they have internalized the values of their culture.<sup>72</sup>

While it reflects a certain reality, violence appears in Rooney’s novels as an external fact of life and even constitutive of loving relationships, rather than a dysfunction stemming from the troubled interiors of the characters. By dismissing emotional experience as uneducated or old-

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<sup>72</sup> FRENCH Marilyn, ‘Missing Pieces in Joyce’s *Dubliners*’, *Twentieth Century Literature*, Vol. 24, No. 4 (Winter, 1978), Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

fashioned, characters lose connection with and deny their inner lives, making it impossible to understand the source of violence. Perhaps because of this, depression overtakes several characters, resulting in self-harm and even suicide. Each of Rooney's novels features a character who stands out because of his violence: Frances' father in *Conversations With Friends*, and Marianne's brother Alan in *Normal People*. Frances' father is no longer physically violent at the moment of narration but still has an impact on his daughter's emotional state. Alan regularly beats his sister up. Both are pictured only in the West, never in Dublin. They are the traditional Irish male figures; and through the characters of Alan and Frances' father, Irishness is associated with abuse. It is consistent with the characters' desire to shed their 'Irishness' by dissociating from and not confronting their past traumas, and hiding from them in intellectual and romantic or sexual games. Conversely the characters first and foremost point to a societal and globalized violence, a violent machinery operating on the social level rather than the intimate level. For instance, in *Conversations With Friends*, Frances ponders "I had read books, I was familiar with the idea that capitalism was the really crazy thing. But I had thought people who were hospitalised for psychiatric problems were different from the people I knew." (238). The characters repeatedly refuse to explore the internalization of violence and pain as part of themselves, and rather solely see violence in its expressions in Irish society.

What is striking about these examples of violence and oppression is that while they may appear as a forceful dissection of societal issues, they also reveal an unwillingness for the characters to say what they will unequivocally affirm. The characters approach the world they live in both in a state of survival and opposition. Dr. Helen Charman states, in the same essay,

'Maybe he wants to do it'; maybe she wants him to, but the novel continually represses the potential for a consensual exploration and/or subversion of these power dynamics. Instead, Marianne's desire to be sexually submissive is

played out through a relationship with the one dimensional Bad Guy Jamie – ‘he likes to beat me up’ – whose ‘sadism’ is more linked to emotional abuse than sexual dominance, conveyed as it is through set-piece dinner party arguments in Italy, his weak chin and his wealth. The unconvincing interlude with Lukas, the tall Swedish goth with whom Marianne has some kind of BDSM relationship, ends with her fleeing his studio after he tells her he loves her.<sup>73</sup>

The equation goes as follows: if the protagonists have no feelings, sex is shallow and unpleasant; while if they are in a romantic relationship, it is beyond special—a form of sexual hackneyed image: “It’s not like this with other people” says Marianne in *Normal People* (236). As for physicality and sex, the narratives are nowhere erotic but rather factual, sometimes revolting, and often obsessive. This explains the quest for Marianne to unsuccessfully separate love and sex: she gradually increases BDSM as a strategy to be physically vulnerable but mentally dissociated from it. Sex itself, arguably a space for great intimacy and vulnerability, becomes for Marianne an arena of power and control that allows her to not feel.

Marianne’s attraction to violent behaviors is briefly explained as dating back to her upbringing, with her mother Denise presented as tolerant of such behaviors:

Denise decided a long time ago that it is acceptable for men to use aggression towards Marianne as a way of expressing themselves. As a child Marianne resisted, but now she simply detaches, as if it isn’t of any interest to her, which in a way it isn’t. Denise considers this is a symptom of her daughter’s frigid and unlovable personality. She believes Marianne lacks ‘warmth’, by which she means the ability to beg for love from people who hate her.<sup>74</sup>

Instead of begging for affection, Marianne ends up begging for aggression, an inescapable repetition of a behavior which in facts aligns with her mother’s own dysfunctional take on what is acceptable. Her own choice of unconventional behavior thus fits in with the conventions of her family, specifically her mother, and the underlying afflictions of Irish

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<sup>73</sup> CHARMAN Helen, ‘Sally Rooney’s *Normal People*’ *The White Review* —online edition only, October 2018. Retrieval from <https://www.thewhitereview.org/reviews/sally-rooneys-normal-people/> – Last accessed on 8 May 2020.

<sup>74</sup> *Normal People*, pp. 49-50.

society. It exemplifies the failure of the characters' attempt to evade and repress the familial legacies of confinement and despair.

In Rooney's texts, positive feelings are merely miscommunications expressed by secondary characters. As Helen Charman phrases it, "The novel never lets the reader forget that its protagonists are extremely attractive, extremely complicated, extremely clever; their taut high-achieving neuroticism is a stylistic coup de grace, but it allows no room for other possible manifestations of value and complexity in other characters."<sup>75</sup> Connell's mother Lorraine, in *Normal People*, is such an underdeveloped secondary character. She is a perfunctory depiction of the strong single mom, warm and caring, bringing with her tea and hugs. None of her gestures penetrates Connell's refusal to feel, as when he expresses no interest in finding out who his biological father is because he is committed to believing that his lack of a father does not define who he is:

No one except Lorraine knows who Connell's father is. She says he can ask any time he wants to know, but he really doesn't care to. On nights out his friends sometimes raise the subject of his father, like it's something deep and meaningful they can only talk about when they're drunk. Connell finds this depressing. He never thinks about the man who got Lorraine pregnant, why would he? His friends seem so obsessed with their own fathers, obsessed with emulating them or being different from them in specific ways. When they fight with their fathers, the fights always seem to mean one thing on the surface but conceal another secret meaning beneath. When Connell fights with Lorraine, it's usually about something like leaving a wet towel on the couch, and that's it, it's really about the towel, or at most it's about whether Connell is fundamentally careless in his tendencies, because he wants Lorraine to see him as a responsible person despite his habit of leaving towels everywhere, and Lorraine says if it was so important to him to be seen as responsible, he would show it in his actions, that kind of thing.<sup>76</sup>

While Connell's refusal may be valid, it casts his mother as a character at the mercy of others' decisions, a flat character, only present to play the motherly role necessary when Connell is

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<sup>75</sup> CHARMAN Helen, 'Sally Rooney's *Normal People*' *The White Review* —online edition only, October 2018. Retrievable from <https://www.thewhitereview.org/reviews/sally-rooneys-normal-people/> – Last accessed on 8 May 2020.

<sup>76</sup> *Normal People*, p. 46.

still living at home. She is also the means through which Connell and Marianne get to know each other—a plot device rather than a character with depth in her own right. Lorraine’s role is explicitly that of the cleaner; she cleans other people’s messes both for a living and metaphorically in her life. But one could argue that she appears underdeveloped because she is mainly seen through the consciousness of her self-absorbed, emotionally distant and dishonest son. Connell considers himself superior for not caring about his biological father’s identity. He believes that he is somehow more perspicacious and more aware than his friends who are obsessed with their fathers. He views his own refusal to look at facts as exemplifying his own detachment, that he is beyond petty sentimentalism and emotionality. His refusal thus indicates the emotionality he actively suppresses and therefore fails to see in other areas, as in the type of argument he has with his mother. Connell equally numbs and refuses to look much deeper into his relationship with his mother than “that’s it, it’s really about the towel.” This inability to discern his own deeper motivations makes him a character as much confined in paralysis and futility as the characters from *Dubliners*.

Among the positive secondary characters is another Marianne, from *Conversations With Friends* this time, who appears jolly throughout, and congratulates Frances and Bobbi on their getting back together. Immediately the two girls dismiss her, on the grounds that because their relationship does not fit in a box they cannot be a couple and therefore people should not be happy for them. It implies an existentialist reading of intimacy as closer to shared seclusion than it is to shared feeling. The exclusion of secondary characters from a more prominent place in the narrative parallels the exclusion of anything relevant to an individual’s development other than romantic love—which Rooney has stated is the main focus of her novels. In a talk for *The London Review Bookshop*,<sup>77</sup> interviewer Kishani Widyaratna asks,

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<sup>77</sup> In ‘Sally Rooney talks to Kishani Widyaratna about ‘Normal People.’ This interview took place on 2 May 2019, for *The London Review of Books* and is retrievable online from Youtube: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4jH\\_0rg46Es&t=411s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4jH_0rg46Es&t=411s) – Last accessed on 8 May 2020.

“How can man and woman be together? [...] How can we escape much more traditional modes? [In the novels,] there’s some of that negotiation of how can you break out [of] traditional relationships but also what mistakes might we make in trying to break out [of] this very traditional form.” Rooney replies, “Yeah, that is absolutely, I would say, almost *the* dominant question of everything that I’ve written so far. Um, like, how can people be together? That’s the main question that I’ve been asking. And I haven’t obviously come up with any answers, but that’s not my job.” This lack of answers is evident in the emotional disconnectedness of her characters from themselves and each other.

The repeated failures of the characters’ happy relationships result from their inability to speak clearly and consciously to one another, which ultimately derives from their Joycean unwillingness to be honest in confronting themselves, and their ensuing focus on control. A clear example is the story Frances writes about Bobbi without informing her: it is a ‘positive’ creative act, which gets recognized as it is published, but which ends up hurting their relationship. Similarly, Connell’s failing to reveal his relationship with Marianne—a ‘positive’ action—to their peers in secondary school because he fears their assessment promotes unnecessarily painful secrecy, and an excruciating lack of communication.

Rooney’s texts thus present hyper-articulate, educated characters defined by their acute analysis of the world and of people around them; yet those same characters attribute their ineffective communication with each other and their inability to reach equanimity and happiness to differences in social class and power status. For instance, Frances blames her lover Nick for their relational mishaps because he is a) a man b) an ‘adult’ c) wealthier than she. Rooney’s texts point to these power plays, and how individuals interact with them, as they feature series of monologues or dialogues between the characters on the topic:

I worried that if I did turn out to have a personality, it would be one of the unkind ones. Did I only worry about this question because as a woman I felt required to put the needs of others before my own? Was ‘kindness’ just another



term for submission in the term of conflict? These were the kind of things I wrote about in my diary as a teenager: as a feminist I have the right not to love anyone.<sup>78</sup>

In this extract Frances examines the forms of care and love and reasons about their moral values, which indicate an intellectualization perhaps adequate for teenagers but which does not evolve towards felt understanding. That evolution is impossible for these characters:

I just don't think it's possible to love more than one person, Camille said. I mean, with all your heart, really love them.

Did your parents have a favourite child? said Bobbi. That must have been hard for you. [...]

It's not really the same with children Camille said. Is it?

Well, it depends whether you believe in some kind of transhistorical concept of romantic love consistent across diverse cultures, said Bobbi. But I guess we all believe in silly things, don't we?<sup>79</sup>

According to Bobbi, romantic love is an illusion, and love more generally is fundamentally unfair and can be distributed in a quantifiable manner. This dismissal places love—especially romantic love—in a comfortably intellectualized box, as a kind of currency. As a 'positive feeling', love is consistently diminished by intellectual considerations or miscommunications. The characters' interactions then factually revolve around sex, emotional games, blame, and empty debates without ever evolving into actual care or love.

Both of Rooney's novels establish that shaking off Joyce's *Dubliners* view of Irishness is a daunting task. Through their narrative arcs, *Conversations With Friends* and *Normal People* echo some situations from *Dubliners*. Whereas 'Eveline' displays a failure to move and to leave the country, Marianne goes on Erasmus alone in *Normal People*, as if to counter this reticence, but she hates it. She later finds the same painful enclosure in Sweden she had before leaving Ireland, notably because this sense of enclosure is within her:

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<sup>78</sup> *Conversations With Friends*, p. 176.

<sup>79</sup> *Conversations With Friends*, p. 253.

Since she arrived here in Sweden, but particularly since the beginning of the game, people have seemed to her like coloured paper shapes, not real at all. At times a person will make eye contact with Marianne, a bus conductor or someone looking for change, and she'll be shocked briefly into the realisation that this is in fact her life, that she is actually visible to other people.<sup>80</sup>

Marianne's realizations imply that she knows better than to believe that she holds no sway over her life, and that Irish tropes follow her despite her exile from Ireland. Much like Eveline, seeing a situation for what it is and has been does not prevent her from re-enacting it. In *Dubliners*, Eveline is aware that her mother before her was confined by forms of paralysis and despair: "As she mused the pitiful vision of her mother's life laid its spell on the very quick of her being – that life of commonplace sacrifices closing in final craziness" (41). And yet in the space of the story, she too displays the inevitability of 'a life of commonplace sacrifices and final craziness.' As she is about to make a choice at the end of *Normal People*, Marianne repeats a similarly paralyzed behavior: she does not even consider the possibility of going with Connell when he is presented with a literary scholarship in the United States, evading it and concluding the novel with positive thinking: "I'll always be there. You know that" (266).

Joyce's 'After the Race' shows Jimmy, a young college student who tries to fit in a society of wealthier friends in order to impress members of his former social circles: "Rapid motion through space elates one; so does notoriety; so does the possession of money. These were three good reasons for Jimmy's excitement. He had been seen by many of his friends that day in the company of these Continentals" (46). The futility of Jimmy's elation is all the more crushing as by the end of the story, he loses all three reasons for excitement. On the other hand, Rooney's characters are rather stationary; in turn aspiring to fit in and be popular, and despising other people; and seemingly dismissive of monetary considerations—all characters claim to be either Marxists or Communists, but at least half of them are wealthy

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<sup>80</sup> *Normal People*, p. 191.

and all are, or are positioning themselves to become, part of the cultural and social establishment. The characters' only elations come from intellectual debates and romance. Although they might not be as futile as Jimmy in *Dubliners*, their verbal expressions of resistance against the establishment are given the lie by their determination to be part of it. Even their political stances are little more than intellectual posturing.

'A Painful Case' offers another point of comparison. It deals with the connection between two people and how the inability to empathize and see beyond oneself can result in causing other people profound suffering. Both novels by Rooney narrate such events, but instead of showing the cruelty of the characters' actions, the stories provide exculpatory contexts for their actions. In fact, much like Mr. Duffy who repeats "he was an outcast from life's feast" (130-131), Rooney's characters often indulge in self-pity, as Frances does when dwelling on her endometriosis:

I realised my life would be full of mundane physical suffering, and that there was nothing special about it. Suffering wouldn't make me special, and pretending not to suffer wouldn't make me special. Talking about it, or even writing about it, would not transform the suffering into something useful. Nothing would.<sup>81</sup>

The passage suggests that Frances is practicing a kind of clear-eyed humility in denying the specialness of her suffering, but she is actually abstracting and intellectualizing that suffering. She thinks out her 'feelings' rather than feeling anything. The moment exemplifies how the novels explore the dichotomy between normal and special, two terms equally vague, often conflating 'normal' with real and painful. 'Special' becomes a quality characters only attain in disassociating from and critiquing normalcy. The only way to be special, then, is through mastering one's normalcy—which for these characters entails refusing to feel what one doesn't want to feel, especially if it is rooted in one's all-too-normal past.

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<sup>81</sup> *Conversations With Friends*, p. 275.

In Rooney's novels, life is then non-special, painful; as phrased by Connell, "Life is the thing you bring with you inside your own head" (201). Hence an uneventful situation, with no 'drama', gets dramatized into something special by the characters' perspective. Life is polarized to extreme pleasure or extreme pain, and rather than being unfolded by the characters, it gets overly complex, fulfilling the characters' thirst for drama. They feel alive because they are in pain—which sounds special, not normal. 'Normal' is vacuous; the characters have an attraction-repulsion relationship with the 'normal' which they associate with being more or less unconscious. The characters seem to define it as not as clever, distanced, and critical and complicated as they, even though they choose unconsciousness when it comes to what they do not want to feel, which is rooted in their childhoods and would make them too 'normal' in the sense of ordinary.

Gradually the waiting began to feel less like waiting and more like this was simply what life was: the distracting tasks undertaken while the thing you are waiting for continues not to happen.<sup>82</sup>

Life is presented as an intellectual experience, and as an endless waiting with no revelations, no resolution, and no answer: in short, no teleology. This accounts for the novels' take on open endings, but also for the dismissal of religious experience in the narratives. In *Conversations With Friends*, Frances collapses in a church out of pain from her endometriosis cramps. Despite a brief, faltering effort at prayer, what she later refers to as a spiritual experience turns out to be a feeling of heightened connectedness with others' labor:

The pain kicked against my spine, radiating up into my skull and making my eyes water. I'm praying, I thought. I'm actually sitting here praying for God to help me. I was. Please help me, I thought. Please. I knew that there were rules about this, that you had to believe in a divine ordering principle before you could appeal to it for anything, and I didn't believe. But I make an effort, I thought. I love my fellow human beings. Or do I? [...] Instead of gigantic thought, I tried to focus on something small, the smallest thing I could think of. Someone made this pew I'm sitting on, I thought. Someone sanded the wood

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<sup>82</sup> *Conversations With Friends*, p. 289.

and varnished it. Someone carried it into the church. Someone laid the tiles on the floor, someone fitted the windows. Each brick was placed by human hands, each hinge fitted on each door, every road surface outside, every bulb in every streetlight. And even things built by machines were really built by human beings, who built the machines initially. And human beings themselves, made by other humans, struggling to create happy children and families. Me, all the clothing I wear, all the language I know. Who put me here in this church, thinking these thoughts? Other people, some I know very well and others I have never met.<sup>83</sup>

In this 'revelation', Frances bargains the terms of her relationship with the spiritual, arguing that she makes an effort to consider other humans. She redefines the divine as human, with all things stemming from other human beings' labor and all people being themselves produced by other humans. Her moment of faith, therefore, becomes instantly secularized and made mundane.

The reader knows Frances has long disliked Church, for she states earlier,

My mother had taken me to Mass every Sunday until I was fourteen, but she didn't believe in God and treated Mass as a social ritual in advance of which she made me wash my hair. As it turned out I found a lot of what [Jesus] said cryptic and even disagreeable. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken away from him, I didn't like that, though I also wasn't sure I fully understood it.<sup>84</sup>

She persists in this thinking, controlling her thoughts and assessing the environment she is in based on the personal relations involved in the commodities surrounding her. Further on, she even performs a confession on herself, filled with anaphoric structures that grant it a ritual aspect:

Do I sometimes hurt and harm myself, do I abuse the unearned culture privilege of whiteness, do I take the labour of others for granted, have I sometimes exploited a reductive iteration of gender theory to avoid serious moral engagement, do I have a troubled relationship with my body, yes. Do I want to be free of pain and therefore demand that others also live free of pain, the pain which is mine and therefore also theirs, yes, yes.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> *Conversations With Friends*, p. 294.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid*, p. 174.

<sup>85</sup> *Conversations With Friends*, p. 295. This passage is reminiscent of Molly's monologue in Joyce's *Ulysses*.

The moment of fake spirituality passes and is attributed to delirium arising from Frances' weak physical state. Rooney uses the voice of her narrator to portray a disenchanting youth who has no belief—in fact, she has a similar approach to religion as shown in Joyce's 'Grace', where a similarly empty spirituality prevails. Frances narrates a return to mundane realities at the end of the passage:

My experience of spiritual awakening has deserted me. I stopped on the Centra on the way home, bought myself two packets of instant noodles and a boxed chocolate cake, and completed the walk slowly and carefully, one foot in front of the other.<sup>86</sup>

As consolation for her desertion, Frances falls back literally and figuratively on consumption, as if pursuing a kind of self-soothing secular Eucharist. Mr. Kernan in *Dubliners* does not have a spiritual revelation either but rather acknowledges he could use some religion; however, he returns to normalcy and futility within the church itself by “present[ing] an attentive face” (197).

The Joycean tropes of paralysis, despair, and futility are present in Rooney's novels, though in slightly altered forms. *Normal People* and *Conversations with Friends* reveal how, though globalization may have transformed the overarching ethos of Irish society, opening it to the possibilities but also to the social and economic dysfunctions of the contemporary West, the more intimate and inward forms of confinement that constrain the lives of the Irish have hardly changed in a century. By briefly touching on Irish societal issues rather than showing their intrinsic logic or displaying characters truly dealing with them—either opposing them or actually finding solutions to such problems—Rooney's characters affect a form of observant superiority, assuming it is enough to simply point out an injustice without

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This repetition of 'yes' is reminiscent of the famous passage from Molly's monologue in Joyce's *Ulysses* where she says “and yes I said yes I will Yes” (*Ulysses*, p. 732).

<sup>86</sup> *Conversations With Friends*, p. 295.

doing the work of challenging it. They love to diagnose the problems with Ireland, global neoliberalism, patriarchy, etc., but they nonetheless buy into it all—literally as they consume goods, and figuratively as they perform similar consumption behaviors on more intimate levels. The characters only find solace or fulfillment in romantic entanglements and sexual intimacy. This confined form of fulfillment reveals a defensive posture within a hostile environment, and an unwillingness to take the risk to affirm anything.

So when Frances says in *Conversations With Friends* that “to love someone under capitalism you have to love everyone” (298), she implies not that everyone is fundamentally human and deserves love, but that capitalism’s relentless homogenizing makes everyone the same. The result of this consideration is that she is neither able to love nor to hate anyone, and she certainly does not try to counter capitalism—either as ingrained in her set of values or more largely within society. Frances’ remark is yet another strategy for refusing to feel and refusing to love.

### **c. Language, Rationally Dissecting Society**

Rooney, like Joyce, uses a sparse style, but at a lower register, with a more directly colloquial feel. The texts present themselves as simple reports, close to the characters’ more or less realistic accounts of their experiences. There is to a certain extent an approach of minimalist neutrality to the style of both authors, within their larger literary contexts, which is reminiscent of Barthesian *‘écriture blanche.’*<sup>87</sup> For prose that features such conversational discourse, however, Rooney uses very few Irish colloquialisms, and no Irish<sup>88</sup> words—with barely an attempt at the Irish ‘like’—to convey Hibernian English in written speech. This demonstrates Rooney’s effort to reach out farther than the limits of Ireland. When Frances

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<sup>87</sup> BARTHES Roland, *Le Degré Zéro de l’Écriture*, Paris: Seuil, 1953, 1972.

<sup>88</sup> That is, Gaelic language.

wonders in *Conversations With Friends* if her vowels sound pretentious (96) or Connell gets teased in *Normal People* for his tough Sligo accent (165), it comes as a surprise to the reader, especially as those habits have never been evident in the dialogue. Marianne's brother Alan uses more colloquially Irish language such as "riding" to refer to sex, "knacker" to refer to a person of low class, or "yourself" replacing the more common object pronoun 'you'— all of which makes Alan more Irish. Because he is the foremost abuser in *Normal People*, his language becomes the language of abuse. Irishness then becomes associated with abuse. This is then consistent with the protagonists' desire to shed their 'Irishness' by dissociating from and not confronting their past traumas, and hiding from them in intellectual and romantic or sexual games.

In removing quotation marks or inverted commas from all her narratives, Rooney shapes her text in consistent blocks, blurring the distance between narrators and characters. She also follows a similar process to that of Joyce, whose initial design for *Dubliners* was to get rid of the conventional inverted commas for dialogues and to place them instead in between dashes, as has been mentioned earlier in this study, in the style of French dialogues but with more enclosure—an idea which he could only fully achieve for the first publication with *Ulysses*. Rooney, on the other hand, uses little punctuation indicating the dialogues, but the verbs commonly used for them are still present. The overwhelming prevalence of dialogues in her texts enables Rooney to be a discreet author whose narrators are equally unobtrusive.

In stripping her language of most embellishment, only to disrupt her texts occasionally with unexpected metaphors and images, Rooney emulates Joyce's technique while suggesting that he did not go far enough in the stripping process, that he was still too literary to be truthful. Her refusal of literariness, of playing with the aesthetics of language, is reflected in form and content—her characters Frances and Connell are both young writers and yet no



language play prompts their interactions. Rooney's insistence on her novels being conventional seems to indicate that, unlike Joyce, she is self-consciously discarding obvious artifice and does not seek to disrupt the literary stage; yet without necessarily calling it disruption, her evident goal remains to have an eminent position at least on the bookselling stage. One of Sally Rooney's goals is to be successful—her autobiographical essay 'Even if You Beat Me,' in which she traces her past as a European competitive debate champion in university, is edifying in terms of goals she sets for herself: "I don't need to make people feel comfortable. In the end, it was me. It may not mean anything to anyone else, but it doesn't have to – that's the point. I was number one. Like Fast Eddie, I'm the best there is. And even if you beat me, I'm still the best."<sup>89</sup> Rooney is seeking performance, whether as a debater or as a novelist—hence the presence of punchlines in both novels.

In choosing to tell her stories in mostly simple sentences, Rooney creates an atmosphere of simple and therefore believable content. This is evident in the incipit of *Normal People*:

Marianne answers the door when Connell rings the bell. She's still wearing her school uniform, but she's taken off the sweater, so it's just the blouse and skirt, and she has no shoes on, only tights.

Oh, hey, he says.

Come on in.

She turns and walks down the hall. He follows her, closing the door behind him.<sup>90</sup>

The narrative starts *in medias res*, just as with Joyce. However there is little action aside from the answering of the door. Symbolically, it is a stock image—a door opening for a beginning. Marianne walking away and Connell following her is mirrored throughout the story. Such simplicity makes for a quick read—*Conversations With Friends* and *Normal People* have both been called 'page-turners.' This strongly differs from *Dubliners*, which, although Joyce's

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<sup>89</sup> ROONEY Sally, 'Even If You Beat Me', *The Dublin Review* n°58, Spring 2015. Retrievable online from <https://thedublinreview.com/article/even-if-you-beat-me/> — Last accessed on 8 May 2020.

<sup>90</sup> *Normal People*, p. 1.

most accessible book, is still so rich that readers have had to reflect upon it for over a century.<sup>91</sup>

In seeking to represent experiences as closely as possible, Rooney made different choices for each novel. *Conversations With Friends* is narrated in the first person, creating a closeness of voice interrupted with emails and Facebook conversations, presented in a different font, and with different spacing. *Normal People* offers another approach: each chapter alternately follows one of the two main characters. There is no stream of consciousness—which is a psychological process more than a literary one but can be rendered by literature—but a great deal of free indirect discourse and present-tense narration, which describe the immediate environment both mental and physical, and the few actions, as the narrator perceives them. Both novels strive for immediacy. The narrator of *Normal People* presents Marianne and Connell as having similar voices, lending the narration a schizophrenic quality. The result has been hailed as a good account of what being adolescent feels like; it is something which numerous readers have recognized and identified in their own experiences. Joyce, on the other hand, changed the narratorial voice across the stories in *Dubliners*, to represent a variety of characters and points of views. *Dubliners* presents “straight narrative, dialogue, free and direct discourse, indirect discourse, interior monologue”<sup>92</sup> that all account for the different characterizations that the stories foreground.

The characters in Rooney’s novels are readers themselves, so it is worth looking into their own approach to literary experiences. Jane Austen’s *Emma* is described as “[c]onfusing and awing” for Connell, indicating with a genuine response that he at least allows himself to

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<sup>91</sup> These considerations on Rooney’s and Joyce’s texts are a combination and summary of mundane people’s reviews—that is, not literary scholars—on the online reading platform Goodreads.

<sup>92</sup> BAECHLER Lea, ‘Voices of Unexpected Lyricism in Two “Dubliners” Stories,’ *James Joyce Quarterly*, vol. 28, No. 2, Dubliners Issue (Winter 1991), pp. 361-376.

feel vicariously through reading—while Frances has a much more elitist and differentiating approach:

Afterwards I lay on my side with *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* propped half-open on the pillow beside me. Occasionally I lifted a finger to turn the page and allowed the heavy and confusing syntax to drift down through my eyes and into my brain like fluid. I'm bettering myself, I thought. I'm going to become so smart that no one will understand me.<sup>93</sup>

Frances adopts the adolescent practice of confusing big words and concepts with intelligence, that being so convoluted as to be unintelligible makes one smarter than everyone else and that no one will want to challenge that intelligence for fear of being exposed as stupid. Later, she alternates between reading George Eliot's *Middlemarch* and the New Testament, all the while discovering the seriousness of her endometriosis. Reading may be seen as a form of resilience, but it more importantly serves as an elitist process of acquiring cultural capital that renders consumers of books intellectually and morally superior, even without the rigor of literary analysis. In other words, with the disputable exception of Connell, Rooney's characters never seem to study literature in depth, only imitate it superficially, to attain cultural and therefore moral superiority.

Rooney analyses, diagnoses, and her writing is simple and efficient. It uses language that dissects and suggests—not merely through metaphors and symbolism but through invoking concepts that are supposedly known quantities, such as normalcy or love. The novels' combination of clever social critique by the characters with inconclusive conclusions suggests that they enact their characters' unwillingness to do what is necessary to achieve resolution. On the other hand, and more convincingly, that very move could be seen as realistic—why manufacture resolutions for characters that have been written as being unwilling to get there yet?

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<sup>93</sup> *Conversations With Friends*, p. 94.

#### d. 'Revelations' of Time and Space

The characters from *Dubliners*—inspired by Joyce's real-life friends and acquaintances—will come back throughout his career consistently. This consistency is common among authors; Rooney herself wrote two short stories about Marianne and Connell, for instance (of which only one made it to publication), before she made them into the main characters of the *Normal People*. While returning to these characters makes sense, replacing them would be equally reasonable. In *Finnegans Wake*, Joyce writes: "Yet is no body present here which was not there before. Only is order othered. Nought is nulled."<sup>94</sup> It matters not who the individuals present are: they fill a role more than a destiny. 'Everyone' and 'no one' is ultimately the same; this is a lesson that Joyce also promotes in *Dubliners* and his other writings. In short, the larger societal structures of imprisonment have changed since 1914, but the intimate forms of confinement and despair have not; the combination of the two affect characters indiscriminately.

Rooney's novels, much like Joyce's, feature themes of childhood revolving round memories, but also present other themes related to the stages of life, from adolescence to adulthood to old age. These themes come together in the timeline chosen by Rooney to disclose the narratives. While both *Conversations With Friends* and *Normal People* are rather linear, Rooney chooses to add ellipses to meet the characters only at times of apparent change. In the Oprah interview, Rooney reveals the game she played with herself while writing *Normal People*:

Interviewer: "She has never believed herself fit to be loved by any person. But now she has a new life, of which this is the first moment, and even after many years have passed she will still think: Yes, that was it, the beginning of my life." Is that the kind of big moment you're talking about?

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<sup>94</sup> JOYCE James, *Finnegans Wake*, New York: The Viking Press, 1960, p. 613.

Rooney: Yes, that was a big deal. I thought, “When I next meet them, six months later or a year later, are they still gonna be interesting? What can I do to ensure they're still interesting to me?” It was like a game that I was playing to see how long I could keep it interesting for myself. I kept meeting them at junctures where there was still something there worth exploring.<sup>95</sup>

The timeline of the narratives shows a structural logic. For instance, *Normal People* shows dates at the beginning of each chapter, and an indication of how the date relates to the one prior (five minutes later, three months later, etc.). But each chapter also contains flashbacks, which break-up the present-tense narration. So although *Normal People* is not a collection of short stories like *Dubliners*, there is still something episodic about the novel. Whether this stylistic choice was made intentionally to render the novel adaptable to the screen is not clear, but it nonetheless gives the story a televisual quality that would appeal to a young, media-savvy audience. In *Conversations With Friends*, Rooney’s approach is more conventional in that the narrative is purely chronological. *Normal People* is currently being filmed as a series for the BBC, and *Conversations With Friends* has been commissioned, too.

The narratives’ naming of streets and places is both familiar and unsettling; dropped in casually, as if every reader knows them, they provide a sense of one’s position only if one already knows the city. Of course, in context it does not matter much whether or not the reader’s mental representation of Dublin is accurate. But for someone acquainted with Dublin—one of the smallest capitals of Europe—it is visually telling. So it can give either the impression of expertise and experience of the place, whether it is actually known to the reader or not, or a sense of romantic melancholy, blurring the limits between what is real and what is not. In *Normal People*, Connell and his girlfriend Helen meet Marianne at ‘random’ on Nassau Street, which is very close to Trinity College. *Introduction to Joyce* reminds us: “On

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<sup>95</sup> HART Michelle, ‘Sally Rooney Gets Real About *Normal People*, her New Novel—and Finding Literary Stardom’ *O, The Oprah Magazine*, 18 April 2019. Retrievable online from: <https://www.oprahmag.com/entertainment/books/a27182301/sally-rooney-normal-people-interview/> – Last accessed on 8 May 2020.

10 June 1904, James Joyce was walking along Nassau Street, when a beautiful young woman caught his attention. Her name was Nora Barnacle, a young Galway girl who worked as a chambermaid in the nearby Finn's Hotel."<sup>96</sup> In using places charged with history, Rooney plays on both fronts: conveying a specific image to those in the know, and giving an impression of precision to readers unfamiliar with Irish literary history.

Still, Rooney's naming of streets remains more effaced than Joyce's in *Dubliners*. Dublin appears more mysterious and imaginative than in Joyce. The naming of streets guides the reader both not only geographically but also socially: a neighborhood's name in Dublin reveals the background of its inhabitants. However, little is done with these names and districts. To a reader unfamiliar with Dublin, it can be more confusing than anything. It gives the impression that the narrators know where they are, and can deliver clear judgments about what those locations mean, navigating Dublin geography and the innate pettiness of Irish society at the same time. Except for those in Dublin, there are no other street names in Rooney's description of Ireland. Dublin appears an exotic place, while the towns in the countryside are limited to names on a roadmap, with only one nightclub named in *Normal People*.

The countryside then appears either as an indeterminate place of emptiness, or a place of spite considering that all the predetermining unhealthy family issues come from there. For instance, in *Conversations With Friends*, Frances' father gives her a suicidal phone call in the middle of the night, and she ignores the pain and trouble it causes her—which results in her passing this hurt forward, causing an argument with her lover Nick, which leads to their breaking up over the phone. Phone calls, being virtual and not bound by geography, blur the notions of location and allow for the father's countryside emptiness and despair to invade the urban milieu of Frances. This dark, shapeless hinterland of the country suggests the

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<sup>96</sup> NORRIS, David, and Carl FLINT, *Introducing Joyce*, New York: Totem Books, 1994, p. 46.

unconscious, the individual repressed and denied aspects of at least some of the characters—and the collective unconscious of Ireland as a whole. The countryside contains and perpetuates the histories characters want to leave behind and have convinced themselves they have transcended. It is emblematic of the characters' failure to entirely escape a dark, *Dubliners*-esque Irishness; and it is yet another example of Rooney's characters' refusal to feel.

The novels do not openly pay a tribute to *Dubliners*. Arguably, it could be because of an anxiety of influence as defined by Harold Bloom,<sup>97</sup> where the deliberate elision of literary history from Rooney's novels is a flagrant sign of her rejection of the tradition; or it could be because there is a sense of distrust, a sense that times have changed and that the Irish are no longer mired in misery. In any case, any act of resistance against a literary predecessor or tradition cannot be performed without leaning on that predecessor. Rooney's novels measure themselves against the Joycean diagnosis, and effectively revise it for the millennial generation.

*Conversations With Friends* and *Normal People*'s have open endings. Both novels, even stylistically, finish with a comma rather than a full stop. Rooney refuses to conclude or resolve anything. This gives the impression of movement and continuity of the components of the novel itself, but actually there is as much paralysis and ineffectiveness as in *Dubliners*' 'Eveline' or 'Araby'. There is no resolution, and there is no recognition by the characters of the absence of resolution. This makes problematic the notion of coming of age in the characters' arcs. There is a slight change in discourse, for in *Normal People* the characters move from a secondary school speech to a level of literacy and education when speaking, due to their academic education. But the relationships are still on edge. And one must look at their meaning—both in relation to the incipit of the novels, which forecasts and answers the ending

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<sup>97</sup> BLOOM Harold, *The Anxiety of Influence: a Theory of Poetry*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973.

in a continuous flow, as if the totality of the novel could be skipped just to read those opening and closing sentences; and also in relation to the epigraphs, which set the tone for the novels.

*Conversations With Friends*' epigraph is a line from American poet Frank O'Hara and reads: "In times of crisis, we must decide again and again whom we love."<sup>98</sup> The poem from which O'Hara's line is extracted does not deal with personal or romantic love at all; it talks about love as commodity, love as consumable product, love as distraction and entertainment. How Rooney interprets the term 'crisis' is left to interpretation—it can be as much a moral crisis or turning point as it can be a reference to the 2008 financial crisis. Frances' final line, "Come and get me" (321), echoes this epigraph when she gives in to her wish to see Nick at the very end of the novel, choosing 'again and again' to repeat the process. In spite of Nick being married, and in spite of her having a girlfriend (or at least a sort of romantic relationship), Frances seems to go back to their unbalanced affair. She chooses whom she loves, but she also chooses to treat whom she loves in a certain way. When using 'giving in' and with knowledge of their whole history, the nature of the relationship seems like passion, lust, and a quest for pleasure rather than love.

*Normal People*'s epigraph is a quote from George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*: "It is one of the secrets in that change of mental poise which has been fitly named conversation, that to many among us neither heaven nor earth has any revelation till some personality touches theirs with a peculiar influence, subduing them into receptiveness."<sup>99</sup> There seems to be a direct connection between opening and ending, as readers have watched Marianne and Connell in constant 'change of mental poise' over the novel and involved in what is presented as a relationship of 'peculiar influence.' Marianne encourages Connell to go pursue his degree overseas, in an attempt to show that she has changed and is more independent and

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<sup>98</sup> Extracted from the poem 'To the Film Industry in Crisis' by Frank O'Hara.

<sup>99</sup> ELIOT George, *Daniel Deronda*, London: Penguin Books, 1995.



supportive, when she was seen as dependent on and supported by their relationship at the beginning of the novel. The reader is tempted to believe that there has been an evolution for Marianne. But the ending feels more like an escape and a foreseeable failure of their approach to romantic love. Rooney's short story 'At the Clinic', published in 2016 in *The White Review*,<sup>100</sup> actually shows us a glimpse of what happens next. Although written before *Normal People*, it shows Marianne and Connell several years after the plot has taken place, in their mid to late twenties. Nothing has changed. Their relationship is still complicated—they are not a couple but friends having sex—they still believe in the specialness of the other, and they are still insecure. As a short story, 'At the Clinic' provides little background, yet sex remains the sole indicator of intimacy and an obsession of theirs. They still depend on one another: "Connell is driving her to the clinic because he's her only friend with a car, and also the only person in whom she confides about distasteful medical conditions like impacted teeth. He sometimes drives her to the doctor's office when she needs antibiotics for urinary tract infections, which is often" (2). Based on the short story, we can infer that the novel's ending does not show any real change in Marianne, but rather portrays a continuation of her and other characters' indecisiveness. Despite her apparent efforts to break from the Joycean tradition, Rooney unwittingly ends up presenting the same paralysis throughout the book, albeit in a slightly different form. The question of Marianne and Connell's relationship sustains interest in readers who are merely looking for entertainment, but indicates not only that their relationship is actually shallow, but also that *Normal People* presents a false answer to the characters' contemporary predicament.

From *Dubliners* to Rooney's novels, a two-tier structure of imprisonment remains. Sally Rooney's characters are much more aware of the ideological and economic machinery that runs their public life than Joyce's characters; however they remain partially blind to how

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<sup>100</sup> ROONEY Sally, 'At the Clinic' *The White Review*, n°18, September 2016. Retrievable online, for subscribers only, from: <http://www.thewhitereview.org/issue/issue-no-18/>

much this imprisonment infects their internal machinery, only isolating class. Besides, the familial level of abuse and trauma passed on from one generation to the next has not changed in the course of a century; and Rooney's characters abstract and intellectualize their emotionality in order to avoid it. They are then confined in their sole fulfillment, the intimacy between two people, and remain run by the two-tier machinery above them and inside them.

### 3. A Depiction of Millennials' Ireland as Superficial

Rooney's *Conversations With Friends* and *Normal People* present a contemporary Ireland superficialized and polished by globalization. At the same time, the novels reveal both the insubstantiality of this globalized Ireland and the toxic undercurrents Joyce exposed in *Dubliners*, still flowing a century later beneath the glossy veneers of contemporary Dublin. Rooney's characters consistently fail to see the extent to which their own evasions keep them confined.

#### a. Normalcy

'Normal' in *Conversations With Friends* and *Normal People* applies to societal norms, opposes 'abnormal' and 'extraordinary', and plays with dynamics of either fitting in or being excluded from the community that defines the norm. Normal can interchangeably mean ordinary, usual, average, common, regular, typical, standard, customary, habitual, or natural. But 'normal' also calls for personal interpretations of the norm. In aiming her novels at the notion of normalcy, Rooney defines a vision of what normal is in the 21<sup>st</sup> century globalized society, in Ireland and beyond.

Indian writer Arundhati Roy discusses the role of literature in exposing truth through portrayal of the normal and the familiar:

Sometimes I feel—self-servingly perhaps, the way a surgeon has faith in surgery—that fiction is uniquely positioned to do this, because fiction has the capaciousness, the freedom and latitude, to hold out a universe of infinite complexity. Because every human is really a walking sheaf of identities—a Russian doll that contains identities within identities, each of which can be shuffled around, each of which may defy some and simultaneously comply with other “normal” conventions by which people are crudely and often cruelly defined, identified and organized... I'm not talking here of fiction as exposé, or

as the righter of social wrongs (pardon the pun). Nor do I mean fiction that is a disguised manifesto or is written to address a particular issue or subject. I mean fiction that attempts to recreate the universe of the familiar, but then makes visible what the Project of Unseeing seeks to conceal.<sup>101</sup>

Rooney has received praise for her ability to write about commonplace subjects, particularly those that are close to her own experiences. She presents various facets of the concepts of futility, normalcy, love, and idleness, ever-changing according to the situation she sets for her characters. ‘Normal’ is constantly shifting, subjectively definable at any given moment, with no stable, underlying reality.

Futility, which is one expression of paralysis for Joyce, is with Rooney neither as deep nor as embedded in darkness, and it has become mainstream or ‘normal’. At the opening of *Normal People*, Rooney makes an uncomfortable peer pressure the accepted norm for Connell, which he escapes when he is with Marianne:

He could tell her anything about himself, even weird things, and she would never repeat them, he knows that. Being alone with her is like opening a door away from normal life and then closing it behind him.<sup>102</sup>

The characters’ relationship is characterized as a departure from normal life, which is then suggested to oppose a notion of ‘weird.’ For the young Connell in this extract, secrecy and shame, which are deeply ingrained in Irish identity and in collective, specifically Catholic, imagery, do not appear suffocating, but rather liberating. Their notions of intimacy are bound up in secrecy and shame. The secret and shameful relationship, insulated from the gaze of the world, feels like release.

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<sup>101</sup> Arundhati Roy, ‘The Graveyard Talks Back – Fiction in the Time of Fake News,’ in the 2020 Clark Lecture for Trinity College, Cambridge <https://lithub.com/the-graveyard-talks-back-arundhati-roy-on-fiction-in-the-time-of-fake-news/?fbclid=IwAR0kR969bKjSagZT6wYhZTP6kmpaxj7ZqzcnXJMVCFeoL-7HXI5vJFZWBI> – Last accessed on 8 May 2020.

<sup>102</sup> *Normal People*, pp. 6–7.

Normalcy is linked to conformity, and for all the main characters it is a deep mimetic need which shifts the focus of social relations. In exploring the ‘normal,’ Rooney delves into the false beliefs of ‘special’ and extraordinary. Rather than confront one’s inability or unconscious refusal to participate in society, Rooney’s characters account for their seclusion with made up ‘specialness:’

When I couldn’t make friends as a child, I fantasised that I was smarter than all my teachers, smarter than any other student who had been in the school before, a genius hidden among normal people.<sup>103</sup>

In *Conversations With Friends*, a reversed process goes on: Frances sees herself as special and projects a grandiloquent specialness on all the people she admires—she could not possibly appreciate ‘normal’ people and fails to see that the people she admires are in fact commonplace. Connell believes he is ‘normal’ until he meets Marianne. She is presented in turn as abnormal, special, or extraordinary. Connell sometimes acts as if she had infected him with her abnormality, as a form of contagion. Both of them, alternately, aspire to belong with ‘normal’. This futile craving often becomes an excuse for their violent and disrespectful attitudes towards one another.

Frances is possibly the least genuine character of Rooney’s novels: her coping strategy consists in manipulating her way through social interactions. The same goes for interactions with her mother, whom she thus prevents from being close. Habitual dishonesty serves as an emotional barrier: “She said I was tanned. I let a few split hair fall from my fingers to the kitchen floor and said: oh, am I? I knew I was” (163). To perform her program of deceptions, Frances adopts a futile categorization of people—people from the opposite sex, people who have money, people who have power, people who are not as clever as she, to name a few—much like an inexperienced child who does not know that putting people into boxes is

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<sup>103</sup> *Conversations With Friends*, p. 34.

reductive, but who does so as a coping mechanism. Frances's appreciation of what is 'normal' is fruitless: it implies judging and assessing other people's value, not necessarily based on factual information but rather on her projections onto them. In assigning value to humans, she participates in the capitalist society which she believes she opposes.

In both novels, the main characters do not appear to belong with 'everyday people.' Rather, they are part of the middle class, much like Rooney herself, educated and rather well-off. Although they occasionally struggle to make ends meet, the characters benefit from stable housing situations through the grant system in *Normal People*, and through family in *Conversations With Friends*, as displayed when Nick pays a visit to Frances in her flat:

I said my dad's brother owned it and he looked at me and said: oh, you little trust fund baby. You didn't tell me your family had property in the Liberties.<sup>104</sup>

These characters make crucial mistakes of assessment and assumption, and display a superficiality in terms of observation, whether of physique, personality, or social level, and also in terms of behavior. The 600 hundred pages of Rooney's two novels are fixed in their perspective on the same side of society.

Rooney's characters repeatedly question how one can aspire to normalcy. The characters explore aspects of normalcy, as much in terms of physical appearance as in terms of societal standards, and in terms of literary occupation and behavior. In their focus on relationships, the novels depict an apparent blurring of lines that in effect reinforces separations: the 'romantic dimension' remains always set aside from the rest of society even when feigned flexibility and openness prevent characters from labeling their relationships 'a couple.' This refusal of labels is, for Rooney's characters, an end in itself rather than a means toward clarity.

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<sup>104</sup> *Conversations With Friends*, p. 195.

In that regard, queer relationships—notably between Bobbi and Frances—are presented as normal, which in this day and age is not as groundbreaking as it was prior to the legalization of same-sex marriage in 2015 in Ireland. Yet despite the presence of this homosexual relationship, all of the numerous intercourse episodes in the narratives are heterosexual. *Conversations with Friends* thus equivocates on the normalcy of queerness: an important romantic relationship between two women is nominally treated as normal but its sexual dimension is elided, while heterosexual relationships give rise to numerous sex scenes.

To better seize the scope of ‘normal’ in Sally Rooney’s novels, we shall have a look at its opposites, ‘abnormal’ and ‘extraordinary’. Abnormal, which carries a weight of negative connotation, can span from the abnormal contained within the usual—in other words the ‘normal’ abnormalities—to destructive inhumanity. Because of its constancy throughout the novels, the abnormal becomes part of Rooney’s norm, but it is presented as an undesirable difference from the norm—unlike in *Dubliners*, where the judgment of whether a situation is desirable or not is left to the reader. Mundane abnormality is reflected in the relation to an absent or distant parent, in the unbalanced and significantly unhealthy family, in the fights that ensue. When the fights result in physical or psychological violence, such as the episode where Marianne’s brother Alan breaks her nose on a door, the abnormal becomes inhumane. What Rooney does in foregrounding characters immersed in these abnormal social settings is a form of banalization of this logic of abnormality. Violence is, in fact, normal. It is depicted as having direct causal relationship with the characters’ impaired ability to function as social beings. But in making that dynamic exculpatory, the novels ironically participate in their characters’ evasion of responsibility for their emotional dysfunction. For example, Marianne’s attraction to BDSM is justified as an expression of the inner beliefs and considerations which are shared at the beginning of the novel: that she is not fit to be loved.

She has never believed herself fit to be loved by any person. But now she has a new life, of which this is the first moment, and even after many years have passed she will still think: Yes, that was it, the beginning of my life.<sup>105</sup>

Because abnormality is the norm in her family—a violent dead father, a dissociative mother, and a violent much-alive brother—Marianne attempts to ‘normalize’ her life experiences by introducing a form of pain and imbalance into the rapport of emotional and physical intimacy, which results in her being physically hurt during intercourse. Frances also seeks out violence toward herself, even though her body is already in pain with endometriosis: she states “I towelled my skin off properly and blow-dried my hair until it crackled. Then I reached for the soft part on the inside of my left elbow and pinched it so tightly between my thumbnail and forefinger that I tore the skin open. That was it. It was over then. It was all going to be okay” (171) and further on, “I wanted to hurt myself again, in order to feel returned to the safety of my physical body” (182). In this form of emotional confinement, the characters actively pursue a continuity of their abnormally hurtful milieus, which are emotionally familiar and therefore, in a way, normal.

This conflation, or confusion, of normal and abnormal also has a wider moral dimension. Characters in both novels challenge the prevailing morals—or what are presented as the prevailing morals—from the same angle of relationships. In *Conversations With Friends* notably, the extramarital affair between married Nick and otherwise committed Frances is central to the story. The last chapter of the book, where after a long silence the two pick up the affair from where they left it, shows that maintaining this imbalance is ultimately of central importance. While Frances is herself ‘the other woman’, she comes to see Nick’s wife from a reversed position, giving way to scenes of jealousy and anger:

In my anger I even began searching my emails and texts for ‘evidence’ of our affair, which consisted of few boring logistical messages about when he would

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<sup>105</sup> *Normal People*, p. 46.



be back in the house and what time I might arrive. There were no passionate declarations of love or sexually graphic text messages. This made sense, because the affair was conducted in real life and not online, but I felt robbed of something anyway.<sup>106</sup>

In this passage, adulterous Frances seeks the sensations of righteousness and drama, trying to mentally ‘get back’ at Melissa, the wife, by unearthing proof that Frances matters in the eyes of Nick. She acts as an outraged wife would; as if she has been wronged herself. Abnormality and moral indignation thus fuel one another.

Then there is the extraordinary, what is beyond the norm in supposedly positive and admirable ways. All of the main characters are presented as exceedingly beautiful in an inexplicable way and of course unbeknownst to them: Connell is very sporty and has a strong jawline, Marianne is diaphanous and mysterious. Frances is the moon to Bobbi the sun. Nick the actor is introduced as ridiculously handsome nearly every time he appears. Not only are the characters good-looking, but they are so in conventional, retrograde ways, participating in gendered stereotypes of the strong male and the mysterious or captivating female. Just as well, they are presented as amazingly talented, in spite of little or no demonstrated work ethic. Either the characters are geniuses, or the effort of nurturing intelligence is unnecessary. They are oblivious prodigies, complacent in their extraordinariness. They never have mentors but are rather self-taught experts. The only teacher mentioned by name, Miss Neary, is sexually offensive and tries (and manages) to lure or seduce Connell.

Such effortless attractiveness and accomplishment appear to extend to the characters’ remarkable articulateness. They appear preternaturally able to cognize and verbalize their emotions; but their assessments of their own and others’ felt experience are primarily intellectual and abstract, and fundamentally evasive in a manner recalling the underlying dishonesties of *Dubliners*. Extraordinariness itself is revealed as enabling self-deception on

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<sup>106</sup> *Conversations With Friends*, p. 94.

multiple levels—most importantly, an illusory self-awareness that is in fact disconnected from actual feeling, and which replaces empathy with calculative assessments of others.

Fittingly, then, none of the protagonists from *Conversations With Friends* and *Normal People* is able to or commits to defining what being ‘together’ means; the only relationship that gets labelled is the affair—a non-official relationship. While the characters defend this indecision as a refusal of labels, it reflects a deeper inability to integrate into community. With the exception of Connell, who is a team player in football, no character considers themselves as part of any group. Although she tries to be part of a group both in school and at college, Marianne never quite manages to feel at ease in the group, and struggles to form enduring friendships with individuals. Professionally, outside of school in their ‘natural habitat’ as writers or artists, or members of a family, the characters seem alone. This inability to be in community with others is clearly blamed on family dysfunction.

Romantic and sexual intimacy therefore becomes the characters’ chosen form of personal connection. We see mainly the romantic relationships of the protagonists, which become the silver lining of their experiences of isolation and despair. Love affairs of others remain largely absent; parents are left unrecovered from their past relationships; most friends do not have a girlfriend or boyfriend; and if it so happens that they do, their relationship is barely mentioned and presented as insubstantial.

Rooney’s characters are not lazy *per se*, but they often end up idle, not doing much, despite being pictured during formative and typically ‘active’ years of their lives. They are in school or at university, but the content of the courses never appears as central to their lives. In this regard, their actions and attitudes contrast sharply with the focus and tenacity of millennial characters in other recent bestsellers in Ireland, such as Tara Westover’s memoir

*Educated*.<sup>107</sup> There is also a certain pride in idleness; the idea that acting idle means one can afford it. When Frances is left alone by everyone in *Conversations With Friends*, she fantasizes meeting Bobbi at random, and states, “My overriding fear was that she would come into the sandwich shop where I worked and see that I have a job. [...] I was ashamed at the idea that Bobbi might come into the sandwich shop and see for herself how deluded I had been” (290). This is class-related; much like the representation of aristocrats in 19<sup>th</sup> century cultural pieces depicted them as able to enjoy the luxury of idleness. Rooney’s novels depict a globalized Ireland in which social mobility is real but class still exists, and money is the index of status.

### **b. Individual Agency in Rooney’s Novels**

Agency is the ability to act or intervene and produce effect according to a set of rules. Frances, Marianne, and Connell, although they are the normal people whose experiences are the subject of Rooney’s books, are presented as disconnected from the norm. In order to function, they seek to create their own norms through relationships.<sup>108</sup>

In an interview with Northern-Irish literary and cultural magazine *Tangerine*,<sup>109</sup>

Rooney says:

[...] What might disappoint readers about the book is that they might want a conventional hero’s journey where Frances undergoes certain experiences, learns something, then comes out a different person. That’s not really what the book is trying to do, I don’t think. It’s more about developing meaningful inter-relationships within a group, or within a community, or a family, or a friendship. I think it’s very true that if Frances were to have a diary, it would

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<sup>107</sup> WESTOWER Tara, *Educated*, London: Windmill Books, 2018.

<sup>108</sup> Relationships, as a word, is composed of the basis ‘relation’ and the suffix ‘-ship’, which sends back to its etymology. The suffixes -ship, -scape, which are from the same family, send back to an action in the making, in the shaping. This questions the notion of what the concepts of friendship and love are to the characters and by extension to Rooney.

<sup>109</sup> NOLAN Michael, ‘An Interview With Sally Rooney,’ *Tangerine*, issue 3, Autumn 2017. Retrievable online from <https://thetangerinemagazine.com/print/interview-sally-rooney> – Last accessed on 8 May 2020.

be a diary in the form of exchanges with other people, rather than her relating her own experiences.

We can thus see a clear agenda for Rooney to not consider the individual character as an entity separated from others. Instead, she focuses on the agency of the character in relation to others and the world around her. But the characters in truth fail to connect with other humans and their environment. Furthermore, Rooney's own description of her novel as rejecting 'a conventional hero's journey' of growth and transformation points to how her characters remain essentially static, rearranging their exterior lives while failing to change inwardly.

This purely exterior agency is evident in the characters' struggles with alienation from the social norm. The characters are presented as disconnected enough from the outset to identify that norm and clever enough to have a critical detachment. Judging others and remaining insulated within their own thoughts are the ways characters distance themselves from the norm. In the first chapter of *Conversations With Friends*, Frances distinguishes herself through her powers of observation and calculated sociability: "already preparing compliments and certain facial expressions to make myself seem charming" (3); "Right away I decided to remember everything about her home, so I could describe it to our other friends later and Bobbi could agree" (4); "Next to the door was a low table where someone had left a stack of change, a hairbrush and an open tube of lipstick" (4). Such clinical observations reveal how the characters presume they stand apart from the norms in which they place the people around them, and see themselves as able to maneuver in and out of these categories. This concern with 'what will people say' calls to mind the rampant denunciation in *The Valley of the Squinting Windows* by Brinsley MacNamara, which exemplifies the long tradition of the "village of Ireland". In *Normal People*, we are led to believe that Marianne is more 'out' of the norm than Connell at the beginning of the novel, but this changes as their social situations shift when they go to Dublin and the norm itself changes. Both characters

can be popular among a crowd and show the outer signs of fitting in, which indicates a degree of ‘normal.’ But this crowd is shallow, as the protagonists end up having no real relation and connection with either of their previous friends.

Being presented as introverted and intelligent, Rooney’s characters tempt the readers into trusting their cleverness, intelligence, reflectiveness— but when the characters confront their estimations of themselves and others with other people’s judgment, they never seem to consider that they may be wrong. They are never willing to concede to realize that they may need the help of someone wiser, or even cleverer, than they are. They only want to level with equals, and they consider one another as equals. This extract where Frances ends her summer internship exemplifies such complacency:

I wonder about you, she said. You don’t seem to have a plan.

Yeah, that’s something I definitely don’t have.

You’re just hoping to fall on your feet.

I looked out the window behind her onto the beautiful Georgian buildings and the busses passing. It was raining again.

Tell me about the holiday, she said.<sup>110</sup>

Here, Frances refuses to acknowledge that her lack of plan for her future may be worrying; she simultaneously refuses to engage about it as something that someone older and more experienced can help with—only she can decide.

The characters are enmeshed in an emotionality that oscillates between despising banality and aspiring to belong. They are convinced of their ability to control things, but actually they cannot; that belief is an illusion born of their highly selective and self-beguiling sense of self-awareness. Emotionality—the love of ‘feeling’ as an activity rather than honestly confronting one’s felt experience—takes the place of emotional honesty. Their

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<sup>110</sup> *Conversations With Friends*, p. 183.

inability and unwillingness to feel derives from the emotional dishonesty that pervaded their earlier years:

My mother hated the way I talked about my father, like he was just another normal person rather than my distinguished personal benefactor, or a minor celebrity. [...] You must love him, she told me when I was sixteen. He's your father.<sup>111</sup>

Rooney's characters enjoy displaying control over whom they love. Here, Frances rationalizes her choice of not loving her father as something that should not come as a granted. However, each interaction she has with him in the novel causes her to unwittingly hurt; rather than not loving him, she numbs what she feels for him. In both novels, the characters' emotionality allows them to believe they have broken the chains of passivity or unresponsiveness—yet what they feel is pain, discomfort, hurt, sadness, and depression. They also conflate love and emotionality. This is demonstrated in *Conversations With Friends*: “[Bobbi] asked Melissa: who's prettier, Nick or me? Melissa looked at me and in an arch tone she replied: I love all my children equally” (241). This is supposed to be a witty comment, but in fact the character does not take either the question or her answer seriously. Earlier on, the concept of love or empty love is explored in a Facebook conversation between Bobbi and Frances:

Bobbi: if you look at love as something other than an interpersonal phenomenon

Bobbi: and try to understand it as a social value system

Bobbi: it's both antithetical to capitalism, in that it challenges the axiom of selfishness

Bobbi: which dictates the whole logic of inequality

Bobbi: and yet it's also subservient and facilitatory

Bobbi: i.e. mothers selflessly raising children without any profit motive

Bobbi: which seems to contradict the demands of the market at one level

Bobbi: and yet actually just functions to provide workers for free

me: yes

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<sup>111</sup> *Conversations With Friends*, p. 175.

me: capitalism harnesses 'love' for profit

me: love is the discursive practice and unpaid labour is the effect

me: but I mean, I get that, I'm anti love as such

Bobbi: that's vapid frances

Bobbi: you have to do more than say you're anti things<sup>112</sup>

These 'conversations' enter the narratives as the characters' direct interactions, the new forms of conventional dialogue. The characters' dematerialized and virtual interactions are representative of their being out of touch with reality—their virtuality is appropriate to the millennial culture, but it also emblemizes the characters' abstraction and intellectualization of values and, more importantly, personal experiences. The lines "that's vapid frances / you have to do more than say you're anti things" is never taken in. In another extemporation on capitalism and love, Frances revises her point of view and states, "To love someone under capitalism you have to love everyone. Now is that theory or just theology?" (298). She refers to the homogenizing quality of capitalism, and decides that one can intellectually commit to loving all people. This passage comes right after she has fainted in the church, and she gives in to her emotionality to write an email to Bobbi. She can only understand capitalism in terms of intellect or religion, and fails to see that the capitalism amid which the characters evolve is about consumption, not love.

The main characters enjoy tangling emotionality and rationality. They feel 'alive' through language. They love having an opinion, feeling enraged about something, showing that they know what they are talking about—not just for the act of knowing but also to some extent to trump others intellectually. For instance, Connell's girlfriend Helen doubts whether Marianne actually cares about the political situations she mentions even though she talks about them passionately:

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<sup>112</sup> *Conversations With Friends*, p. 180.

When they saw her at parties Helen went out of her way to compliment her hair and clothing, and Marianne would nod vaguely and then continue expressing some in-depth opinion about the Magdalene Laundry report or the Denis O'Brien case. Objectively Connell did find Marianne's opinions interesting, but he could see how her fondness for expressing them at length, to the exclusion of lighter conversation, was not universally charming. One evening, after an overly long discussion about Israel, Helen became irritable, and on the walk home she told Connell that she found Marianne 'self-absorbed'.<sup>113</sup>

Connell is convinced that Marianne actually cares—but caring is to Marianne and Connell an intellectual concept rather than an action. Marianne's seemingly passionate discourses are empty of actions; they are intellectual exercises.

Because the characters cannot and will not face their buried emotions as felt experiences, they become prey to eruptions of emotion that nonetheless give them a certain power over others. For instance, Connell's passion when handling Marianne's abusive brother demonstrates that he cannot avoid or contain his emotions. They engulf him:

A coloured haze sweeps over the driveway as he watches Marianne get into the car. [...] Connell, his sight even blurrier now, can't tell whether Alan is angry or frightened. [...] His vision is swinging so severely that he notices he has to keep a hand on the door to stay upright. [...] Connell's face is wet with perspiration. Alan's face is visible only as a pattern of coloured dots. [...] It seems to Connell, though he can't see or hear very well, that Alan is now crying.<sup>114</sup>

The rage blinding Connell has a double effect: that of immediately releasing Alan's hold on his sister, and that, more superficial and temporary, of giving her some peace. One wonders why Marianne is going back home in the first place, when it is a known fact that it is a place of abuse—until one considers how Marianne seeks out abuse elsewhere, constantly recreating the familial environment she is unwilling to face honestly, and from which she can therefore not extricate herself.

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<sup>113</sup> *Normal People*, p. 167.

<sup>114</sup> *Normal People*, pp. 251-2.



The characters' scorn for what they regard as banality is a form of class judgment, ingrained in the characters' minds: what characters judge as 'normal' in the sense of banal is associated with a lower class. For characters who claim at least some allegiance with Marxism, it is quite antithetical and indicates a posture rather than any conviction. Having a 'normal' set of aspirations, such as having supportive friends, enjoying time with family, seeking physical and mental health, being 'wholesome', is not pictured as desirable. In fact, it even makes the character of Marianne dramatically angry:

Now she knows that in the intervening years Connell has been growing slowly more adjusted to the world, a process of adjustment that has been steady if sometimes painful, while she herself has been degenerating, moving further and further from wholesomeness, becoming something unrecognisably debased, and they have nothing left in common at all.<sup>115</sup>

In judging herself, she realizes that Connell has shifted from what she considers to be her norm to another mainstream norm, and that they are drifting apart. She thus shifts and sees her deviation from the norm as 'debased', and Connell's integration as somehow wholesome. Marianne seems to be finding another rationale by which to be punished or abused.

The characters' alienation also expresses itself in their having little idea of what they want to do as an activity in the future, or how they might chart a career. They have ambition, but an ambition to be special, above others, which could be a way to caricature academic types.<sup>116</sup> This is particularly true of Marianne, who hopes to win a scholarship to Trinity for the fame and intellectual recognition it would mean, without regard for others who need the funding more. This pursuit of specialness, of the transcendence of banality, paradoxically

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<sup>115</sup> *Normal People*, p. 238.

<sup>116</sup> GRADY Constance, 'The Cult of Sally Rooney,' *Vox Magazine*, September 3, 2019. Retrievable online from <https://www.vox.com/culture/2019/9/3/20807728/sally-rooney-normal-people-conversations-with-friends> – Last accessed on 8 May 2020. "In *Conversations With Friends*, Frances writes poetry and is studying English, while Bobbi studies history and politics and identifies as a communitarian anarchist; Frances notes that Bobbi's areas of interest are "subjects my mother considered serious," while her own are not. Frances considers Bobbi to have "ferocious and frightening power over circumstances and people," and when Bobbi suggests that after school she might "work in a university if I can," Frances can't face the idea of Bobbi spending her life doing something so "sedate and ordinary.""

leads to a kind of elevated banality. This is evident in the comparison between the two nightclub scenes in *Normal People*. When in school, Marianne tries hard to please and fit in with a group of people, which is noticed by some but generally fails. At the end of the novel, when she goes to the nightclub again with Connell, she now scorns the desire to fit in. This is precisely what makes her banal, as she locks herself into a self-alienated and contradictory elitism. Rooney's characters want to fit in, but they do not want to fit in. They are normal, but special. They despise banality, which they regard as lower-class, but choose a banal pose of cosmopolitanism. As articulate as they may be about the conformity around them, they end up conforming in a more superficially sophisticated but no less impoverished way.

A similar contradiction prevails in the characters' insistence on their own independence and agency when they consistently fail to take responsibility for their actions. Instead, they either make excuses or blame others for their frustrations. Frances breaking up with her lover Nick is a direct result of the suicidal phone call from her father the night before, yet she refuses to speak about what actually upsets her. Instead, she feeds Nick her fear and anger, and they break up. As justification, she states, "I was a very autonomous and independent person with an inner life that nobody else had ever touched or perceived" (288)—an excruciatingly ironic self-characterization from someone who has just failed to face her feelings or even understand her own motivations.

Often, the characters blame not only other people, but also the broader system—such as capitalism—in which they grow up and live and from which they often benefit enormously. They deflect responsibility on social or economic institutions and systems. They enjoy complaining about the flaws of society in the course of small talk, which is in itself a form of personal ideology:

In a series of emails they exchanged recently about their own friendship, Marianne expressed her feelings about Connell mainly in terms of her sustained interest for his opinions and beliefs, the curiosity she feels about his

life, and her instinct to survey his thoughts whenever she feels conflicted about anything. He expressed himself more in terms of identification, his sense of rooting for her and suffering with her when she suffers, his ability to perceive and sympathise with her motivations. Marianne thought this had something to do with gender roles.<sup>117</sup>

This summarized exchange, which exemplifies the characters' analytical stance even in their intimate relationship, is immediately an opportunity to point out the over-arching societal machinery. The fact that Marianne displaces Connell's analysis as gendered shows how dissociative she is, and how she seeks to put people and things into safely impersonal conceptual categories such as societal structures. Incidentally, this example shows that although Connell is also analytical in his ways, especially when class questions are at stake, he does have empathy and a desire to connect emotionally, at least with Marianne. Throughout the book, Connell comes off as capable of meaningful change because he responds feelingly to others and to literature—however, he would have to confront willingly his inner demons, with which he does not get to grips frontally. This capability for change is not an option he seems aware of.

Rooney's characters seem to glide effortlessly through the system they love to critique. They meet unrealistic successes that are disconnected from their inner alienation. Everything falls onto their laps without any required effort, from a flat in the Liberties to top grades without re-reading essays. Such entitlement generates in them misleading ideas about work and value. While the novels position themselves as realistic, their characters, despite difficulties, somehow achieve and materialize success as if by magic. Connell gets offered a place for a Masters of Fine Arts in America after sending only one application. His stories are loved by Trinity College's journal—just as Frances's short story gets published immediately. Marianne gets accepted in Trinity despite not going to school anymore—a remarkable fact given the point-based Irish educational system. Rooney chooses to show results rather than

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<sup>117</sup> *Normal People*, p. 162.

processes—it could be argued that she simply does not show the characters’ work because it is not central to the narratives. But the repetition of this fantasized ease seems all of a piece with the characters’ emotional denial.

Eventually, the characters’ carelessness—which is in fact tied to a refusal to live fully, a contemporary form of paralysis—translates into mild political notions and social apathy. The examples of a lack of serious engagement listed below are few among many:

Sorry I’m late, he says. There was some protest on so the bus was delayed. He sits down opposite her. He hasn’t ordered anything yet.

Don’t worry about it, she says. What was the protest? It was not abortion or anything, was it?

He feels ashamed now that he didn’t notice. No, I don’t think so, he says. The household tax or something.

Well, best of luck to them. May the revolution be swift and brutal.<sup>118</sup>

When Marianne alludes to a protest, both characters dismiss it. Marianne’s concluding remark is a cavalier piece of wit intended to close down the topic. Even when isolating the specific issue of abortion, implying it is more worthy of interest, they still treat it as part of the background, not an urgent issue. Such vagueness is repeated about the school system: “The whole idea of ‘meritocracy’ or whatever, it’s evil, you know I think that” (174). For Rooney’s characters, the mere mention of a problem seems sufficient engagement with it. Being against something is presented as the foremost way of knowing what the world is like. As for the ‘liking’ of Facebook comments being a political action, it is a striking example of lack of commitment:

Connell hasn’t commented on any of the Facebook threads, but he has liked several comments calling for the invite to be rescinded, which is probably the most strident political action he has ever taken in his life.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> *Normal People*, p. 120.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 79-80.

This lack of commitment is found everywhere in Rooney's narratives; the characters' see themselves as politically and socially discerning and engaged, but they take no action whatsoever. This intellectual dilettantism is tied to their lack of commitment to relationships: Marianne and Connell, Bobbi and Frances, and Frances and Nick never admit to being couples. Even the novels' open endings, which offer no resolution, seem to devalue commitment to one course of action or mode of being as unrealistic, or even naive.

On the hot-button topic of abortion and motherhood, both Frances and Marianne have a moment of doubt. As both novels were written before the referendum that effectively legalized abortion in January 2019, the potential consequences of a pregnancy would have carried a lot of weight for the characters:

If I ever had been pregnant, then I was probably miscarrying anyway. So what? The pregnancy was already over, I didn't need to consider things like Irish constitutional law, the right to travel, my current bank balance, and so on. Still, it would mean that at some time I had been unknowingly carrying Nick's child, or rather a child that consisted of a mysterious half-and-half mixture of myself and Nick, inside my own body.<sup>120</sup>

Both characters avoid the real stakes of the situation, either deciding that it seems to be over anyway for Frances, or, in the case of Marianne, refusing to see the real impact of such an event and recasting it in theatrical terms:

I don't know, she said. In a way I like the idea of something so dramatic happening to me. I would like to upset people's expectations. Do you think I'd be a bad mother?<sup>121</sup>

The response to potential abortions reveals the characters' affected apathy, a determination never to recognize the potential event for what it is: neither light nor easy. They choose to veil from themselves what pregnancy would actually entail. In fact, their encounters with an

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<sup>120</sup> *Conversations With Friends*, p. 169.

<sup>121</sup> *Normal People*, p. 75.

irrefutable and unpleasant reality—that actions have consequences—are an occasion for more dissociation and denial, packaged as intellectual deliberation.

### c. Leveling Cultural Effects and Writing

*Normal People* was among the Book of the Year selections at the British bookshop chain Waterstones<sup>122</sup> in 2018, with lasting effects in 2019; *Conversations With Friends* benefitted from the platform provided by the Costa Book Awards; and both were major commercial successes. The critical reception and popularity of Rooney's books show that there is demand for her writing—a Guardian article from April 2020 states “[t]he sales figures are huge for a literary novel, with *Normal People* running through seven editions, selling nearly 500,000 copies in the UK and 76,000 in Ireland, according to industry analysts Nielsen Bookscan. Translation rights have been sold into 41 languages.”<sup>123</sup> That global reach reflects the globalized sensibility that informs the novels, as well as a certain generational style.

To begin with, Rooney's writing is sprinkled with punchlines, indicating a literature that corresponds to at least one aspect of society in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the attraction to fast content. The use of emails and Facebook messages in the narratives creates a sense of speed in the relationships but also estranges the protagonists. Those technologies both shape and mimic the fragmented nature of social interactions among millennials, and mirror the characters' lack of reflectiveness. Even when writing an email, a more time-consuming and theoretically more reflexive activity, the characters are shown to press 'send' without thinking

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<sup>122</sup> Anonymous, 'Love story *Normal People* is Waterstones' book of the year', 29 November, 2018, *BBC News*, Retrieval online from <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-46372322> – Last accessed on 8 May 2020.

<sup>123</sup> ARMISTEAD Claire and THOMAS-CORR Johana, 'The stakes were really high': the stars bringing Sally Rooney's *Normal People* to TV,' *The Guardian*, April 12, 2020. Retrieval online from <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2020/apr/12/the-stakes-were-really-high-bringing-sally-rooney-normal-people-to-tv> – Last accessed on 8 May 2020.

twice. Featured in an interview for Northern Irish literary magazine *Tangerine*, Rooney herself said about *Conversations With Friends*:

And obviously Frances isn't me, but the voice that she uses in the book isn't dissimilar to the voice she uses in instant messenger and email. And we know that she's a writer in the book, and she gets a story published, but the only writings we ever read of hers are her emails and messages. They are texts that she produces in her voice, and they are part of her writing life, even if they're not 'creative writing'. So I think that a large part of my style has definitely developed through writing emails and, as you and I know, those late night deep meaningful emails in which you're communicating quite a lot. And there are emails like that in the book. The book itself is almost like one of those emails. Like a controlled outpouring.<sup>124</sup>

Rooney asserts that, for her generation in its use of social media and email, there is little difference between writing and speech. Frances' spoken words in casual conversation are on a similar level of orality to her written speech in instant messages, on Facebook or texts. Conversely, her spoken word poetry performances are never displayed, nor is her prose style in the short story she says to have written. The book is to be understood as an 'outpouring,' 'in one go'—while written, it could just as well be delivered orally, in the 'conversation with friends' fashion it is named after.

There is also a sense that the novels could be set anywhere in the western world; local color has a merely referential aspect. It features, for instance, the 'Leaving Cert'<sup>125</sup> which is the Irish equivalent to the French Baccalauréat or the British A-levels; the 'Debs'<sup>126</sup> which is the summer 'debutante' ball held for new school graduates; 'Trinity'<sup>127</sup> which is Ireland's most renowned university; 'Culchies'<sup>128</sup> which is a derogatory term for the peasants of Ireland; alcoholism which has always been rampant in Ireland and belongs with the romantic and touristic image of the country; lots of tea, which of course seems anecdotal but is

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<sup>124</sup> NOLAN Michael, 'An Interview With Sally Rooney,' *Tangerine*, issue 3, Autumn 2017. Retrievable online from <https://thetangerinemagazine.com/print/interview-sally-rooney> – Last accessed on 8 May 2020.

<sup>125</sup> *Normal People*, p. 58. "Someone in your year got six hundred, hey!"

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54. "I asked Rachel Moran to go to the Debs with me."

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 70. "He's from Belfast, and he also thinks people in Trinity are weird, which is reassuring."

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 165. "You're such a culchie, though. [...] You have the thickest Sligo accent, she said."

accurate; and surprisingly little Church considering the country's past. All of the images which Rooney uses are Irish clichés that are not significant to the texts but are added for local color. Rooney chooses instead to focus on local realities that are in fact global: secondary education and graduating as a passage between life stages; attending a reputable university; the rural-urban divide at the age of technology; and lack of faith. Neither is the focus on romantic love specific to Ireland or any other country.

These flattening effects of globalization are evident in the incipit structure of the novels, that is, at the opening sentence of each chapter. When arranging them in a paragraph, they seem to make up a summary of the narratives:

- Bobbi and I first met Melissa at a poetry night in town, where we were performing together.
- It rained all day before we went for dinner at Melissa's.
- Bobbi and I often performed at spoken word events and open mic nights that summer.
- Bobbi was going out to dinner with her father on Thursday, so we offered Philip the spare ticket to the play.
- Over the summer I missed the periods of intense academic concentration which helped me relax during term time.
- After that we saw Melissa sporadically and she sent us occasional email updates about the profile piece.
- Melissa invited us to her birthday party in July.
- That afternoon I lay on my bed smoking with the window open, dressed in a vest and my underwear.
- Melissa was working in London the following week.
- I hadn't spoken to Bobbi since the night she'd stayed over in the apartment.
- I missed work the next day because I slept in.
- Melissa was waiting for us at the bus stop, right by the harbour.
- The next day we were clearing up the breakfast dishes and Melissa asked Nick if he would take the car to some shopping complex outside town to get new deckchairs.
- The next day I felt warm and sleepy, like a child.
- The following night, Evelyn wanted to play a game where we split into teams and entered names of famous people into a large bowl.
- The next morning at breakfast, the day before Bobbi and I flew home, Melissa told us that Valerie was coming to visit.
- We had duck for dinner, with roast baby potatoes and salad.
- It was late August.
- My mother came home early from work that afternoon and fixed some cold chicken while I sat at the table drinking tea.



- My internship in the agency ended formally at the start of September.
- The following week, Bobbi and I went to the launch of a book in which one of Melissa's essays appeared.
- The next day I started to write a story.
- When I tried to withdraw some cash for food on Monday morning, the ATM said I had insufficient funds.
- In my room Nick sat on the bed while I dressed in clean pyjamas and towelled my hair.
- It was the middle of October by then.
- The next evening, Nick and I went to see an Iranian film about a vampire.
- In the hospital I was advised to drink even more water, so much that I was in active discomfort while sitting in the waiting room.
- That week I went to class every day and spent every evening in the library writing CVs and printing them off on the library printers.
- I was offered a job working evenings and weekends serving coffee in a sandwich shop.
- We talked about our break-up for the first time that night.
- The following week my phone rang.

—Adapted from *Conversations With Friends*

- Marianne answers the door when Connell rings the bell.
- She sits at her dressing table looking at her face in the mirror.
- They're talking about their college applications.
- They have her name on a list.
- He stands at the side of the bed while his mother goes to find one of the nurses.
- She's in the garden, wearing sunglasses.
- Connell doesn't know anyone at the party.
- Marianne gets in the front seat of Connell's car and closes the door.
- He's just come back from the library.
- Marianne is reading the back of a yoghurt pot in the supermarket.
- He's late to meet her.
- She's in her apartment with friends.
- He wakes up just after eight.
- In the lobby of the Languages and Literature building she sits down to check her email.
- In the waiting room he has to fill out a questionnaire.
- Her eyes narrow until the television screen is just a green oblong, yawning light at the edges.
- In the kitchen he takes a can of beer out of the fridge and sits at the table to open it.
- In the kitchen Marianne pours hot water on the coffee.

—Adapted from *Normal People*

Little excitement or literary novelty is found in the opening of the chapters. The setting of the sentences is always broad and their syntactic structure is always simple. They convey a sense

of boredom and vagueness, depicting relatively low common denominators of generational experience. A similar process could be undertaken with the ending of each chapter, with a similar result. As hyperarticulate and ironic as the characters are, the milieu they inhabit has a sameness born not only of quotidian details but also of globalized brands, globalized tastes, globalized images of beauty, power, and success.

#### **d. Materialism**

The 2008 financial crisis has had lasting effects on Ireland's population and on its property market; on its employment rate, which only reached a post-crash low in 2016;<sup>129</sup> and on its overall economy. As Rooney's characters were born prior to the crisis, their consumer habits have been influenced by the crash.

Different classes have bounced back from the crash at different speeds, and sometimes barely bouncing back at all. Rooney's narratives show persisting class divides and a degree of fiscal irresponsibility. In *Conversations With Friends*, Frances, a supposedly poor character whose bank account is constantly low, is smoking away her wealth and health. Her father, whose irregular funds are supposed to feed and sustain her, provides her with a flat in central Dublin to accommodate her. As far as property owning and liquidity are concerned, it shows a poor sense on Frances's part, and her father's, of the precariousness of her situation.

The High Street retailers<sup>130</sup> also feature in the novels. Frances goes shopping in Centra, one of the most successful convenience groceries stores, and she is seen at the end of

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<sup>129</sup> BURKE KENNEDY Eoin 'Unemployment falls to post-crash low of 7.8%,' *The Irish Times*, 31 May 2016. Retrievable from: <https://www.irishtimes.com/business/economy/unemployment-falls-to-post-crash-low-of-7-8-1.2667070> – Last accessed on 8 May 2020.

<sup>130</sup> ROWE Simon, 'No Festive Cheer for Retailers as Fears Grow over Brexit Impact,' *The Irish Independent*, 30 October 2016. Retrievable from: <https://www.independent.ie/business/brexit/no-festive-cheer-for-retailers-as-fears-grow-over-brexit-impact-35171281.html> – Last accessed on 8 May 2020.

Grafton Street (which is the equivalent of Dublin High Street) now features shops such as Victoria's Secrets, & Other Stories, Disney Store, Starbuck's, Burger King, M&S, Claire's, Massimo Dutti, Levi's etc...

the novel ominously wandering through St Stephens Shopping Centre while on the phone with Nick. Connell and Marianne meet in front of Hodges Figgis (165), a bookshop owned by Waterstones. While what they eat is usually rather plain—toast and instant coffee—the characters always eat Italian food when they are in the company of their love interests. Dress, a marker of social class and of consumption, is the focus of envious or judgmental descriptions. Characters look alternatively ‘chic’ or *culchie*, practical or performative, successful or vulnerable—and sexually available, as in *Normal People*: “a crowd of smiling women in tight dresses and perfectly applied lipstick” (69). The presence and enumeration of these commodities, seemingly tangential to the narratives, illustrates the impact of globalization on Irishness, a process which has been accelerated since the financial crash.

In the same way that they consume material goods, characters in Rooney’s novels also view people as objects of consumption. Connell finds himself always attracted to the same kind of girl in terms of appearance, of whom “the originary model of the type” is of course Marianne—the novel explores and ultimately counters the idea that people within a type are interchangeable:

Increasingly it seems as if Connell is actually drawn towards this supercilious type of person. [...] his flatmate Niall will point out one person and say: I bet you think she’s attractive. And it will always be some flat-chested girl wearing ugly shoes and disdainfully smoking a cigarette. And Connell has to admit, yes, he does find her attractive, and he may even try to talk to her, and he will go home feeling worse than before.<sup>131</sup>

In seeking out the same type of girl, Connell tries to fill in a void with more emptiness, for he fails to acknowledge any humanity in these girls who conform to an immediately recognizable list of characteristics he carries with him as if shopping. He is after a certain ‘brand’ of girl.

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<sup>131</sup> *Normal People*, p. 69.

What distinguishes the main characters from the rest in this consumption of people is the awareness of their potential to hurt others—which yet does not prevent them from doing so. They consistently navigate relationships in terms of power relations. Connell tries to take advantage of his proximity with Marianne when they are in Italy, and he is regularly overwhelmed by the impression that he could hurt and destroy her. Bobbi warns Frances “don’t fucking use me” (204) when the latter tries to play a game of provoking jealousy. Marianne consumes, and allows herself to be consumed by, abusive men as a way to assert her beliefs about herself and about the patriarchal society, even as she consumes.

The metaphor of consumption extends to material bodies, whether through an obsession with sex or through self-harm. The language of intercourse evolves through the narratives as the characters get ‘used’ to it, but power plays maintain an overall prevalence. Damaging oneself is also a common vector to the novels: Frances is regularly shown as ‘acting out,’ self-harming by cutting little holes in her skin or practicing other discreet forms of auto-violence: “On the bus home I chewed the inside of my cheek and stared out the black window until I tasted blood” (218). She adds a layer of pain to her pre-existing condition of endometriosis, which horrifies her:

I noticed that along with the blood were thick grey clots of what looked like skin tissue. I had never seen anything like this before and it scared me so badly that the only comforting idea I could think of was: maybe it’s not happening. [...] I let my hands tremble and waited to start feeling normal again, until I realised that it wasn’t just a feeling, something that I could dismiss to myself. It was an outside reality that I couldn’t change. The pain was like nothing I had ever felt before.<sup>132</sup>

Here, Frances is consumed by her pain, which is described as so intense that even her attempts at intellectually numbing it fail. Even in the most crushing and painful moments, the individual is fighting against the reality of her situation. But more significantly, she refers to

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<sup>132</sup> *Conversations With Friends*, p. 165

the conscious dismissal of her emotional experience as something she can and does easily do, with ‘just a feeling’. The dissociation is masquerading as a mature and self-possessed detachment.

Materialism thus becomes the means through which the ignored past traumas are expressed. The new capitalist machinery offers only consumption and private pleasures as the means to happiness—and the young characters, although intellectually aware of such societal flaws, remain trapped. Moreover, because they want to believe that they have left their intimate traumas behind, Rooney’s millennials are imprisoned by that very denial.

## CONCLUSION

Sally Rooney's *Conversations With Friends* and *Normal People* have been widely popular among various audiences, from critics and writers to Instagram influencers. There is thus a widespread market for her literature, which engages in a generationally-focused dialogue with the legacy of *Dubliners*. While her novels appear to break free from Irish literary conventions, they in fact show that Ireland has adapted age-old expressions of societal imprisonment to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Instead of the oppressive mechanisms of the Catholic Church and an overbearing patriarchy, Rooney's 21<sup>st</sup> century Dublin, which has become increasingly indistinguishable from other global capitals, is a theatre of market forces, consumerism, and rapidly changing values. But the new form of prison created by the characters' self-absorption is one of their own making. Their conflation of dissociation and denial with a mature self-possession, their glib intellectualism, and their complacent belief that they can learn all they need to learn on their own are internal and can be said to rest on the same founding stones as in *Dubliners*: the refusal to be honest with oneself.

The main characters all emerge from adolescence as if on the threshold of maturity, yet they do not change. In moments when Rooney's characters experience despair and depression, they dismiss emotion through intellectualization. Despite all their interior monologues, Frances, Connell, and Marianne avoid and deny the most destructive aspects of their inner lives. Conversely, the novels feature an eagerness to gain release from the pain of this self-alienation, but this release is superficial and merely aimed at pleasure, thereby allowing for neither healing nor catharsis. But *Conversations with Friends* and *Normal People* run the risk of validating their characters' inertia because of their lack of obvious narrative distance from their protagonists. The fact that the novels deal with characters from

privileged cultural or educational backgrounds—rather than financial—is not a problem per se; rather, the problem is the absence of challenges other than sentimental ones, which incidentally never get resolved.

In lieu of epiphanies like those of Joyce's *Dubliners*, Rooney's novels depict character developments that are entirely dependent on the idea of romantic love, exemplifying the quote from Gary Snyder that opened this essay. This is what has replaced the older and more conventional forms of futility and despair: the characters are so estranged from themselves that they are not aware of what might eventually offer them fulfillment, nor are they aware of their estrangement, which echoes Kierkegaard's famous description: "The specific character of despair is precisely this: it is unaware of being despair."<sup>133</sup> The characters are adept at pointing out the culprits behind society's injustices, but unable to see the extent of the injuries they inflict on themselves. Even when abroad, they bring their despair along with them.

*Conversations With Friends* and *Normal People* thus diagnose, wittingly or unwittingly, how little has changed beneath the surface since 1914. They depict a glossy and polished version of Ireland in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, where life seems more fulfilling than it actually is, and yet, underneath the veneer of globalization, remains drowned darkness and paralysis.

Despite the 2008 financial crash and its harsh consequences, Ireland still lives on the promise of material growth and global fame. Perhaps the serialization of Rooney's novels for Hulu and the BBC, respectively American and British based platforms, can reveal similar contradictions between discourse and action—between intellectually acknowledging a problem and still remaining within such problematic setting. Conversely, the equally wide success of the series foregrounds a popular need to understand and explore these issues. What

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<sup>133</sup> KIERKEGAARD Soren, *The Sickness Unto Death*, (Hong Eds), Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983.

has been gained and what has been lost in the process of globalization for Ireland will likely remain a topic for Irish literature and cultural media for the years to come, especially as new societal challenges are to be faced. We shall wait to see whether or how Irish writers other than Rooney choose to write about such dilemmas, and whether or how they embrace their Irish literary heritage as a way to move toward the future of Irish literature.



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