**DEPARTAMENT DE FILOLOGIA ANGLESA I DE GERMANÍSTICA**

# Navigating Emotional Inhibition: The Role of Restraint in Relationships and Identity in Sally Rooney's *Normal People*

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I would first of all like to thank my supervisor, David Owen, who guided me throughout the whole writing and creative process in this dissertation. My enjoyment of his Victorian Literature course during my second year encouraged me to undertake a dissertation project in literature, and it has been incredibly rewarding.

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## Abstract

In 2020, during the height of the pandemic, Sally Rooney's novel *Normal People* gained significant popularity, particularly following the release of its television adaptation of the same name. Set in 21st-century Ireland, the novel follows the evolving relationship between Connell, a working-class teenager who is intelligent and well-liked at school, and Marianne, a middle-class peer who is equally bright but socially isolated. As the novel unfolds, the two protagonists drift in and out of each other's lives, navigating personal growth and shifting dynamics. Their roles reverse when they begin university in Dublin, where the depth of their connection is evident in the way they transcend social hierarchies.

Given that *Normal People* consolidated Rooney's status as a celebrated author, this thesis aims to explore not only her writing style and influences but also the themes her work engages with. In particular, the thesis aims to examine how emotional restraint disrupts relationships and identity, revealing the difficulties characters face in expressing their emotions and forming authentic connections. Additionally, it considers the broader social implications of this theme, especially in relation to contemporary struggles with vulnerability and authenticity in an era that both promotes and fears emotional openness.

Sally Rooney's *Normal People* resonates deeply with a generation marked by emotional awareness, economic precarity, and complex relationships. The novel reflects their struggles with mental health, self-worth, and isolation despite constant digital connectivity. Rooney's minimalist, dialogue-driven style aligns with the introspective narratives shaping contemporary literature, blending the political with the personal. Through themes of social mobility, class, and privilege, *Normal People* explores the tension between independence and intimacy. Marianne's evolution into a strong, self-sufficient individual who still values her bond with Connell mirrors the modern challenge of balancing personal growth with deep relationships. Rooney captures the emotional landscape of a generation, using fiction as a mirror to examine vulnerability, identity, and the longing for authentic connection.

To support this study, I will consult secondary sources such as book reviews, interviews, critical essays, and scholarly papers. However, because *Normal People* is a relatively new novel, obtaining in-depth scholarly critique has been difficult. Despite this, the existing critical debate provides significant insights that will help to deepen our comprehension of Rooney's work and its meaning.

**Keywords**: Normal People, Sally Rooney, Emotional Inhibition, Restraint and Relationships, Identity.

**0. Introduction**

The reason behind this topic choice is the strong connection I have with the novel and its characters. *Normal People* has helped me get back into reading after a very long reading slump. Immediately after starting to learn about Marianne and Connell and their story I strongly identified with it, as someone who has sometimes felt like Marianne and Connell themselves. On the cover of the novel, we see— through a sardine tin with the foil partially pulled back—a boy and a girl with their faces buried in each other's necks. This picture captures what Connell and Marianne are to each other: an isolated world free from social judgement. The word "normal" in the title is not incidental. It is through this title that the reader gains insight into what it seems that Sally Rooney may be trying to portray - what "normal" means in today's collective imaginary.[1]

It is very easy to judge Connell's confusion when one first reads *Normal People*, as well as Marianne's attention-seeking and self-loathing. However, after reading the book again five years later, I have changed, as has my comprehension of it. Marianne's story is now more than just one of self-destruction and insecurity; it is a heartbreaking tale of abuse, neglect, and betrayal by those who were meant to keep her safe. The belief that she is not deserving of anything good is the result of her desperate search for love, which is always just out of reach. Connell, however, reminds her that she is sufficient to face the world in her current state.

Connell's perplexity now seems incredibly relatable as well. It is about the isolation that comes from being surrounded by people who do not really know you but act like they do. It

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[1] See *Conclusions*, page 20.

is about the struggle to hide aspects of oneself and how people can be reluctant to share things they are ashamed of. That conflict between self-awareness and the person the world expects us to be only gets more intense as we age, driven by social expectations. But *Normal People* is more than just a study of love; it is also a study of the unseen forces that influence our lives. Friendships are shaped by socioeconomic status, and our political views can separate us from our peers. But once you find someone who is a perfect fit for you, it is almost impossible to let them go permanently. Apart from physical closeness, what really defines everything is the connection—the deep, unbreakable bond.

To better understand not only the characters but also how *Normal People* was able to connect with hundreds of thousands of readers all over the world, this study will focus on the novel's main characters, Connell and Marianne. By analysing their personas throughout their personal and academic development, this investigation will examine how, if at all, they change; what causes this change; and why they act the way they do. Studying their relationship allows for a better grasp of their character journeys. Their bond serves as the book's focal point, making it simpler to understand them. The second part of this thesis is, still with the relationship as its core, about how well—or not—*Normal People* reflects our contemporary society. It is in this section that I mention not only love and modern relationships but also how themes such as class, politics, economy, and gender shape who we become, how we are perceived, and how we act.

There are few critical studies on *Normal People* because it is such a recent publication. In order to successfully complete the research for the thesis, I have primarily relied on interviews with Sally Rooney, the author, who shared her thoughts on the story as well as the characters. For

anyone who would like to study *Normal People's* work, I hope this thesis contributes to a greater selection of easily accessible works.

This thesis seeks to comprehend the author, her writing, her influences, and the subjects that she addresses in her work. The reason for this is that *Normal People* made Sally Rooney the popular and well-acclaimed author that she is today. It was with this book that she created a place for herself as one of the most influential figures in the 21st century, not only because of her writing technique but also because of how she portrays her ideals and values in her works. Rooney's way of portraying such values in two very relatable characters is very unique. Making both of the characters relatable is not an easy task, but Rooney makes the readers connect with both of them almost at the same level. Is it because of the accurate portrayal of modern society? Could Rooney be critiquing contemporary society's inability to foster open and meaningful emotional expression?

To respond to these questions, this TFG in turns poses two questions of its own: first, how does the balance between emotional expression and restraint shape personal growth, identity, and relationships as depicted in the novel? And second, what are the implications of emotional overcontrol or emotional freedom for fostering authentic connection and understanding in contemporary society, again as presented through Rooney's work? Through analysing the power dynamics and affective relationships in this contemporary literary representation of intimacy, I hope to be able to give an account of the ways in which the novel has resonated so fully with its readership.

My TFG is structured as follows. In chapter 1, I will examine how the identities of the two main characters influence each other in their growing into young adults and how their views change during the process; in chapter 2, I will examine the story's central themes and how they resonate in the modern times of widespread social disconnection. I then present my conclusions and suggestions for further reasearch. Following the Work Cited section, I provided an appendix with information on Rooney and on *Normal People*, which includes a brief narrative summary.

## 1. Intertwined Identities: Trauma and Connection in Sally Rooney's Normal People

As we will see in both this section and the following one, Connell and Marianne are distinguishably different individuals. Nevertheless, their lives become intertwined, offering a profound exploration of identity, self-image, and the power of human connection. In this first section I aim to address the portrayal of both characters and how this view changes as they grow older.

Connell, while not a stereotypical "popular" high school student, is widely recognised, well-liked, and academically successful. Despite his popularity, his relationships with friends lack depth, as they do not share his intellectual curiosity. Connell is severely aware of how his self-image impacts the way others perceive him. This awareness gives him quiet confidence but also reveals the fragility of his self-perception. This duality demonstrates how a strong self-image can provide social confidence while simultaneously hiding insecurities and vulnerabilities. Connell navigates these complexities, often projecting restraint in his interactions to avoid opening up emotionally, whether to appear too nice or too arrogant. However, Connell undergoes a significant transformation when he leaves the small town of Sligo for Dublin. The larger urban environment

affects his sense of belonging as his high school popularity vanishes, and he begins to fade into the background. This initial loss of confidence marks a turning point. At Trinity College, Connell finds a new sense of identity among peers who share his interests in literature and intellectual pursuits. These connections, built on shared passions rather than superficial social structures, allow him to explore his true self and reconcile the gap between his external persona and internal uncertainties.

In contrast, Marianne starts as the antithesis of a "popular" high-school girl. Isolated, misunderstood, and lacking family support, she experiences deep alienation. Connell partially understands her but struggles to comprehend her complexities fully. Marianne's self-image is similarly multifaceted: while she often appears calm, controlled, and confident in public, she carries deep feelings of loneliness and disorientation when alone. This persona—a mask shaped by social pressures and a survival mechanism developed in response to her traumatic family life—allows her to navigate different social environments with composure.[2] Marianne's ability to adjust her behaviour and attitude demonstrates her strong social skills, but it also highlights the emotional toll of constantly faking a persona to meet others' expectations. Like Connell, Marianne transforms upon entering Trinity. Surrounded by people who value her intellect and opinions, she evolves into an independent, well-liked, and assertive persona. For the first time, Marianne feels a sense of belonging, yet her romantic relationships reveal a more vulnerable side. Despite her outward confidence, she continues to deal with unresolved trauma, which leads her to suppress her

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[2] "Yet it was also, as we have seen, a sphere of interdependence and personal intimacy in which—within the parameters of ideology and law—familial roles were more complex, less rigid, and considerably more emotionally demanding, than was once assumed, and in which the perennial friction of individual personalities could wear down the sharp edges of prescriptive categories." (Wrightson, p.189)

emotions in most of her relationships—except with Connell.[3] In Connell's presence, Marianne feels safe enough to express her authentic self, suggesting that their bond transcends the surface-level connections they form with others.

It is evident that both individuals behave substantially differently around one another than they do around other people. We learn throughout the book that they have extremely complex interactions with people outside of their own bubble, which is likely triggered by a PTSD reaction. This has an impact on their relationships and personal growth, both with others and with themselves. Dominick LaCapra presents the ideas of 'acting out'—the recurrent, unconscious reliving of trauma—and 'working through'—the conscious engagement with traumatic experience to move forward—in his research article *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (LaCapra 24) qualities that are applicable to both Connell and Marianne's character. Marianne, for instance, has a tendency to 'act out' her trauma through emotional detachment and destructive sexual relationships, especially when she looks for partners that mimic the abuse she experienced at home. Connell first acts out by repressing his pain, but with therapy and candid dialogue with Marianne, he finally starts working through his tragedy. Their emotional journeys and personal development are better framed by this distinction.

According to Laurie Vickroy's research in *Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction* (Vickroy, 2002) these trauma response behaviours are typically reflected in the characters and their emotional lives in the novel and are frequently represented through subtle, indirect forms as

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[3] "While victims may choose not to speak of their traumas, there is little evidence that they cannot." (Pederson, p.334)

opposed to visible descriptions. Marianne's disguised confidence and tendency to seek control in emotionally risky relationships, as well as Connell's reserved behaviour, social disengagement, and panic episodes, are all indicators of unresolved trauma. Instead of extraordinary breakdowns, these subliminal indicators show how trauma affects Rooney's characters' daily actions and sense of self.

Regarding this thesis, we may see that Connell's primary PTSD reaction is to his friend's unexpected passing. While attending university in Dublin, Connell finds out about his friend Rob's suicide in *Normal People*. Connell is devastated by the unexpected news. His emotional life changes at this point because he is forced to face his own mental health issues, which he had been ignoring. Feeling as though he could have done something to how she portrays her ideals and values in her works, he falls into a severe depression characterised by overwhelming remorse and helplessness. Connell feels remorseful and somewhat accountable for his friend's death after this episode, even though he is not at all at fault. During this time, Connell reconnects with Marianne, with whom he has always felt secure, and grows estranged from his current lover, Helen. The episode is essential to his character development because it highlights the value of communication and emotional support while demonstrating how trauma can destabilise even seemingly calm people.

As for Marianne, as previously mentioned, her family circumstances are the reason behind her PTSD reaction. Both her violent brother and her carefree mother, who practically act as though they have forgotten about Marianne and ignore her when they cross paths in the street, make her feel alienated. *"On New Years's Eve they saw Marianne's mother in the supermarket. She was*

wearing a dark suit with a yellow silk blouse. She always looked so 'put together'. Lorraine said hello politely and Denise just walked past, no speaking, eyes ahead." *(*Rooney 211*)* When it comes to creating your own identity, the family environment plays a crucial role, particularly during high school, when it often provides room for growth but with a certain safety net, guiding and accompanying you through the entirety of the process.[4] In her study *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History (*Caruth, 1996*)*, Cathy Caruth points out that trauma is not fully experienced at the time it happens but rather recurs in invasive ways. She also highlights how trauma defies traditional narrative structures.[5] This is best illustrated by Connell's postponed emotional breakdown following his friend's death. Although his trauma doesn't seem particularly dramatic on the outside, it recurs inside of him in ways he can't quite articulate. Similarly, unresolved familial trauma that Marianne finds difficult to articulate or openly discuss with others is reflected in her emotional detachment and quest for self-worth.

Connell's and Marianne's emotional journeys are linked, yet their approaches to understanding and processing their feelings diverge. Marianne is emotionally self-aware and determined to understand her feelings, while Connell initially suppresses his emotions, avoiding introspection. Over time, as both characters experience personal growth, their emotional dynamics shift. Marianne, once an advocate for open dialogue, begins to regulate her emotions in response to her romantic experiences. Contrarily, Connell gradually becomes more introspective, allowing

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[4]  See *How the portrayal of family is representative of a society* in *Further Research,* page 22.

[5] See *How trauma defies traditional narrative structure and how this is reflected in the narrative structure of Normal People* in *Further Research,* page 22.

himself to confront his vulnerabilities and communicate more openly. It is clear then that the balance between emotional expression and restraint shapes personal growth and identity, but does it shape relationships as well?

## 1.2 Romantic relationship between the characters

Connell and Marianne give fictional support to the idea that balance between emotional expression and restraint can indeed shape personal growth. Throughout the novel we witness how Connell and Marianne learn to be in a relationship and grown into their respective roles in the relationship. However, it is unquestionably not a conventional relationship. What mistakes might they make in trying to break out of this very traditional form? What do they replace the form of relationships from the past with? Maybe we are now in a cultural moment where certainties around relationship forms have deteriorated slightly. In fact, Lorraine, Connell's mother, mentions how in the past, they were either going out with someone or not. And Connell replies, "Where did I come from, then?"—because he has never known his father. (Rooney, p.107)

In the past, the dominant fictions in which people took part socially were to be either in a monogamous relationship or in no relationship at all. "But that was not the reality of how people lived their lives; that is what they said they were doing, but it did not reflect the genuine experience for people" (Rooney, 17:47). The real experiences were considerably more ambiguous and uncertain much of the time. *Love Letters* by Virginia Woolf and Vita Sackville-West[6] proves as much. The same pattern appears now with modern relationships, but with the difference that the

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[6] First published in 1926.

labels that we place on relationships, inexistent in the past, reflect and draw attention to ambiguity to a greater extent. Monogamy has long been an ideal, even if not a widespread reality. Rooney captures how modern relationships increasingly reflect this gap—where emotional bonds exist outside traditional labels, mirroring shifts in sexual freedom and gender equality. It is through Connell and Marianne that Rooney is trying to represent the modern society in which we are now finding ourselves. By presenting such a complex love relationship, Rooney manages to portray how romantic relationships have changed in relation to the past. Nowadays, monogamy, though still present in society, is unlikely to happen in the majority of romantic relationships. As Anthony Giddens mentioned in his research paper *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love and Eroticism in Modern Societies*, in modern society it is "commonplace for a woman to have multiple lovers prior to entering a 'serious' sexual involvement" (Giddens, p. 6). Yet historically, a small percentage of women have always been attracted to sexual diversity. However, women have generally been classified as either virtuous or loose, and 'loose women' have only existed on the periphery of a respectable society. Contrarily, men have historically been thought to need sexual variety in order to satisfy their biological instincts. It has long been considered normal for men to have several sexual relationships prior to marriage. Both sexes have adjusted to a society where sexual equality is growing, however incomplete that equality may still be.[7]

Connell and Marianne's relationship does not fit neatly into traditional categories—and I would argue that this is precisely Rooney's point. Their connection, often ambiguous and shifting,

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[7] "You could have a different boyfriend, you know, he says. I mean, guys are constantly falling in love with you, from what I hear" (Rooney 125).

reflects how modern relationships resist fixed definitions. Just as cultural scripts around love and commitment have become more fluid, so too does their bond adapt, falter, and transform. Through them, Rooney captures the disorientation and beauty of navigating love without a map—where emotional truth must replace social convention. In addition to reflecting personal trauma, their emotional avoidance and fluctuating connection also indicate a generational attempt to establish intimacy without following a predetermined path.

As we have seen in the previous section, Marianne and Connell's high-school relationship is of great importance to better understand how they perform later in life and how they navigate the socioeconomic disparity present in the 21st century.[8] During their high-school years, Connell's mother works as a cleaner for Marianne's wealthy family, a dynamic that initially doesn't seem to trouble him. However, after a friend mocks him for it, Connell begins to exhibit subtle signs of anxiety. Like many teenagers, Connell is deeply affected by others' perceptions of him. The socioeconomic disparity between him and Marianne becomes a growing source of discomfort, complicating their already fragile relationship. They share meaningful conversations and connect over mutual interests, yet there remains a persistent emotional distance—moments where one of them may be internally struggling, but that pain goes unvoiced. A recurring pattern emerges in their interactions: just when a deeper, vulnerable conversation is about to unfold, Connell diverts the moment with physical intimacy, either by telling Marianne he loves her or initiating a kiss. This use of intimacy as a form of emotional avoidance suggests that, while their bond is intense, they often fear the exposure that comes with full emotional transparency. For Connell, in

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[8] See *Normal People, navigating adulthood and facing the 21st century's socioeconomic disparity* on *Further Research,* page 22.

particular, this reflects the internal conflict between his desire for connection and his fear of vulnerability. As a teenager, Connell embodies the widespread pressure to conform—to meet expectations, to appear composed—which ultimately leads him to prioritise the judgment of his peers and so fit in, over his authentic relationship with Marianne. In doing so, he distances himself from the only person he comes close to being emotionally open with. Teenage Marianne, on the other hand, carries emotional burdens that stem from her tumultuous home life. After the death of her father—who had been abusive—she is left with a mother who neglects her and a brother who openly mistreats her. This dysfunctional family environment erodes Marianne's sense of self-worth and teaches her to associate affection with submission. She repeatedly tells Connell that he could do anything he wanted to her. These statements are deeply revealing: they speak to her wish to be desired but also her need to relinquish control, to be validated through passivity. Connell's response to these declarations changes over time. In high school, he simply tells her she shouldn't do things that make her uncomfortable, but his emotional reaction is limited.

Later, when they reconnect at university, Marianne makes the same statement, and Connell experiences a panic attack. While this can be partially attributed to his worsening anxiety, it also reflects his deeper recognition of the emotional weight behind her words—and perhaps his fear of what their connection demands from him. Interestingly, when Marianne makes the same statement years later during a more stable phase in their relationship, Connell's response is entirely different: he admits he likes hearing it. This shift demonstrates how his reaction to Marianne's vulnerability correlates with how secure he feels in their relationship at any given time. In essence, Connell and Marianne's evolving relationship mirrors their psychological and emotional growth at different

stages in their lives. Their repeated miscommunications, the tension between physical and emotional intimacy, and the way they navigate trauma and self-worth all serve as compelling insights into how past wounds continue to influence present behaviour. Regarding their romantic relationship during this particular time of their lives, Connell and Marianne did have a very deep and intimate relationship, so intimate, though, that they would hide it from the outside world. It was during this time that they started to fall in love with each other.[9] However, because Connell was so scared to make their relationship publicly known, they had to keep their relationship in a bubble that only would be accessed by themselves, mostly when Connell decided.

Connell and Marianne's relationship illustrates the idea that, among the many people we meet in life, there may be one person with whom we share a unique connection. Despite periods of alienation, Connell's and Marianne's bond evolves, suggesting that true connection can withstand time and distance. As they both achieve greater emotional maturity and self-awareness, their romantic relationship flourishes, offering hope for a more stable future together. However, the novel resists offering a clear resolution, emphasising, up until the end, that their journey is a work in progress. Who we are socially is constantly shaped by the push and pull between how we view ourselves and how we're seen by those around us. They are, therefore, not fixed and unchanging, yet not entirely fluid either. Over time, recurring social interactions and role-based expectations can become ingrained and widely accepted, forming consistent behavioural norms for both individuals and groups. However, this sense of stability is only partial—when people face new challenges or shifts in context, these identities may become unsettled, leading to tension,

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[9] "*Well, I like you, Marianne says.*" (*Normal People*, page, 13)

change, or redefinition of roles and relationships.

Connell's and Marianne's stories also reflect themes of self-image and its role in shaping interactions and relationships. Connell's awareness of his external persona gives him the ability to navigate social settings with ease, yet it covers his internal insecurities. Similarly, Marianne's carefully built self-image allows her to take control of social situations, but it often masks her feelings of isolation. Both characters fight with the tension between their public personas and private selves, highlighting how social expectations shape behaviour.  As Rooney mentions in an interview, Connell, for instance, could come across as a vastly different person in a different relationship with a different woman or man. In fact, this specific book is not really about Connell's psychology or Marianne's psychology, but it is about the dynamic that appears between them and the developments in that. "They never occurred to me without each other." (Rooney, 12:12)

*Normal People* is a moving story about relationships, identity, and human development. The common path of Connell and Marianne highlights the value of emotional openness and self-discovery in creating profound relationships. Their narrative implies that although interpersonal interactions often influence personal development, honest intimacy entails the bravery to be open and genuine. Ultimately, their relationship serves as an example of how to find a balance between independence and interdependence, reminding readers that certain relationships are worthwhile despite uncertainty. Through Marianne and Connell, we learn how hard it can be for normal people to foster authentic connections. In Rooney's portrayal, romantic relationships are not fixed identities but living, shifting dynamics. Connell and Marianne's love story is not a straight line—it's a mirror to how our generation is learning, slowly and painfully, how to love outside the lines.

## 2. Normal People and Issues in Modern Society

The release of the televised adaptation of *Normal People* during the COVID-19 pandemic examined the story's central themes of emotional intimacy, longing, and isolation, lending them a deeper resonance in a time of widespread social disconnection. As people around the world faced unprecedented levels of loneliness and emotional uncertainty, the fragile but passionate relationship between Connell and Marianne resonated deeply with audiences. Their struggles with vulnerability, communication, and self-worth mirrored the collective emotional landscape, making the characters feel especially relatable. This cultural moment not only amplified the impact of Rooney's work but also contributed significantly to the novel's popularity and her growing prominence in contemporary literature.

The ability to act and feel in accordance with one's true self is referred to in this context as emotional authenticity. Recent psychological research has examined this idea as a 'state' experience that is influenced by one's surroundings, interpersonal interactions, and self-perception. Sally Rooney's *Normal People* uses the emotionally contrasting journeys of Connell and Marianne to explore how emotional overcontrol—particularly in men—is socially reinforced, while emotional freedom remains conditional and fragile. These differing emotional modes directly shape their ability to build authentic connection, reflecting broader challenges in contemporary relationships where vulnerability is both necessary and deeply risky. As I previously mentioned in the first section of this thesis, "Intertwined Identities: Trauma and Connection in Sally Rooney's *Normal People",* Connell's early inability to articulate his feelings highlights the stigma surrounding male emotional expression, yet his eventual emotional growth suggests a social

push toward greater emotional intelligence and self-awareness. Marianne, in contrast, is able to express herself more fully only in psychologically safe environments, underscoring how trust and emotional security are essential foundations for genuine intimacy. Their emotionally complex relationship shows that openness, while often difficult, is critical for meaningful human connection. Beyond its specific cultural setting, the novel addresses universal themes of vulnerability, authenticity and emotional struggle. The narrative's intimate access to the characters' thoughts mirrors the rhythms of real emotional life, making readers feel as though they are thinking alongside Connell and Marianne. This effect arises from Rooney's deeply empathetic portrayal of contemporary individuals navigating issues like anxiety, precarity and relational ambiguity. Rooney has, in fact, noted in interviews that she feels little distance between herself and her characters, as though she is writing not about grand, exceptional experiences but about the everyday emotional realities that define modern life (Rooney, 26:03). This closeness between author and character reinforces the novel's central claim: that emotional authenticity is both profoundly ordinary and profoundly human and that its expression—however flawed—is essential for connection in the modern world.

Connell and Marianne's transition from the emotional confines of small-town life in Sligo to Trinity College's openness serves as a metaphor for how changing surroundings can promote emotional independence, a greater sense of self, and the possibility of genuine connection. Both characters are influenced by constrictive emotional expectations in Sligo, where Marianne and Connell are minutely aware of social judgement: Marianne internalises a profound sense of social alienation and unworthiness, while Connell conceals his relationship with her out of shame and

fear of being judged by others. Connell's emotional control and fear of being seen are consistent with the emotional signs of inauthenticity as defined by Lenton et al., namely, anxiety, low self-esteem, and excessive public self-consciousness (Lenton et al. 281–282). In contrast, Trinity College provides a more open and varied environment where both characters can start examining repressed facets of their selves. While Marianne momentarily finds places where her emotional intensity is accepted—though not without vulnerability and risk—Connell faces his mental health issues and class anxieties. This shift emphasises how emotional authenticity is greatly impacted by outside factors and is not just an internal quality. Lenton et al. assert that authenticity is not just a constant personality feature but rather a situational, felt experience. It develops when people behave in ways that are consistent with who they really are and is fostered by settings that offer acceptance, emotional safety, and autonomy. In today's interconnected world—where people navigate between digital and physical spaces with varying levels of openness—the ability to form meaningful connections often hinges on contexts that encourage, rather than suppress, emotional expression. Rooney's portrayal of this journey emphasizes how exposure to new perspectives and inclusive social environments can foster emotional growth and drive personal transformation.

Marianne's journey highlights how emotional freedom is often only possible within psychologically safe environments, suggesting that authentic connection relies not just on personal openness but on trust and context. Similarly, Connell's early emotional repression and gradual development underscore the cultural stigma around male vulnerability, revealing how emotional overcontrol—particularly among men—can inhibit self-understanding and obstruct intimacy. Together, their emotional trajectories reflect a broader social tension between the need for

emotional independence and the desire for closeness. This theme is reinforced by the novel's engagement with wider social issues, including class dynamics, social mobility, and the implicit power of hierarchies within relationships, which mirror real-world concerns about privilege and inequality. By intertwining the political with the personal and adopting a psychologically realistic narrative style, Rooney offers a nuanced portrayal of how emotional lives are shaped by both internal struggles and external structures. Marianne's evolution into a self-assured, independent woman who still values her connection with Connell captures the contemporary challenge of balancing individual growth with meaningful emotional bonds.

The characters' preoccupation with being 'normal' reveals how social ideals can suppress emotional authenticity, forcing individuals into a performance of stability rather than to pursue real connection. Although the title *Normal People* was a late addition to the text, the concept of normality recurs throughout the novel in subtle but significant ways. Much of what Connell and Marianne experience—emotional insecurity, social awkwardness, longing for connection—feels deeply familiar and relatable, which underscores Rooney's interest in exploring the ordinary rather than the exceptional. Marianne believes she is somehow "not normal", that she is either beneath or above what she perceives as socially acceptable, while Connell is consumed by a desire to fit into his idea of normality. His struggle to maintain that facade often leads to intense anxiety, particularly when he feels he has failed to meet those expectations. Although their approaches differ, both characters are negotiating internalised pressures to conform to an ideal that ultimately proves an emotional limitation. In the end, Rooney presents them as deeply ordinary people undergoing mundane but emotionally rich experiences, suggesting that what we consider 'normal'

is often a mask we wear to avoid vulnerability. Through their internal monologues and emotional miscommunications, Rooney appears to *inhabit* the idea of normality, not to idealise it, but to interrogate it from within—revealing how the desire to be normal can both obscure and illuminate our most authentic selves.

Rooney's focus on mundane, everyday emotional pain challenges dominant narratives about what is worth expressing, arguing that true understanding comes from recognising the universality of inner struggle. In *Normal People*, this type of pain is often overlooked by social standards of 'normality', which can suppress or invalidate the depth of everyday emotional experiences. Rooney herself, in an interview, expressed a strong connection to a line from Margaret Drabble's *The Millstone*: "I'm sure the experiences that I was having were very ordinary experiences, and if they weren't, it wouldn't be worth writing about them." (Rooney, 19:36). This resonates deeply with Rooney's approach to writing, as she explores experiences that, though seemingly banal or awkward in the moment, are actually profound. By focusing on these ordinary yet significant moments, Rooney undermines traditional narratives that elevate certain experiences over others, highlighting the emotional complexity that exists in the most 'normal' aspects of life. Through this, she calls attention to the subtle, shared pains of living that often go unrecognised but are integral to authentic human connection.

Millennials and Gen Z, Rooney's primary audience, are often marked by an acute awareness of emotional well-being, economic precarity, and the complexities of contemporary relationships—experiences that are mirrored in *Normal People*. Growing up in an era of intense internet connectivity yet experiencing significant emotional isolation, these generations can relate

to the novel's exploration of mental health, self-worth, and the challenges of authentic connection. Through her minimalist, dialogue-driven style, Rooney taps into the introspective and psychologically nuanced storytelling that has gained traction in modern literature, reflecting a broader cultural shift toward examining emotional depth. *Normal People* suggests that emotional freedom—supported by trust and psychological safety—is essential for fostering deeper understanding and intimacy. In contrast, emotional overcontrol, often shaped by social expectations and fear of judgement, leads to alienation and loneliness. Through its quiet psychological realism, the novel argues that true authenticity in human relationships requires emotional openness, a notion that has become increasingly radical in a world that still struggles to accommodate vulnerability, especially among men. Rooney's depiction of emotional openness as an essential requirement for intimacy strengthens Lenton et al.'s statement that authenticity is crucial for psychological health and meaningful connections in addition to self-coherence.

## 3. Conclusions

After a close reading of Rooney's *Normal People*, it seems highly plausible to argue that the author is deeply invested in portraying the interiority of her characters and the nuances of their interactions. It is through this intimate lens that we come to understand Connell and Marianne not only as individuals but also as products of their environments. Rooney shows how social forces—such as class, patriarchy, and emotional repression—shape their behaviors, relationships, and sense of self. These are forces beyond their control, yet they significantly inform how they navigate the world.

*Normal People* challenges readers to reflect on the ways in which external circumstances and cultural expectations can influence our ability to express ourselves authentically. Through Connell and Marianne's evolving relationship, Rooney offers a quiet but powerful meditation on vulnerability, emotional growth, and the enduring human longing for genuine connection in a world that often prizes appearance over depth. In doing so, she not only cements her status as a defining voice in contemporary literature, but also affirms fiction's continued role as a mirror to society—capturing the fears, contradictions, and emotional landscapes of a generation.

At its heart, *Normal People* is a story about connection—about how people shape, challenge, and sometimes wound each other in their attempts to understand themselves and the world around them. The novel invites readers to reflect not only on the characters' lives but also on their own, asking profound questions about love, identity, and whether "normal" is even a meaningful category. Rooney's precise prose and emotional acuity elevate the novel into a meditation on the complexity and beauty of being human.

That kind of exquisite, enclosed portrait feels rare in contemporary fiction, yet it resonates with the tradition of the 19th-century novel—particularly in its psychological depth and focus on ordinary lives. Like Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, Rooney's *Normal People* renders the emotional inner worlds of her characters with tenderness and restraint, while also situating them within the social structures that subtly shape their decisions and identities.

In conclusion, the title *Normal People* is a carefully chosen, deeply ironic reflection of the novel's central concerns: human relationships, social pressure, conformity, and the search for

meaning in everyday life. Rooney invites us to question what it truly means to be "normal"—and whether such a concept can ever fully capture the complexity of lived experience. Her novel stands as a testament to the quiet power of introspection and to the enduring capacity of literature to illuminate the truths we often struggle to articulate ourselves.

## 4. Further Research

Because of constraints on length, I could not include a detailed assessment of certain ideas. This is also because some of these are outside the scope of my TFG. However, I still think they are relevant and could be interesting to explore in future.

<u>How the portrayal of family is representative of a society:</u> Family has a crucial role in accompanying individuals during their growth and self-discovery, thereby defining their transition into adulthood. This is evident in the relationship between Lorraine and Connell, particularly in how Lorraine has contributed to Connell's development during his high school years. However, there are instances where these roles are neither ideal nor expected, as Marianne's situation is the reverse of Connell's.

<u>How trauma defies traditional narrative structure and how this is reflected in the narrative structure of *Normal People*:</u> The fragmented episodic form, emotional interiority, recurrent relational patterns and subtle temporal shifts all reflect trauma's effects on the conventional narrative structure. This method produces a depiction of trauma's repercussions on identity and connection.

<u>*Normal People*, navigating adulthood and facing the 21st century's socioeconomic disparity:</u> *Normal People* demonstrates how existing socioeconomic inequality can impact a person's

development into an adult. Connell strives to obtain a scholarship that will finance his degree since his ongoing problems to find employment or pay his rent have made him more conscious of his options. Marianne, on the other hand, is well aware of her financial advantages and perhaps takes them for granted, not having to worry about tuition or housing and taking the scholarship exam just for fun.

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## 6. Appendices

**6.1 Appendix 1: A Note on Sally Rooney**

Sally Rooney, born on February 20, 1991, in Castlebar, County Mayo, Ireland, has been recognised as "the first great millennial novelist". Her writing explores modern relationships, emotional depth, and subtle social commentary. Rooney's second novel, *Normal People*, published in 2018, brought her widespread acclaim and was later adapted into a successful television series co-written by Rooney. The show starred Paul Mescal as Connell Waldron and Daisy Edgar-Jones as Marianne Sheridan, and it garnered multiple award nominations.

Rooney's debut novel, *Conversations with Friends*, was published in 2017 and later adapted into a TV series in 2022, with Rooney serving as executive producer. In 2021, she released *Beautiful World, Where Are You*, a novel centered around four characters whose lives intertwine through a mix of everyday experiences and deeper philosophical reflections shared through emails. Most recently, in 2024, she published *Intermezzo*, which tells the story of Peter and Ivan, two brothers struggling to move forward after their father's funeral.

Outside of her novels, Rooney was the editor of *The Stinging Fly*, an Irish literary magazine, during 2017–18. Her writing style is known for being emotionally resonant, accessible, and understated, with a strong focus on dialogue and interior life. Rooney herself has expressed a lack of interest in writing isolated characters, preferring instead to explore the ways people are shaped by relationships. She emphasises the complexity of communication and how language can fall short

in expressing emotion. *Normal People* in particular has been praised for its nuanced portrayal of connection and earned several awards, including the Costa Book Award.

**6.2 Appendix 2: Normal People**

Sally Rooney's *Normal People* explores the profound ways in which individuals can shape one another through love, vulnerability, and shared experience. At its heart, the novel traces the fragile yet powerful connections that bind people together, illuminating how these bonds can shift, unravel, or endure over time. Rooney's narrative is rich with themes of miscommunication, emotional fragility, identity, and power dynamics within love, creating a story that is both deeply personal and broadly resonant.

The novel follows Marianne Sheridan and Connell Waldron, two teenagers from Sligo, Ireland, as they move from high school to university life in Dublin between 2011 and 2015. Their relationship, marked by tenderness and turbulence, mirrors their evolving sense of self and place in the world. Rooney masterfully portrays how love is rarely straightforward; it is shaped by silent fears, past traumas, and social expectations. The contrast between Marianne's wealth and Connell's working-class background introduces a subtle but persistent tension, underscoring how class impacts intimacy and self-perception.

The title *Normal People* serves as an ironic commentary, elevating the ordinary experiences of its characters—awkward silences, fleeting joys, emotional wounds—into something deeply meaningful. Rooney challenges the reader to question social definitions of normality and to consider the pressures imposed by culture, class, and family. Through this lens, identity emerges

not as fixed but fluid, shaped by personal growth, external forces, and the people we love. Though rooted in modern Ireland, the novel's reflections on connection and selfhood speak to timeless and universal human experiences.