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Arenas Contreras, Sara; Martín Alegre, Sara , dir. Painfully Normal : Connell's Brittle Masculinity in Sally Rooney's Normal People. 2022. 61 pag. (1099 Màster Universitari en Estudis Anglesos Avançats / Advanced English Studies)

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Painfully Normal: Connell's Brittle Masculinity in Sally Rooney's *Normal People*

Treball de Fi de Màster/ MA Dissertation

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Màster d'Estudis Anglesos Avançats

June 2022

I had to be there from the start, I had to be the fucking man
It was a clamber of a life, I sucked the ring of every hand
Had them plying me with drink, even met with their demands
When the cherries lined up, I kept the spoilings for myself
'Till I had thirty ways of dying looking at me from the shelf
A cloud-parting smile I had, a real good child I was
But this island's run by sharks, with children's bones stuck in their jaws
Now the morning's filled with cokeys tryna talk you through it all
Is their mammy Fine Gael and is their daddy Fianna Fáil?
And they say they love the land, but they don't feel it go to waste
Put a mirror to the youth and they will only see their face
Makes flowers looks like broadsheets, "every young man wants to die"
Say it to the man who profits and the bastard walks by [...]
Would I lie?

Fontaines D.C

"I Love You"

Skinty Fia

Partisan Records

2022

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Acknowledgements

I have only one person to blame for the initial idea that led to this dissertation: my good friend Jamie Scott. If you ever meet him, you will understand why he is one of my favourite men on the face of the Earth, together with my brother Ricard. Without them, the thoughts and motivation that lead to this project would have never materialised.

The person that deserves the most acknowledgement because of her incomparable help in the completion of this dissertation is my supervisor, Dr. Sara Martín Alegre. She has gently guided me and pushed me to be my best writer self.

I would also like to thank my examiners, Dr. Maria Cristina Pividori and Dr. Nicholas Spengler, for taking the time to read my work and providing useful feedback at all times.

Abstract: The reception of Sally Rooney's work has been remarkably positive, as it resonates with the experience that many millennials have of intimacy, desire and the effect of these on contemporary life. So far, *Normal People* (2019) has been widely discussed in mainstream media and, to some extent, in academia. Given the relevance of the portrayal of the main relationship in the novel, I found it necessary to open a discussion on the configuration of masculinity of the main character. Whilst there has been a lot of debate and different insights offered on the construction of the feminine identity of the character of Marianne Sheridan, there have been very few explorations of her male counterpart, Connell Waldron. Mainstream criticism has described Connell as representation of the archetypal hero that saves a damsel in distress. Nevertheless, the novel presents a plot in which Waldron usually feels helpless against the social force of patriarchy and the pull of the capitalist economy that rule his life. The young man is presented as an ambivalent character that has the potential to cause damage, and exert power over Marianne in their relationship, but also suffers with mental health issues that render him unable to make the correct decisions in most of the aspects of his personal life. In fact, Connell does not adhere to the traditional representation of manhood that is expected from Western society, and in particular to the one of the Irish context. Hence, exploring Waldron's character from the framework of Masculinity Studies and an intersectional approach will help understand the different gender dynamics that are presented in the novel.

The objective of this dissertation is to explore masculine identity, and to establish how it affects Connell's and Marianne's intimate relationship. Waldron's masculine identity finally translates in an intimacy that can be described as 'cold'. On the one hand, he finds the space to express warmth when he is with Marianne, although he experiences an extreme disconnection with his emotions. In addition to this, he seems to involuntarily exert power over her, which he does not know how to process. This contributes to the construction of a conflicted masculinity in the context of deep crisis of modern times. In this sense, Connell's masculinity can be defined as non-hegemonic, as he struggles with most of the demands that society has of manliness. Moreover, due to his working-class background, he feels the need to conform to societal standards rather than being assertive, as he usually feels inferior to others. Connell's position in society is constantly threatened because he does not seem to adapt to the standards of masculinity that the context of deep economic crisis demands. Hence, despite some of the readings in the media Connell does not embody the figure of Marianne's 'saviour', but is rather a more faithful representation of the contemporary male experience, which can be defined as 'brittle' as it is characterised by a solid surface that hides a sense of crumbling insecurity.

Keywords: Masculinity, Irish Identity, *Normal People*, Sally Rooney, cold intimacy, brittle masculinity

Introduction: Sally Rooney and the Representation of Millennial Love

Sally Rooney, born in Castlebar, Ireland in 1991, claimed in an interview that when she started to write *Conversations with Friends* (2018)—her first book—she didn’t mean to write a novel, but rather the story developed quite spontaneously (Hu, 2019). Indeed, writing seems to come quite naturally to the Mayo County author. This reflection about her own creative process signals at Rooney’s own perception of her characteristic “simple prose” (Brouillette, 2020), which critics have attributed to her success, as it makes her work easily translatable to other contexts (Brouillette, 2020). Her effortless style has definitely been one of the key elements that have helped shape a whole generation’s view of the topic of relationships, both economic and emotional, in the fiction of the contemporary period of late capitalism (Delistraty, 2019). Readers find connecting with Rooney’s writing extremely easy, as they can “borrow the glow” (Enright, 2018) and have a “well-rounded literary experience of emotional depth and profound societal rumination” (Kemmy, 2021), whilst at the same time have “fun” (Grady, 2019). What makes this author particular is the enormous appeal she has generated in the millennial literary culture¹. The author has, indeed, been defined by some journalists and critics as the “millennial whisperer” (Delistraty, 2019), or “as the novelist of the millennial generation” (Dockterman, 2019: 54).

Millennials are defined by scholars as those “born between 1982 and 2004” (Luttrell and McGrath, 2016: 21). Hence, being one myself, I could not help but feeling some curiosity towards the author’s work. Rooney’s novels had already been widely praised in the media when I first came into contact with them. This happened during my

¹ Even my fifteen-year-old sister, taught by millennials in high school, has been asked to read the Catalan translation of *Normal People* (2019) for one of her classes.

third year in the mid-pandemic United Kingdom. Any *connoisseur* of the literary panorama in the English-speaking world would have known then that “all people who talked books seemed willing to talk about” (Grady, 2019) was Rooney’s second novel, *Normal People* (2019, 2018)—and its subsequent televised adaptation by the BBC². The series was released less than two years after the novel was published, and became a big hit amongst the audience. It was the genuine, generalised feeling of keenness towards the series that made me watch it in the first place, given the incredible reviews³ that I read online and heard from my friends and colleagues. As soon as I pressed the ‘play’ button on the BBC iPlayer platform, I was hooked. Just hours after I had switched the TV on, I ordered Rooney’s first two novels on Amazon. They were delivered the next day and I read both of them in the space of four days. I totally had a first-hand experience of the appeal that Rooney’s work had had on many other readers, as I could see how they were “highly relatable” to my own life (Brouillette, 2020).

² *Normal People*. Created by Element Pictures, written by Lenny Abrahamson, Alice Birch, Hettie Macdonald and Sally Rooney. Hulu, BBC Three and RTÉ, 2020.

³ “It’s a triumph in every way, from acting and direction to script, and if we see a better drama – certainly about adolescence, one which takes it seriously without treating it indulgently – this year, I’d be very surprised. It’s a beautiful, hugely beautiful thing” in Mangan, Lucy. “*Normal People* review – Sally Rooney’s Love Story is a Small-Screen Triumph”. The Guardian, 26 April 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2020/apr/26/normal-people-review-sally-rooney-bbc-hulu> [Accessed 20 May 2022]

“For all its raw emotion and underlying sadness, this is a heartfelt love story that radiates warmth from the very start. Expectations might be high, but no one needs to worry. If this really is the only BBC drama we get this year, at least it’s a good one” in Bradshaw, Paul. “*Normal People* review: a Heartfelt Love Story that Deals with Longing, Introspection and Awkward Sex Scenes”, *NME*, 22 April 2020, <https://www.nme.com/reviews/normal-people-review-sally-rooney-2651624> [Accessed 20 May 2022]

““Normal People” looks and sounds like a teen melodrama about falling in love and getting it on. But more than that, it’s a double-barreled bildungsroman, an empathetic study of two young people coming, together, of age” in Poniewozik, James. “*Normal People* review: Their Love Will Tear You Apart”, The New York Times, 28 April 2020 <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/28/arts/television/normal-people-review.html> [Accessed 20 May 2022]

It is precisely this relatability about Rooney's narrative that has qualified her novels as "aspirational" (Grady 2019) or, in other words: "a signifier of a certain literary chic" (Grady 2019). *Normal People* felt as the boundary between a before and an after in my reading. One of the reasons for this was the portrayal of a feeling of well-known postmodern world "fickle" intimacy (Do, 2020): "not quite knowing what we all know well [...] this pulsing possibility of ongoing doubt—of misunderstanding" (Hu, 2019). Millennials usually love with "a certain withholding, a desire to maintain autonomy and avoid dependency, and a reluctance to appear to be "too much"" (Brouillette, 2020). Therefore, it is easy to understand how the type of relationship that the main characters in *Normal People*, Connell and Marianne, have might be highly relatable for a generation that seems to perceive romance as a potential threat to their individuality. In the novel, this mindset is portrayed in the drift-apart get-back-together pattern of the main characters' romantic relationship. As a key element of the development in the plot of the love story, this relationship pattern has appealed to the millennial readership because it relates to the type of intimate bond that this generation is leading, which is inevitably "impossible at best and dangerous at worst" (Grady, 2019). Since this mode of "fitful on-and-off-again romance" (Brouillette, 2020) is common enough amongst millennials, it has become a "trope" (Brouillette, 2020) that Rooney does not fail to use it in all her novels. The other examples of this motif are Nick and Frances in *Conversations with Friends* (2018, 2017), and the two protagonist couples in her most recent *Beautiful World, Where Are You?* (2021)⁴.

⁴ All of the characters mentioned in here have on-and-off relationships that are at the chore of their romantic and emotional lives. Nevertheless, it seems that they have the feeling they tread on eggshells when they are with their partner and they seem to think that they never can fully express their emotions, as this would mean appearing 'clingy' or 'needy'. The fact that the audience feels appealed by this type of relationship in her novels seems to suggest that the sort of fragile romantic bond amongst millennials is extremely common.

Another explanation for how the public has identified with Rooney's novel could be that reading *Normal People*, and navigating the protagonists' relationship from their teenage years into early adulthood, often feels as "a kind of therapy and can encourage people to understand themselves" (Brouillette, 2020). Hence, there is something about the characters that is extremely "attractive" (Delistraty, 2019) because it causes an emotional response from the reader—whether positive or negative—(Enright, 2018). It is the characters' awareness of their intellectual and inner lives, or how they connect with their feelings and emotions that show Rooney's unique millennial romantic understanding (Laing, 2018: 47).

Marianne and Connell are, indeed, extremely "brainy" characters (Mars-Jones, 2018: 34), which also adds layers of meaning in the building up of the love story. Their relationship starts through the unexpected event of their sudden intimacy and "mind-shiftingly pleasurable" sex life (Jarvis, 2020), which "dominates the book, though it's by no means graphic" (Laing, 2018: 47). It is in sex that Marianne and Connell find they can transcend the impositions of the world around them (Hu, 2019; Heatherly, 2020; Jarvis, 2020). This could imply for this generation that the heterosexual—"vanilla sex" (Jarvis, 2020)—represented in the novel helps attain a degree of satisfaction that the current violent pornographic culture dumped on millennials can never provide. This narrative seems to suggest that there is a potential to shift to a more optimistic mindset in the millennial romantic life, instead of relying on the violent approach to intimacy that seems to be the norm in contemporary society. I believe so because, even when Connell and Marianne maintain a certain distance in the relationship, there are moments of warmth that signal at the human need for connection in a very "translatable" manner (Hennigan, 2018), even when they experience a fundamental "inarticulacy [...] of verbal dialogue"

(Loach, 2020). Thus, their sexual lives serve as a type of “release” (Loach, 2020) for their lack of communication.

Rooney has famously appealed to her feminist readership for the large extent to which the portrayal of her female characters has resonated with the experience of the young women of this specific generation—particularly in Ireland (Hennigan, 2018). While it is true that Rooney’s female protagonists excellently embody the experience of the young millennial woman, it must be taken into consideration that she follows a tradition of writers that have tackled the same realities (Cameron, 2020). What I find interesting is that Rooney’s take on female experience has been considered unconventional (Grady, 2019; Harding, 2021) and easily identifiable in other Western contexts (Hennigan, 2018). However, critics have overlooked at how the representation of men in her work is articulated. In the case of *Normal People*, I found the lack of discussion about Connell particularly concerning⁵.

Whilst much of criticism has focussed on the figure of Marianne and how she constructs her femininity (Hennigan, 2018; Brouillette, 2020); there have been very few claims about the figure of Connell. Criticism has actually suggested that he, in a way, acts as the knight that saves the damsel in distress (Dockterman, 2019: 54). This claim is certainly logical given how the plot develops. Connell defends Marianne at different points in the story from violence. However, this approach overlooks the essential trait that defines Connell: his inherent insecurity. In order to be emotionally supportive, any

⁵ Most articles in the media that exclusively discussed Connell did so in an almost comical manner falling on the “working-class hunk cliché” (Heatherly, 2020). Examples of this are the Instagram account, Connell Waldron’s Chain [@connellschain] *Instagram*, 2020-2022 <https://www.instagram.com/connellschain/> [Accessed 10 February 2022]; or the following article: Lord, Annie. “Why Are Those Little Neck Chains So Sexy?”, *Vice*, 30 April 2020 <https://www.vice.com/en/article/bvgwp8/normal-people-connell-silver-chain> [Accessed 10 February 2022]

individual needs to be self-confident and able to tend to their own needs. Hence, since Connell does not seem capable of emotionally looking after himself, he cannot take care of Marianne and be fully supportive of her. I believe Connell is quite incapable of actually ‘saving’ anyone. This dissertation analyses the behaviour that Connell adopts throughout the narrative as proof of his own insecure masculinity. In order to do this, I use an intersectional approach which takes into consideration how gender, class background and mental health influence Connell’s masculinity.

Given the already existing debate about the novel, this dissertation aims to explore a different aspect of it. This account could lead to a deeper understanding of the millennial conception of the world of masculine relationships and of masculinity. In her book *The Will To Change* (2004), bell hooks explores the need to deeply engage men in the feminist debate as they are generally not accepted within the feminist community (hooks, 2004: 107). Feminist criticism has engaged with *Normal people*, providing plenty of perspectives on it. Nevertheless, it has not engaged with the novel’s potential to become a space for the portrayal of a specific type of masculinity, that is not necessarily positive but shows potential for change. Since the novel has evidently appealed to the millennial audience by representing a new type of masculinity, it is necessary to focus on the alternative male figure that the narrative portrays. This could be encouraging for all the young men that see themselves mirrored in Rooney’s novels, but also in understanding new ways of portraying intimacy and masculinity for a generation that has experienced a series of world crisis at a young age.

The theoretical frame of Masculinity Studies allows for a deeper understanding of the position that Connell occupies in society, considering how hegemony or the dominant male model of conduct (Connell, 2005: 77) affects his different behaviours and the conception of his masculine self. This study seeks to deepen the understanding of

Connell's experience of class and masculinity through an intersectional approach, considering the consequences that these have on his life and romantic relationships. In addition to this, I offer a re-definition of the concept of "brittle masculinity" (Clark, 2013: 121; Snyder, 2017) in order to explain how the male protagonist interacts with the world. This concept was used by Christopher Clark in his book *The Sleepwalkers* (2013) to describe the attitude of some military men in high positions in Eastern Europe during the Second World War. Despite the potential this term seems to have, it has not been applied much to describe masculinity in other contexts. The word 'brittle' implies that whereas in appearance, the masculinity shown to the world appears to be solid, under the surface there is a crumbling insecurity that will eventually lead to lashing out (Reiss and Grossmark, 2009: 184-185). As seen in the novel, Connell behaves like a kind human being; however, he has the potential to react violently when Marianne is at the centre of conflict—he threatens her brother Alan when he is aggressive towards her. Following this description of masculinity, the first chapter of this dissertation outlines Connell's understanding of masculinity and how this is affected by his mental health issues. For this character, being a man means fitting in and fulfilling social expectations. Nevertheless, in doing so, he neglects his emotional life, which causes him to experience depression and anxiety. Connell's lack of connection with his emotions and his failure at communication are a direct consequence of his context and circumstances, which point at the extent to which his life is affected by them. This section puts into perspective the millennial understanding of hegemonic masculinity and the underlying issues that it carries for the men of this generation.

The second chapter of the dissertation focuses on the relationship Connell has with Marianne and the implications that intimacy has for him, with the objective to show to what extent the narrative succeeds in representing the experience of intimacy of the

millennial male. The romantic relationship seems to be a safe space for both characters to express their emotions, especially for Connell. When he is with Marianne, there is no need for him to pretend he conforms to what bell hooks would call “a system that denies men full access to their freedom of will” (hooks, 2004: 27); nor does he need to be “compliant” (Connell, 2005: 77) when he is in the safety of the intimate space with her. Despite this, because of his secrecy about the relationship, as well as the indication that their bond is something that requires avoidance to be discussed in public, Connell ends up damaging Marianne’s trust in him. There is a coldness about Connell’s attitude, which I further explore in relation to intimacy. Waldron’s attitude seems to reflect the reality that men are willing to partake in meaningful forms of intimacy, although they still seek to keep their social position intact (hooks, 2004: 6). In Connell’s case, he definitely gives the impression that, even when he truly has feelings for Marianne, he struggles to show them and to create a warm relationship environment where intimacy can be fulfilling for both, because doing so with Marianne—who is not popular in school—will threaten his social position.

Ultimately, this dissertation has two main goals. The first objective is to offer a rejection of previous claims that Connell acts as Marianne’s saviour, since he is not in a position to do so. Instead, he represents a model of masculinity which is a product of the consequences of class, gender expectations and mental health issues. The second objective is to explore how Connell’s masculinity affects his relationship, which can be defined as a ‘cold intimacy’, as he struggles to communicate and connect with his emotions.

Chapter 1: Connell's Masculinity in its Social Context

This chapter explores how the construction of the masculinity for the main character is intertwined with his tendency to follow social expectations, as there is a lack of connection with his emotions that leads him to experience mental health issues. Connell Waldron can be identified as someone who appears to have a solid position in the society of his native Carricklea, although this masks his inner insecurity—mostly caused by his inferiority complex due to his family background and his class—that surfaces when he has to make decisions about his conduct. I relate this to mainstream patriarchal conceptions of masculinity, and notions of how men are supposed to interact with society in compliance to those.

Whenever the word masculinity appears in mass media, it is mostly associated to the negative term “toxic masculinity” (Harrington, 2021: 346). Carol Harrington defines this type of masculinity as “a recognizable character type” (350), the particularity of which “essentialized marginalized men as aggressive” (48). In his book *Toxic Masculinity: Curing the Virus: Making Men Smarter, Healthier, Safer* (2021), Stephen Whitehead explains the wide range of masculine behaviours that can be identified with toxicity:

Clearly, toxic masculinity encompasses a wide range of behaviours and is not exclusive to any one class, sexuality, ethnicity or race. Some men who exhibit it will be vehemently anti-racist but also paedophiles and sex abusers. Other men may be anti-racist, but verbally violent and bullying towards people. Lots of men with toxic masculinity may simply enjoy being members of a men-only brotherhood, not violent at all but ignorant of how their masculine practice feeds into sexism and, ultimately, misogyny. Some will be boys and teenagers searching for peer approval, thereby leading them to conform to toxic masculine behaviours – even if so doing damages their life possibilities. Toxic masculinity can be further linked to drinking cultures which not only reduce male inhibitions but strengthen male bonding and sexist behaviour. (59)

Whitehead's definition of behaviours indicates that, contrary to what Harrington claims, men do not need to be necessarily marginalised in order to become toxic. They just need

to adopt harmful conducts towards others. In her paper, Harrington explores how the term has been spread by the feminist movement and mainstream media to the detriment of the “scholarly” (350) definitions of masculinity. It is no coincidence that the expression, which has seen a surge especially when the “term took off as part of what some scholars have called a new “feminist moment,” intensifying after 2014 (e.g. Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer 2017, 885) with Beyoncé’s MTV Video Music Awards performance in front of a giant, glowing sign reading, “FEMINIST”” (Harrington, 346). The millennial generation would have grown up in a world where this term was coined decades before and was commonly used to describe aggressive masculine behaviour (Harrington, 347). What seems curious to me is that, even when the millennial youth has been described as inherently pedantic and dainty of external help—they are known by the wider society as the “the *entitled* group” (Luttrell and McGrath, 21)—, there seems to be an insistence on labelling marginalised men of this generation, especially white and working-class as toxic, pointing at them being an increasing social ““problem”” without a clear solution (Amit and Dyck in Amit and Dyck (eds.): 2012, 3).

Millennial working-class men are essentially “portrayed as being dangerous” (15), thus justifying the link of their identities to the outbursts of rage connected with the usual description of toxic masculinity. Even millennial Jordan Stephens describes the toxic man in his article *Toxic Masculinity is Everywhere: It’s Up to Us Men to Fix It* (2017) as: “one of these guys who takes pride in jumping from girl to girl or brags about breaking hearts [...] grab a woman’s ass, or tell her what to do, or watch too much porn or deny her space” (2017). These manifestations of harmful masculine behaviour are very much present in society, even though men have already started the conversation on how to repair the

trauma associated with this type masculinity⁶. It is only natural, then, that working-class Connell Waldron in *Normal People* has been labelled as ‘toxic’. However, this is not the case for every single millennial working-class man. Most of them actually present systemic “conformity” (Amit and Dyck in Amit and Dyck (eds.), 17) to patriarchal values which explains the prevalence of traditional notions of “respectability” and “adult independence” (17) amongst them. These values serve the purpose to help them identify with the traditional notions of masculinity that enhance the navigation of their own contemporary society.

Normal People by Sally Rooney has been defined as “what we might wish [millennials] to represent” (Hu, 2019). This explains that the concept of toxic masculinity has been used by fellow millennials to describe the behaviour of the men that appear in the novel. The narrative follows the evolution of the relationship between Connell Waldron and Marianne Sheridan, two young people from County Sligo, Ireland. The story starts with their clandestine involvement during their high school days, and continues with a series of events that provoke their drifting apart to end up being together again several times. The responsibility of this relationship pattern has generally been—rightfully—placed on Connell. In fact, his choices have been described as: “a dangerous ‘ordinary’ [behaviour] rooted in the patriarchy, disguised as ‘toxic masculinity’” (Loach, 2020). Whilst it is true that the more than questionable decisions that Connell makes throughout the novel could be identified with this type of masculine behaviour, I would like to suggest that they also respond to his insecurity to distinguish between what is the

⁶ Examples of this are the books: Urwin, Jack. *Man Up: How to Survive Modern Masculinity*. London: Faber and Faber, 2016; B, Guvna. *Unspoken: Toxic Masculinity and How I Faced the Man Within the Man*. London: Harper Collins, 2013.

right thing to do and his need to feel accepted by the wider male community. In order to do this, I will introduce the notion of patriarchy and the oppression it causes on men, as well as the social organisation of masculinity.

Jordan Stephens opens the aforementioned article in *The Guardian* stating that “women suffer at the hands of the patriarchy” (2017). As defined by bell hooks in *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity and Love* (2005):

Patriarchy is a political-social system that insists that males are inherently dominating, superior to everything and everyone deemed weak, especially females, and endowed with the right to dominate and rule over the weak and to maintain that dominance through various forms of psychological terrorism and violence. (hooks, 2005: 18)

hooks’ definition of patriarchy as a hierarchical system implies that it not only oppresses women; in fact, men are vastly affected by it too. hooks goes as far as to say that this power structure is the “most life-threatening social disease assaulting the male body and spirit” (17). The culture of patriarchy is, thus, everywhere. It conditions men’s behaviour and is extremely harmful, as “it keeps them from knowing themselves” (xvii).

The same year bell hooks published her book, Raewyn Connell’s revised edition of *Masculinities* (2005, 1995) was released. One of the most interesting suggestions in this author’s work is that masculinity is not static: “men are not permanently committed to a particular pattern. Rather, they make situationally specific choices from a cultural repertoire of masculine behaviour” (2005: xviii-xix). Since patriarchy is described as a “system of domination” (41), there has to be a “hierarchy among men” (78). The category at the top of this organisation is the hegemonic—“deriving from Antonio Gramsci’s analysis of class relations” (77)—which Raewyn Connell uses for the normative man legitimised by the values that patriarchy attributes to him (77). Hegemony is highly dependent on the context: “at any given time, one form of masculinity rather than others is culturally exalted” (77). Hence, different forms of hegemonic masculinity may emerge

in a particular society, specific to that context. It is also crucial to understand that other factors influence the construction of hegemonic masculinity. As Kimberlé Crenshaw suggests with her theory of intersectionality (Cho, Crenshaw, Sumi: 2013), the oppression experienced by a certain group of people is influenced by several aspects of their social condition, such as class, ethnicity, nationality, migrant status, gender, etc. Even though this theory explains the marginalisation of non-normative identities, hegemonic identities exist in the intersection of different qualities, too. In Connell Waldron's case, those sections in his masculine identity are his regional and class background, as well as his mental health.

In order to consider the different hegemonic models of masculinity that inform the perception of the characters gendered identity in *Normal People*, we need to acknowledge that there are two differentiated social contexts: the countryside—the town of Carricklea, in County Sligo—and the metropolis—the city of Dublin. The novel's initial chapters are set in rural Ireland, where the two protagonists grow up and attend the same school. The action moves to Dublin at a later stage, when both Connell and Marianne pursue their university studies at Trinity College. The fundamental tension that exists between the city and the countryside is used in the novel to explore masculine identity.

This exploration is visible in the how the two different types of native man of the region are described. At one point, Jamie—Marianne's Trinity College boyfriend—calls Connell “some milk-drinking culchie” (149), which is a common derogatory expression used to refer to rural working-class lads in Ireland. On the other hand, Connell thinks of the sleek Trinity College middle-class clique of young men as boys who “wear the same waxed hunting jackets and plum-coloured chinos” (70), going as far as to think that he “would feel like a complete prick wearing that stuff” (70). The mutual disdain expressed in these different points of view reveals that there is an inherent rivalry between the

characteristic manifestations of masculinity in these two settings. It is impossible to overlook the relevance that class has in shaping this aversion. At university, Connell, who attends thanks to a scholarship and needs to work besides, feels “he has a sense of invisibility, nothingness” (70). In a way, Connell is inferior, or a “subordinate” (Connell, 77) because he does not have economic power. This situation supports the argument that “hegemony relates to cultural dominance” (78), and it is within the establishment of recognised cultural institutions within contemporary capitalist society that its highest dominant exponent can be found—in this case, upper middle-class men in Dublin. Hence, Connell finds himself in the position of the marginalised (80)—he does not comply with the hegemonic model in the context of Trinity College. In Carricklea, he has also experienced marginalisation due to his family background, this is suggested by Lorraine—his mother—when she mentions that Connell is maybe hiding his relationship with Marianne in order not to be disregarded by the Sheridan family (Rooney, 51). At university, his class background is even more evident to him and others because of his appearance: “he feels objectively worse-looking [...] has become self-conscious [...] his own clothes are cheap and unfashionable” (Rooney, 70). This is something that also takes place during his high-school days, when Marianne observes at the fundraiser event that Connell wears “the same Adidas sneakers [...] everywhere” (37), whereas the other boys, the popular jocks, wear “leather dress shoes” (37). Therefore, even amongst ‘culchies’, for Connell, there is a marked class distinction that will never be overcome.

Looking at Clay Darcy’s recent study on Irish masculinities, it is easy to identify in the novel that, the hegemonic models of masculinity presented partake of what is generally considered the stereotypical “Irish Male [...] [:] jovial storytellers [...] with a deeply nationalist and Celtic spirit [...] [a man who] has a complex relationship with his parents [...], and an even more complex relationship with alcohol” (Darcy, 2019: 18).

Even though the nationalist question does not necessarily explicitly transpire in the novel, this conception of masculine Irish culture is definitely present throughout. Young men, both working-class and middle-class seem to have very strong opinions—Gareth, Marianne’s first university boyfriend is a “Holocaust denier” (Rooney, 80), and Eric refers to Connell as “gay” (76) when the latter points at the fact that it’s not acceptable for the former to show nude pictures of his girlfriend to others. In addition to this, they are heavy drinkers, and contribute to the ‘banter’ culture that seems to permeate their identity. One of the clearer examples of this type of joking culture can be noticed during the fund-raiser event, when two “men in their twenties” (39) join the group of high-school students at the club. Soon the attention of one of the older men is turned to Marianne:

Let me get you a drink, the man says. What are you having?
No, thanks, says Marianne.

The man slips an arm around her shoulders then. He’s very tall, she notices. Taller than Connell. His fingers rub her bare arm. She tries to shrug him off but he doesn’t let go. One of his friends starts laughing, and Eric laughs along. [...]

In one motion he moves his hand down from her shoulder and squeezes the flesh of her right breast, in front of everyone. [...] Behind her the others are laughing. (Rooney, 39)

This passage shows clearly how the culture of what starts in ‘banter’, ends in the violation of Marianne’s body. The attitude shown in this extract is definitely patriarchal in the sense that it seeks to dominate women through aggression. The sexual harassment experienced by Marianne at this point gets legitimised by everyone else laughing. After the incident, Eric tries to justify his friend: “it was just a bit of fun” (40). When they are back in school the next week, Connell’s friends think he has slept with Marianne, so they “start[ed] fake-cheering” (53). In addition to this, the jocks are constantly talking about sex—“Go on, tell us. Did you get the ride the other night?” (53). The hegemonic type of masculinity that is shown at this point definitely shows toxic traits, because it often results in aggression. When confronting these offences, everyone shows “complicity towards the

hegemonic project” (Connell, 79), which in this case is to assert patriarchal dominance over women.

On the other hand, Dublin—specifically the context of Trinity College—offers a very different model of hegemonic masculinity. There, “popular people [...] [are] involved in college societies [...] [and] went to one of the big private schools in Dublin” (67) which guarantees their social hegemony, too. These men have the ability to “express [...] opinions passionately” (67). In turn, this is intertwined with being white, male and upper middle-class, which stands for appearing “unpleasantly smug” (67). In Dublin, men are, nonetheless, also interested in dominating the women. Jamie, Marianne’s second boyfriend at university is described as having “proclivities” (113) towards violent control. They display dominance in a much more subtle and refined manner, because they can also exert political power through their families: “Jamie’s dad was one of the people who had caused the financial crisis—not figuratively, one of the actual people involved” (124). As Marianne observes: “men are a lot more concerned with limiting the freedoms of women than exercising personal freedom for themselves” (95-96). This indicates how the hegemonic model of maleness in Dublin contributes to support the patriarchal order of society by undermining and controlling women around them.

These two very different hegemonic male models, are still very much in line with the patriarchal *status quo*. Both of them can be identified with what is usually called “patriarchal masculinity” (hooks: 37), which is achieved by “embracing the dominator model [...] donning the mantle of the patriarch, [...] to be accepted and affirmed” (28) by other men. Connell, however, does not seem to fully adapt to the conventions of either hegemonic model, rural or urban. Even though all the elements in his life—his body, his popularity in school, and his intellect—indicate that he will assimilate into the dominant male culture; he resists this assimilation. Despite this, we can clearly see that, sometimes,

he cannot help to comply to some of the characteristics of the patriarch. hooks has an explanation for this: “few men brutally abused as boys in the name of patriarchal maleness courageously resist the brainwashing and remain true to themselves. Most males conform to patriarchy in one way or another” (28).

In appearance, Connell could very well fulfil his hegemonic role in the social context of his native Carricklea because “everybody likes him” (Rooney, 32). This is in spite of his uncertain origin—“no one except Lorraine knows who Connell’s father is” (46)—and despite belonging to a family that possesses quite dubious reputation: “the Waldrons are notorious in Carricklea” (32) for their involvement with criminality, traffic accidents and early pregnancy outside of marriage (32). Connell is different, and even Marianne’s mother, who would “be considered a bit odd” (260), would approve of him, since “he’s studious, he plays centre forward in football, he’s good-looking, he doesn’t get into fights. [...] He’s quiet. [...] That boy is nothing like a Waldron” (32). The opinions people have of him allow Connell to feel part of his group of peers, therefore his status in Carricklea is legitimised by the characteristics others think he possesses: “he’s wholesome as a big baby tooth” (149). He is shy; however, this is not a problem because “everyone knew who he was already” (70). Because of his shyness, most of the time Connell shows himself as compliant with the patriarchal *status quo*. He does this because it is “not easy for males [...] to reject the codes of patriarchal masculinity” (hooks: 73), and by conforming to those rules he stands – apparently - free from inner challenge. Sally Rooney explained in an interview that: “his friends in school do kind of shitty stuff and he does shitty stuff because that’s how they behave. [...] So he feels like he’s doing it because everyone’s doing it and it’s kind of normal behaviour” (in Parker, 2018).

However, the reader discovers soon enough that Connell experiences a deep aversion towards his friends’ behaviour. In one of his first interactions with Marianne, he

makes it clear that they “do some stuff that is a bit over the line and that would annoy me obviously” (14). After the fundraiser event, when his friends Rob and Eric are trying to find out whether he has been involved with Marianne, his disgust manifests itself in the most physical form of anxiety, a panic attack which causes him to lock himself in the toilet: “he took one deep uncomfortable breath and then threw up” (54). Connell feels anxious at that point because “he didn’t understand the situation with Marianne” (23), that is he did not have the capacity to understand his own feelings. In an attempt to deny that he might be experiencing genuine care for someone else, Connell “carried the secret like something large and hot” (22). He does that because expressing a feeling other than ‘anger’, “the only [...] emotion that patriarchy values when expressed by men” (hooks, 7) would delegitimise his position in his group of friends. This anxious experience of feelings, shows how men “often suffer in silence when experiencing existential struggles” (Kemmy, 2021). In this case, the challenge for Connell is the inability to come to terms with his own feelings and to express them in front of others. It also points out at the sense of disassociation from feelings which men experience within the frame of patriarchal masculinity, which “insists that real men must prove their manhood by idealizing aloneness and disconnection” (hooks, 121).

As opposed to his local peers, Connell has a passion for literature and is one of the talented and gifted students in his school. These two elements of his personality cause him enormous shame because he cannot fit the norm of a less refined hegemony: his friends “wouldn’t be interested in that stuff” (Rooney, 14). Because of these qualities, Connell Waldron could be “expelled from the circle of legitimacy” (Connell, 79). Nevertheless, when he denies his true self in front of others, he has an experience which is “fundamentally wounding, that is the breeding ground for mental illness” (hooks, 154). It is clear that Connell is constantly battling low self- worth, as he is never sure that his

actions are ethical, or just the right choice: his “capacity to live fully and freely is severely diminished” (154), as he has to prove himself to be able to show “complicity” (Connell, 79). That is, in order to feel that he belongs, he needs to act as all the other male teenagers do. In this sense, it is easy to identify the reason why he is widely liked in the context of his school as he doesn’t express himself, “never speaks or acts” (Rooney, 41). However, the complicit behaviour that he displays to gain the approval of others finally has devastating consequences for his mental state. Connell ends up experiencing a severe depressive episode at the end of the novel, which is triggered by the suicide of one of his high school friends. This leads him into “difficulties [that] eventually lead to a chronic and alienating downward trajectory whereby he must seek clinical help” (Kemmy, 2021) for his poor mental health.

Critics of the novel have admired how mental health is “dealt with profoundly” (Kemmy, 2021; Donnelly, 2019), especially through the ongoing issues that Connell experiences. The process of anxiety described in the novel as “chronic and low level” (Rooney, 206) makes it impossible for him to build meaningful relationships: “I just don’t have a lot of people who I really click with [...] in school I [...] had that feeling of isolation” (216). As the storyline progresses, his “mental state [...] steadily [...] continued to deteriorate” (206). It is not surprising that Connell should experience low self-esteem, isolation and clinical depression because he presents a strong disconnection from his emotions, which “were suppressed so carefully in everyday life, forced into smaller and smaller spaces” (212). As the following passage illustrates:

Things happened to him, like the crying fits, the panic attacks, but they seemed to descend on him from outside, rather than emanating from somewhere inside himself. Internally he felt nothing. He was like a freezer item that had thawed too quickly on the outside and was melting everywhere, while the inside was still frozen solid. Somehow he was expressing more emotion than at any time in his life before, while simultaneously feeling less, feeling nothing. (214)

Connell is, above all, a man that is severely disassociated with his emotional life. As Donald Moss would put it in his book *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Man: Masculinity and Psychoanalysis* (2012), he is one of these men who is “immune to [...] either disappointment or pleasure [...] neither pursue[s] satisfaction nor flee[s] from pain” (22). For him, the only natural response to his feelings is to suppress them. He chooses to do so following the inherent restrictions imposed on men by the patriarchal thought system. The consequence of this choice is troubling, since it is impossible to live a fulfilling life if individuals are separated from their emotions (Fromm, 1995: 8). As bell hooks would put it, there is a need to connect with one’s feelings to achieve “integrity, that is, [...] [being] whole, [...] not divided” (114). Erich Fromm also makes the same point in his book *The Art of Loving* (1995), where he places the impulse of achieving a state oneness or “union” (8) as one of the main “need[s] of man” (8).

At this point, I consider it natural that readers would somehow experience scepticism towards Connell’s mental state. Because it’s universally acknowledged that he is widely liked, and comes from a loving household, it does not seem that the state of his mental health matches his circumstances. However, I defend that his absent father plays an important role in the development of his issues with anxiety and depression. Psychologist Andrew Briggs suggests that there are three possible outcomes that children may experience in his study on the effects of absent fathers (Briggs, 2019: 67). These are commonly “Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder” (72), “self-harm” (74) and “sexually inappropriate behaviour” (80). These outcomes are directly linked with having a “parasitic relationship” (71) with the mother, in which the parental roles are reversed and the child has to meet the mother’s needs to a certain extent (72). Throughout the novel, there are instances that show how Connell has to adopt the role of the carer towards Lorraine: “two and a half years he worked in the garage after school to buy this car, and

all he uses it for is driving his mother around because she doesn't have a licence" (Rooney, 57). In addition to this, it seems that their relationship is closer to the ones siblings have—he does not call her 'mother', and they are fairly close in age, since Lorraine was a teenager when he was born. When they argue, it is generally about him being "fundamentally careless" (46). Therefore, in a way, it seems that Connell's main concern is that his mother sees him as "responsible" (46), rather than making her proud. In this sense, Lorraine does not fulfil the role of the mother that shows "unconditional" love (Fromm, 31), since her approval has to be earned by Connell through being accountable for his actions. When Connell invites Rachel to their school-leavers event, the Debs, instead of Marianne, whom he has a relationship with at that point, Lorraine says to Connell: "I think you're a disgrace. I am ashamed of you" (Rooney, 56). Even though this comment is well deserved—Connell could have been more considerate towards Marianne—, this seems a rather disproportionate reaction when it is evident that there is a lack of male behaviour models for him to follow when it comes to treating women right. Hence, even though he lives with his mother, it is difficult for him to understand how other men would approach a similar situation. In this scene, Lorraine provides a moral judgement for Connell's actions; however, in the past she has also consented to be in Marianne's position and be kept a secret by Connell's father. In this occasion, Connell chooses Rachel because she enjoys popularity in school, and he believes that going to the Debs with her is what the expectation his friends have of him. Hence, Connell is here reproducing his family dynamics, rather than intentionally trying to hurt Marianne. The lack of pedagogy on Lorraine's side is not particularly helpful for him, because Connell is blinded by other people's external opinions' and is, in a way, incapable of telling right from wrong due to his inexperience. In fact, later in the novel, he regrets this behaviour and apologises for it:

I'm really sorry, he said. I did the wrong thing there. [...]

I feel guilty for all the stuff I said to you, Connell added. About how bad it would be if anyone found out. Obviously that was more in my head than anything. I mean, there was no reason why people would care. But I kind of suffer from anxiety with these things. Not that I'm making excuses, but I think I projected some anxiety onto you, if that makes sense. I don't know. I'm still thinking about it a lot, why I acted in such a fucked-up way.

[...] I think I did learn from it. And hopefully I have changed, you know, as a person. (91-92)

Generally, when fathers are present, young adults are able to have some “help [...] [with] those emotions and impulses that are too dangerously anti-social, and to [...] learn to self-regulate other emotions” (Briggs, 70). This is because the role of the father is “about providing early experiences of difference and healthy exclusion for the infant, and maintaining this as the infant develops through adolescence” (70). Because Connell has not had this support throughout his childhood and he finds it difficult to connect with his emotions, his mental health is severely affected. Whilst Connell does not present any signs of ADHD, or of inappropriate sexual behaviour; there is definitely a sense of self-harm fantasies that are manifested in his thoughts. That is, sometimes, in order to “regulate emotional states that are felt otherwise to be too overwhelming” (75), he daydreams about inflicting pain on himself. One example of this is when Connell sees Marianne in the anniversary Mass for her father:

[...] he wanted to do something terrible, like set himself on fire or drive his car into a tree. He always reflexively imagined ways to cause himself extreme injury when he was distressed. It seemed to soothe him briefly, the act of imagining a much worse and more totalising pain than the one he really felt, maybe just the cognitive energy it required, the momentary break in his train of thought, but afterwards he would only feel worse. (Rooney, 128)

This feeling is exacerbated towards the end of the novel, when he causes himself to experience physical discomfort during his worst episode of depression: he does this by “lying on the floor [...] feeling my right arm go numb under the weight of my body” (201), or “he swallows his throat so hard it hurts” (203).

Connell does not seem to have any interest in knowing who his father is “he can ask any time he wants to know, but he really doesn’t care to” (46). However, with this carefree approach, and the fact that he also seems to despise his friend’s attitudes towards their fathers—they “seem so obsessed [...] with emulating them or being different” (46)—he masks a crippling fear of abandonment—when Marianne suggests that he should go to New York to study he says: “I’d miss you too much [...] I’d be sick, honestly” (265)—that contributes to a “depressing” (46) state of mind. It is evident that there is a “lack [...] [because of a] difficult start” (Hennigan, 2018) that characterises Connell’s life. He grows into adulthood in a semi-state of neglect, not being able to experience fatherly love or male love in general. In addition to this, he is constantly reminded that he is very different from the rest of his family—his grandmother says “you certainly don’t take after your mother” (45)—, which would contribute to explain his low self-worth. Consequently, he seeks approval from his peers by adopting socially expected behaviours, as he genuinely thinks he will be affirmed by others in doing so. I believe there is a silver lining to this attitude towards his father’s identity. Connell’s reluctance to know who his father is could be interpreted as a strategy to build a positive identity that is detached from the patriarchal system. Ironically, it does not seem that he particularly succeeds at this, because his mental state ends deteriorating regardless.

Since Sally Rooney self-defines as a “Marxist” (Quinn, 2019; Hu, 2019), it is only natural that social class is one of the main concerns of the novel. In Connell’s case, class is inevitably intertwined to his masculinity and is a vital contributing factor towards his low self-worth. From the start of the novel, Connell shows a preoccupation about his future, and he hesitates about what degree to choose because, as he states: “I’m not sure about the job prospect” (20). This contrasts with Marianne’s carefree attitude towards her career: “Oh, who cares? The economy’s fucked anyway” (20). What Marianne refers to

is the general economic situation in Ireland post 2008 financial crash. As described in the “Introduction” to the *Routledge International Handbook of Irish Studies* (2021):

Ireland endured a collapse in property values, generational indebtedness, various forms of addiction, the return of large-scale emigration, the inhumane nature of Direct Provision⁷, and an increased marginalizing and abandonment of the vulnerable: those with physical and intellectual disabilities, the aged, and the economically deprived. (Conchubair, Cronin and Fox, 3)

Normal People—set between 2011 and 2015—is situated very midst of this period of economic instability, which lasted from 2008 to 2015 (3). Chonchubair, Cronin and Fox refer to the general attitude towards the crisis Ireland as “keeping calm and carrying on” (4), underlining that the cultural expressions that were recognised internationally after this period signalled to “the banal calamities of Sally Rooney” (4) and the “heteronormative fetishization of normalcy, [...] to render a fully relatable, “ineluctably right” portrait of mundane Gen Z life”” (4). This dismissive reading of Rooney’s novels overlooks that there is a sense in *Normal People* that financial oppression is a constant phantom looming over Connell’s life. At first, it takes the physical shape of the “ghost” (33) estate, a “shameful reminder of postcolonial Celtic Tiger narcissism” (Free and Scully, 2018: 314), where Connell observes the following:

This is probably three times the size of my house [...] Just lying empty, no one living in it, he said. Why don’t they give them away if they can’t sell them? [...] It’s something to do with capitalism, she said.
Yeah. Everything is, that’s the problem, isn’t it? (34)

In this scene, Marianne is mostly focused on Connell’s involvement with other girls. However, because of his class background Connell is thinking about the futility of capitalism, which is something he does from a young age. Proof of this is his knowledge

⁷ “Direct Provision is Ireland’s system of accommodating those seeking international protection while in the asylum process, managed by the the International Protection Accommodation Service (IPAS) an administrative division of the Department of Justice” in Irish Refugee Council. “Direct Provision”, *Irish Refugee Council*, Retrieved 23 May 2022 from <https://www.irishrefugeecouncil.ie/Listing/Category/direct-provision> [Accessed 23 May 2022]

of the *Communist Manifesto* (13), as well as his political choice when the election is on: “Connell did vote for Declan Bree [a standalone Communist candidate], who went on to be eliminated in the fifth count” (47). The result of the election, in the end, is favourable for “Fine Gael and [...] Sinn Féin” (47) who are described as “the party of Franco” and “criminals” (47) respectively. This reflection suggests a deep political awareness, which massively affects the characters’ lives and is indeed present throughout the novel – against the interpretation of the previous critics-. Thus, the political life of the country is translated in a feeling of powerlessness that Connell experiences at the face of the dominance that capitalism exerts in his life.

Connell’s distress about his prospects lies in the fact that he does not feel particularly secure about them: “he feels his future is hopeless and will only get worse” (201). However evident it seems to the reader that the tables are turned for him when he gets a scholarship that completely funds his degree—“his rent is paid, his tuition is covered, he has a free meal every day in college” (159)—Connell still struggles to accept that he is deserving of this career, because he doesn’t know what to “believe [...] about himself” (159). The later acceptance in an MFA programme in New York (263) confirms his value as a scholar. Nevertheless, it doesn’t seem that the praise he receives at university for his academic skills and his role as editor in the literary society (257) contribute to improving his self-esteem: he still thinks “it seemed such a long shot” (263) that he would achieve any recognition. This deeply rooted sense of failure could be traced to the national sense of shame and guilt attached to the economic crisis and Connell’s class background, as scholars have identified “a learned predisposition towards habitual and corporeal modesty and self-regulation peculiar to Irish Catholicism” (Free and Scully, 313). Alternatively, this could also reflect his family dynamics, specifically being abandoned by his father and unable to sustain a healthy belief system about himself. Since

fatherly love has to be “deserved, [...] [one has to] do something to acquire it” (Fromm, 34), and Connell feels unworthy of it, he cannot show “respect” (46) for himself. Hence, Connell – contradicting the general view on millennials (Luttrell and McGrath, 21) – cannot feel a sense of entitlement to this bright future as there is a lack of reassurance that characterises the early stages of his life and articulates a feeling of shame – manifested in his shyness- and guilt – present in his denial of emotions and sense of success - towards his achievements, even when they are a reward for his hard work.

Essentially, then, Connell feels crushed and unable to belong to the wider society that is dominated by unrefined, middle-class patriarchal thought. When he finally seeks help for his mental health, he mentions to his therapist that he moved to Dublin, “thinking I could have a different life [...] but I hate it here” (Rooney, 217) because he finds it a “bit hard to fit in” (221). In a way, Connell feels shame because he cannot distinguish his “real desires” (Moss, 22) to relate to anyone except for Marianne, and does not find a healthy way of asserting himself. It is precisely this feeling that renders him unable to explore new possibilities both in his professional and personal life; instead, he “mime[s] what “other people” do” (22). When he finally expresses and connects with his emotions in therapy, he realises the impossibility of returning to his old life (Rooney, 217). The resolution of his inner conflict lies in accepting that he will have to endure hardship if he wants to overcome the feeling of negativity towards himself, and transform his limiting beliefs. Becoming a better man through hard work is not something Connell seems to be particularly willing to do at the beginning of the novel, as it places him in a position in which he has to question himself and his actions. An example of this is when he is challenged by Lorraine and he asks her to “act normal” (56). What Connell considers ‘normality’ here is intertwined with the immobilism of his personality: the rejection of his true feelings for Marianne. Only when he can reconnect with his inner life, he is able

to experience moments of “joy” (222). One of these moments is described when Connell is speaking to a fellow writer, and is told “you could get a first collection [of short stories] out of it” (221), meaning his time in Trinity, which would validate and transform his experience of isolation. What Sally Rooney seems to suggest with this narrative is that, on the one hand, through refinement of knowledge and academic potential, working-class millennials can be redeemed of the external misperceptions that society poses on them and climb the social ladder. On the other hand, there will always be an element of misplacement that will be difficult to unravel from a bright future, which is the fact that young people belonging to this social class will constantly have battle the initial barriers and limitations tied with their background.

As I have observed in the previous discussion about toxic masculinity, marginalised—which includes working-class—men have traditionally been demonised at the hands of millennial opinion. We can see this demonisation extended to Connell when his face is described “like an artist’s impression of a criminal” (Rooney, 46) because of his dark “hard” (46) features. The general perception that people have of Connell is that he is “intimidating” (127), and there is a confirmation of this when he confronts a man that mugs him in the street. When Jamie calls this man who assaults Connell a “lowlife scum” (145), the latter gets defensive because he doesn’t want to be identified with the scary prospect the attacker could possibly embody a vision of his future. This would restrict Connell’s identity and place him with the rest of the demonised working-class men: having to endure a hopeless destiny of substance abuse, criminality, or even the helplessness that drives his friend Rob to commit suicide. Connell’s defensive reaction is understandable here, although it seems disproportionate, given that he usually remains uncannily silent in the face of abuse. When, in this scene, he sarcastically responds to Jamie saying: “we can’t all go to private school” (145), Connell is showing that he feels

personally attacked. On this instance, he uses wit as an outlet for his emotions, rather than acting on his thoughts:

For several months after he first saw them together Connell had compulsive fantasies about kicking Jamie in the head until his skull was the texture of wet newspaper. Once, after speaking to Jamie briefly at a party, Connell left the building and punched a brick wall so hard his hand started bleeding. (163)

This passage, which can be read as a manifestation of toxic masculinity, illustrates how anger is the only emotion that Connell allows himself to experience before he starts attending the counselling programme at university. Thus, it is not surprising that critics have read Connell as a ‘toxic’ given these violent outbursts throughout the novel and his terrible choices in the way he treats women. It is clear that, at school, in his aim to emulate how some of his friends behave, there are instances when he partakes in toxic behaviour. Examples of this are in his refusal to acknowledge his relationship with Marianne—“in school he and Marianne affect not to know each other” (2)—when he stays silent at the face of abuse—“Your friend Eric called me flat-chested today in front of everyone. [...] I didn’t hear that, he said” (36)—or when he invites Rachel rather than Marianne to the Debs (55). I defend, though, that these behaviours only manifest because of his poor mental health and his deep insecurity. I believe this because there is an inherent inconsistency between these conducts and the belief system Connell sustains about how women should be treated. For instance, when one of his friends shows him nude pictures of his girlfriend, he responds: “Bit fucked-up showing these to people, isn’t it?” (76). Connell also shows awareness for the need of safety in sex—“obviously I didn’t have unprotected sex with anyone” (22), “I actually don’t have condoms” (236)—and consent—“Do you want it like this?” (236)—that are remarkable given his young age. In a way, because Connell has grown up around Lorraine, there is a constant reminder in his life of the devastating consequences not treating women right—the formation of a dismembered

family unit. Thus, describing Connell as a toxic man, as some critics have done, is simplistic and fails to fully acknowledge the extent of the struggle Connell experiences when trying to establish his masculine identity.

In order to describe Connell's masculinity, I would like to suggest the term 'brittle'. Christopher Clark uses the term for the first time in *The Sleepwalkers* (2013), in order to profile a certain type of masculinity that was emerging at the midst of the Second World War. This masculinity is characterised by the "accentuation of gender roles that had begun to impose intolerable burdens on some men" (360); and presents several qualities that we could recognise in Connell Waldron, such as "the nervousness [...] manifested itself [...] not just in anxiety, but also in an obsessive desire to triumph over the "weakness" of one's own will" (361). One of these qualities is the obsessiveness with the loved object, Connell's "sole joy" (103) is Marianne, the one who "can lift him from the abyss of despair" (103). The other aspect is the "immobility of his thoughts" (104), and the intention towards "maintaining a manly [...] outward appearance" (104), showing "toughness, duty and unstinting service" (360) towards others, which would reflect Connell's impulse to please his mother and friends. Another valuable mention of the term 'brittle' in relation to this masculine behaviour characteristics appeared in the book *Heterosexual Masculinities: Contemporary Perspectives from Psychoanalytic Gender Theory* (2009) edited by Reiss and Grossman, where C. Jama Adams warns about the "attractive[ness] to disempowered males" (184) to perform a "reputational masculinity" (184) – that is to show a masculinity in front of others as a "masquerade" (184)-. The consequence of this would be to perform a masculinity that is only the enactment of a "fantasy" (184), or rather an aspiration to hegemony that cannot be achieved due to the conditions of the individual, both material and social.

According to the *Cambridge Dictionary* (2022), the word ‘brittle’ implies that something might be “delicate and easily broken”, “easily damaged”, or “fragile”. Connell shows this in the way he depends on external validation for self-affirmation. The term also points at the capacity of something being “easily made to fail” (*Cambridge Dictionary*, 2022), just as Connell’s ideals about how to treat women crumble when they do not correspond with the social expectation of the patriarchal system of thought. In “appearing to be [...] confident, but actually nervous, weak or likely to change mood suddenly” (*Cambridge Dictionary*, 2022), Connell confirms that the use of this term is accurate to describe his masculinity. In addition to this, Timothy Snyder referred in an article for *The Guardian* (2017) to the dangers attached to this type of “masculinity [which] in the right setting, becomes political atrocity. Strength brings problems; weakness brings others; but weakness posing as strength is the most dangerous of all” policies, because it can ultimately lead to power abuse—whether intentional or not.

In this sense, whereas the popularly known as ‘toxic’ model of masculinity is characterised by an aggressive conduct shown towards others with the aim to assert dominance; brittle masculinity would suggest an attempt to fight the impulse towards this tendency. This is achieved by showing a false sense of security. Ultimately, though, this self-imposed attempt to show a solid *façade* does not help to succeed at overcoming violence and aggressiveness because of the impact that the patriarchal mindset has already had on the socialisation of men. Connell is a good portrait of this type of behaviour, since he generally appears as strong and intimidating, having the potential to react violently. However, under the surface, he is dominated by a crumbling insecurity. We can observe this when Connell physically assaults Marianne’s brother after an episode of domestic abuse that results in her nose being broken. The passage illustrates the intimidation Connell exerts on Alan, although it is clear under the surface that he is consumed by the

frustration that his reaction will not be effective in stopping aggressions towards Marianne:

Once she's safely inside the car, Connell closes over the front door, so that he and Alan are alone together.

What are you doing? says Alan.

Connell, his sight even blurrier now, can't tell whether Alan is angry or frightened. I need to talk to you, Connell says.

His vision is swimming so severely that he notices he has to keep a hand on the door to stay upright.

I didn't do anything, says Alan.

Connell walks towards Alan until Alan is standing with his back against the banister. He seems smaller now, and scared. [...] Connell's face is wet with perspiration. Alan's face is visible only as a pattern of coloured dots.

If you ever touch Marianne again, I'll kill you, he says. Okay? That's all. Say one bad thing to her ever again and I'll come back here myself and kill you, that's it.

It seems to Connell, though he can't see or hear very well, that Alan is now crying.

Do you understand me? Connell says. Say yes or no.

Alan says: Yes. (251-252)

Another reading that critics have provided of this fragment—and of the episode where Marianne is sexually assaulted in the fund-raiser event—is that Connell acts as the “knight” (Cameron, 2020: 425) that saves the “damsel archetype[s]” (Dockterman, 2019: 54). I am much rather inclined to support other critics’ readings of these two episodes as a proof of Connell’s “kindness” (Laing, 2018), and to be supportive of Marianne in the only way he knows possible, using his privilege as a man who apparently conforms to the norms of traditional hegemonic masculinity. Any time that Connell defends Marianne, he does not do it with an ulterior motive to be recognised, but rather he does it to help someone that he considers is vulnerable and in real danger at that moment. In these occasions, he overlooks his impulse to protect his social status in order to help someone else, which is a valuable expression of his good nature.

Even though Connell can act aggressively, he is essentially a “good person” (Rooney, 149); he has “turned out well” (43) in Marianne’s eyes. Despite his silence and compliance with the patriarchal *status quo*, the narrative presents Connell’s awareness as he is trying to overcome the contradictions that are at the core of his position in society.

The general consensus about Waldron is that he is humble, loyal and he will always stand by the people he loves, which are excellent personal qualities and show the potential to transcend of the evils of patriarchy (Quinn, 2019). Even though he is not capable of communicating effectively or embracing his feelings fully, he is still able to read situations in which he is needed and respond quickly to help Marianne. His dedication to comfort Marianne in an intimate setting is beyond admirable. He, thus, has the capacity to effectively be considerate and “good” (Rooney, 266), even when he struggles to present this side of himself in public.

Since the “dual existence of Connell’s school years” (Loach, 2020) pinpoints at the danger that every man is “vulnerable to being ensnared by the patriarchal mould” (Loach, 2020), the behaviours he presents in the way he treats women especially are bound to cause distress in the readership. Connell’s compliance with the male behaviour considered normative is painful both for himself and others because there is no space to celebrate his most authentic self—which emerges, to an extent, only in the company of Marianne. Therefore, it is only when he seeks clinical help for his mental health issues and starts connecting with his feelings for the first time that he can find solace and consolation in the fact that this struggle is not exclusive to him, and that there is an “opportunity to grow” (Loach, 2020), to be “whole [...] [and] speak [...] without shame” (hooks, 2004: 163) when it comes to trying to build more a positive self-image. In this process, it will be key that he establishes spaces of acceptance of his personality, which presents itself as “simultaneously destructive and hopeful” (Moss, 2012: 6). The positive note is that the future looks bright for Connell both professionally and an emotionally, despite him not being completely ready to accept the “goodness” (Rooney, 266) that he has brought to someone and received in turn.

Chapter 2: Connell's Masculinity in an Intimate Context

This chapter presents an analysis of the relationship between Marianne and Connell's. The focus on this exploration is on the definition of the relationship as a 'cold' intimacy, as Connell shows his incapacity to fulfil the Marianne's needs in the relationship due to his issues with mental health and low self-worth. This approach allows deeper understanding of how both parties interact intimately, and how this affects Connell's masculinity.

The love story in *Normal People* ends in a standstill, after Connell receives an offer to move to New York to take an MFA on Creative writing: "his life opens out before him in all directions at once. [...] You should go, she says. I'll always be here. You know that" (Rooney, 266). The readership has no way to know whether Connell and Marianne ever get back together—although Rooney's short story "At the Clinic" (2020) seems to acknowledge that the couple eventually return to their usual relationship cycle when "they are twenty-three" (Rooney, 2020). The open ending of the novel suggests that the romantic relationship between the characters is destined to either fail, or continue to reproduce the same pattern. As Marianne says to Connell in the short story "you're not attracted to me [...] [,] not romantically" (Rooney, 2020), so there is no apparent progression in their bond. The reason why the relationship does not seem to function is because it is at the same time "sustaining and [...] undermining" (Laing, 2018: 47), that is, it is necessary for them to be together to "grow" (Hennigan, 2018) but this also has the limitation of "uncertainty" (Jarvis, 2020) that does not allow progression towards a more fulfilling form of intimacy. Rooney points out that this "texture to it [is present] because of their history" (in Leskiewicz, 2018: 43), in which Marianne has felt humiliated by Connell's failure to recognise her value.

Whereas Marianne's generous concession that Connell should go to New York has been read as the triumph of "friendship" (Pakdam, 2020: 57-58), some critics have considered that the intimate relationship is at fault because of the "heterosexual model" (Brouillette, 2020) it navigates. In this case, Connell's patriarchal mentality would be the key issue since it does not allow him to connect with his emotions towards Marianne. This incapacity to acknowledge his feelings annuls his potential to meet the requirements needed for the wellbeing that the realm of intimacy grants. Disregarding this premiss, some critics have defined Marianne and Connell's relationship as the "love story of our generation" (Harding, 2021), which leads me to think that have failed to acknowledge the dangers of Connell's disassociation from his feelings in the setting of intimate interaction. Those critics have also overlooked the self-imposed pressure that Connell has to be "a straight feminist's dream" (Loach, 2020). I share the view that the heterosexual model presents faults when it complies with the challenges of patriarchal demands and the discourse of domination. Hence, it is my view that as long as Connell stays tied to his patriarchal system of thought, he cannot be "unburdened by the stereotypes of modern society" (Harding, 2021), and succeed at being intimate with others.

In Chapter 1, I offered an overview of how Connell's interactions with Marianne are heavily influenced by the patriarchal *status quo*. During the early days of their relationship, he genuinely believes that his friends would delegitimise him if he was to make his bond with Marianne public because of her low popularity as a marginal girl despite her upper middle-class background. In a way, Marianne is considered as, in her own words, a "damaged" (Rooney, 183) person in the context of Carricklea. Everyone seems to think there is something wrong with her, but no one can ascertain what that is, as people in the town do not know about the domestic abuse in the Sheridan household. No one knows except for Lorraine, who works in the house as a cleaner and seems to be

one of the only people that sees Marianne as a very “vulnerable person” (75). During their first year at university, when the couple break up for the first time, it is because he is “struggling to pay rent, which [...] [isn’t] propitious for long term planning” (Brouillette, 2020). Thus, Connell, because of his social and economic background, fails to fulfil the expectation of what he thinks his role in the relationship is:

He could just tell her about the situation and ask if he could stay in her place until September. He knew she would say yes. [...] But he found himself putting off the conversation [...] It just felt too much like asking her for money. He and Marianne never talked about money. (Rooney, 122)

This passage illustrates how according to Connell’s traditional mindset, the expectations of men in a relationship are mostly restricted to being able to fulfil the role of the “the provider, the protector, the warrior guarding the gate” (hooks, 169). The limitations that this role carries are a frightening prospect for most men, as they “grapple with choosing their emotional well-being over the pay check, over the image of themselves as a provider” (103), as they believe this is a “measure for their manhood” (93). Evidently, if men have to follow this prescriptive role, there are very few spaces or nearly none, to express their emotions. The coping mechanism, thus, becomes the exertion of authority in order to maintain the hierarchical order of patriarchy to appear as a “figure [that] is deemed ruler over those without power and given the right to maintain that rule through practices of subjugation, subordination, and submission” (24). During this breakup, Connell assumes the authoritarian role by making the decision to suggest to Marianne that she might want to “see other people” (Rooney, 124). This authority, then, grants him the power to avoid being humiliated if he shows his economic vulnerability. Connell represses here his true intentions and emotions in favour of showing what he considers is a stronger, more solid position of power. This attitude, ultimately, has severe consequences for his mental health and makes his disassociation with his emotional life become even more abysmal.

Another issue that has to be taken into consideration is Connell's difficulty when he tries to be close to other people. Intimacy has traditionally been defined as "the antidote for isolation" (Marar, 2014: 25), a "subtle and often short-lived" (Marar, 2) moment of connection that can lead to closing the gap between individuals that think of themselves as separated. At the beginning of the novel, the narrator offers the following description of how Connell has felt isolated from others before getting involved with Marianne:

He doesn't even really know what desire is supposed to feel like. Any time he has had sex in real life, he has found it so stressful as to be largely unpleasant, leading him to suspect that there's something wrong with him, that he's unable to be intimate with women, that he's somehow developmentally impaired. He lies there afterwards and thinks: I hated that so much that I feel sick. (Rooney, 5)

This passage suggests that intimacy implies a traumatic aspect, since it is too much of an arduous task. Ziyad Marar explains in his book *Intimacy: Understanding the Subtle Power of Human Connection* (2014) that there are some barriers to intimacy, such as "personal insecurities [...], lack of imagination towards the other person, the wishful thinking that creates too false a convergence between people and an aversion towards conflict" (121). In Connell's case, what prevents him to experience intimacy in the first place is insecurity, as he is mortified by how "he'd had to hear his actions repeated back to him later in the locker room: his errors, and, so much worse, his excruciating attempts at tenderness, performed in gigantic pantomime" (Rooney, 21). This passage also offers a glimpse of the anxiety that Connell suffers—his anticipating thinking—, which I relate to his tendency to repress and ignore his emotional responses. Moreover, he also fears confronting his friends' beliefs because that will directly attack his apparent privileged and hegemonic position amongst them. On the other hand, Connell seems to be at ease when seeking for moments of "tenderness" (21) with Marianne, because "everything was between them" (21), private. Despite this, Connell cannot reconcile the reassurance that Marianne offers with the anxiety that he feels in case his friends become aware of their

involvement. Connell is extremely ashamed of being attracted to Marianne, partly because she is not popular—and that would question his status at school—but also because he does not want to see his own trauma reflected in her: “he was never damaged like she was. She just made him feel that way” (169). In the end, this has devastating effects on the relationship, causing Marianne to stop attending high school. It is then when Connell’s anxiety is heightened because he fails to acknowledge his mistake. To cope with the absence of connection with others, Connell resorts to alcohol and sex to help him numb his emotions (74)—following social expectations. Nevertheless, since patriarchal power lies in emotional deprivation, Connell can still present himself as a powerful figure.

It is, indeed, Connell that makes the choice to have Marianne as a girlfriend. That he should choose her seems, at first, somewhat arbitrary because he is more concerned about how “awkward in school [things would be] if anything happened” (15) between them, than with his feelings. Their syntony is a manifestation of “affinity” (Bauman: 2003, 28) as Zygmunt Bauman understands it, which is very similar to “kinship, as unconditional, irrevocable and unbreakable” (28), and has to be ratified through the means of “the founding act of choice” (28). It also “portends a daily struggle” (29), which Connell is not ready to contend with—he asks Lorraine to not tell anyone about Marianne spending time with him as there would be “annoyance” (Rooney, 52) for him. Since Connell is easily detached from his emotions for fear that they will imply further work, he represents the “denizen[s] of the modern liquid world that abhors everything that is solid” (Bauman, 29). Connell definitely prefers to disconnect from reality, rather than attempting to find meaning in his life through inner challenge.

In Connell’s eyes, Marianne only appears as an option after she tells him she likes him (7). Connell only starts showing interest in her when he verifies the possibility of them being together. Before he takes any steps, he makes sure the attraction Marianne

feels is a given, so he asks her to clarify in what way she liked him (15). After this process of mediocre courtship, Marianne feels chosen: “as if Connell had been visiting her house only to test her, and she had passed the test” (16). Connell, because of his insecurity, intends to claim the authority in the relationship from the very start. He needs to make sure he is the one to make the choice in the first place. This way, he assumes the role of the dominator, or the one who establishes the parameters in which the relation is to function and thrive. The main condition for their association being that “no one would have to know” (Rooney, 15). Marianne agrees to this because it allows her to experience connection with someone else—“I never feel lonely when I am with you” (233) she says to Connell when they reconnect after she has spent the year in Sweden on Erasmus. This enacts the perversion of adoration for the loved one explained by Zygmunt Bauman in *Liquid Love: On the Frailty of Human Bonds* (2003) that: “whatever you accept, I accept” (17), even when this is ultimately “humiliating” (Rooney, 91) for her. This role is maintained throughout time, and even when Marianne has other partners. When Connell visits her at her summer house in Italy, the following reflection takes place:

He’s aware that he could have sex with her now if he wanted to. She wouldn’t tell anyone. He finds it strangely comforting, and allows himself to think about what it would be like. Hey, he would say quietly. Lie on your back, okay? And she would just obediently lie on her back. So many things pass secretly between people anyway. What kind of person would he be if it happened now? Someone very different? Or exactly the same person, himself, with no difference at all. (Rooney, 181)

Given this tumultuous beginning to the relationship, it is hard to establish what it is that draws Connell and Marianne together. The basis of the attraction between the pair seems to stem from the fact that they are both extremely intelligent—following Rooney’s common “brainy” (Mars-Jones, 2018: 34) character depiction—and isolated from the wider social interests of the people in their hometown. Their aloneness manifests differently: whilst Marianne cannot abide by school rules, as she finds them “oppressive” (Rooney, 12), Connell does not feel he belongs in the unrefined hegemonic masculine

teenage culture. What brings them together, though, is that the characters have had to overcome challenging family dynamics in their early life. Curiously enough, they are strangely unaware of each other's struggle, which suggests that this experience that separates them from the people around them, also creates distance between each other.

As Molly Hennigan puts it:

There is a privacy that is unshakeable for young adults who are the products of domestically volatile homes. No matter how intelligent they are or what type of safe life they carve for themselves or what type of wholesome people they reinvest their love in, there will always be moments of lack. Moments where the good people who drew you out of yourself and have grown with you for a time, with their so well-deserved inexperience of a difficult start, will for moments not know who you are at all. (2018)

Connell never knows about Marianne being the victim of domestic abuse from her brother Alan until years after they get involved: “He’ll just come into my room, he doesn’t care if I’m sleeping or anything. [...] Would he ever hit you? he says. Sometimes. Less so since I moved away” (Rooney, 182-183). In the same way, they never discuss Connell’s absent father. I thus defend that the source that facilitates their affinity—their common traumatic past—is also the experience that creates distance between them.

Another possible explanation to their affinity could be that both Connell and Marianne need to palliate their feeling of isolation. Erich Fromm defends in *The Art of Loving* (1995) that as “the deepest need of man [...] to leave the prison of his aloneness” (8). It is only natural that Connell and Marianne desperately seek to overcome their loneliness. Fromm describes that the ending of the feeling of isolation is generally achieved through the intense experience of connection with the other (3)—what is generally defined as “falling in love” (3). This fall suggests that there is a need to surrender to a sudden emotion with overwhelming passivity (Bauman, 5). If we apply this to the couple, it explains Marianne’s acceptance of Connell’s choice even when she

receives an unfair treatment. It is, indeed, in her conformity she can escape loneliness for a while.

However, this explanation has an inherent issue. Fromm does not define this impulse as love, but rather a momentary “orgiastic state” (9) that helps soothe primary sexual impulses and the anxiety of isolation. If this is what Connell seeks in this relationship, it can never be productive (95), in the sense that it does not contribute to show “an active concern for the life and growth of that which we love” (21), namely Marianne, but rather a momentary relief that accentuates the distance between both parties. This renders Connell unable to show the emotional support that she needs because of his cowardice in recognising her as a partner: “without humility and courage, no love” (Bauman, 7). Connell’s low self-worth leads him to the adoption of cowardly behaviours and to believe that he is not deserving of love. To overcome this, Connell would have work on his “self-love” (Fromm, 45) since “we, ourselves are the ‘objects’ of our feelings and attitudes” (46), and, in his stubborn insistence to regard external opinion as more important than his own self-concept, he fails to show “care, respect, responsibility” (47) for himself. As a consequence of his refusal to form a solid identity and work on his personality, Connell usually turns to: “drinking too much and having anxious, upsetting sex with other girls” (Rooney, 74). Those are ultimately forms of orgiastic states that accentuate his feeling of isolation, as they do not provide with a sustainable long-term healing alternative: “there was no one he could talk to about that. He was excruciatingly lonely” (74). Therefore, when he craves Marianne’s presence, Connell only manifests the desire to experience momentary relief from the lack of intimacy in his emotional life, rather than showing the initiative to work hard to establish a meaningful bond with her.

The relief that Connell seeks never fully materialises because, if anything characterises his relationship with Marianne—and, by extension, the rest of contemporary

human connections in the postmodern capitalist world (Bauman, 16)—is lack of communication. The narrative seems to suggest at a certain point that this communication issue will be, indeed, solved: “Connell said: You know I love you. He didn’t say anything else. She said she loved him too and he nodded and continued driving as if nothing at all had happened, which in a way it hadn’t” (228). However, towards the end of the novel, there is proof that the flow of information in the couple will never be functional. This is shown through the conversation they have after he receives his acceptance to the MFA programme, as Marianne and Connell have an argument because Sadie—his friend from the Literary Society—knew about his application to the programme, when Marianne did not:

Is something up? she says.
I just got this email.
Oh? From who?
He looks dumbly at the laptop and then back at her[...]
Connell, from who? she says.
From this university in New York. It looks like they’re offering me a place on the MFA. You know, the creative writing programme. [...]
You didn’t tell me you applied for that, she says.
He just looks at her.
[...]I’m just surprised you didn’t mention it. [...]
I don’t know, he says. I should have told you but I honestly thought it was such a long shot. [...]
Did Sadie know you were applying? she says. [...] Why did you tell her and not me? [...] Are you in love with her? [...]
Are you joking? he says.
Why don’t you answer the question?
You’re getting a lot of stuff messed up here, Marianne. (262-263)

This passage seems to indicate that no matter how much work both parties put into the relationship, there is something unchangeable in their communication pattern. Remarkably, a few months before this scene, Connell acknowledges that if communication was solved, it would cancel the fulfilling aspect of their sexual attraction: “things would be less confusing if there wasn’t this other element to the relationship” (233). Whereas the lack of communication mostly—logically, given Connell’s dissociative tendencies—takes place at an emotional level, it never happens in moments

of sexual intimacy: “Maybe you’re telepathic. I did used to think I could read your mind at times, Connell says. In bed, you mean” (78). Between Connell and Marianne there seems to be a sexual bond that transcends the experience that most people are going to ever have of sex: “It’s not like this with other people” (236). This seems to be a curse beneath a blessing because it is the source of endless joy, although it pushes them to “pretend” (134) and “play games” (134) in other relationships. For Connell, the experience of this sexuality translates in his inherent need of denial because of the feelings of abnormality that he experiences when he has sex with Marianne:

With Helen he doesn’t feel shameful things, he doesn’t find himself saying weird stuff during sex, he doesn’t have that persistent sensation that he belongs nowhere, that he never will belong anywhere. Marianne had a wildness that got into him for a while and made him feel that he was like her, that they had the same unnameable spiritual injury, and that neither of them could ever fit into the world. But he was never damaged like she was. She just made him feel that way. (169)

The idea that there is something “damaged” (Clark, 2019) in both Connell or Marianne is not out of place, because “pain is an everyday thing for Sally Rooney’s characters” (Clark, 2019). On the emotional aspect, being with Marianne is painful for Connell because it enhances his feelings of otherness, as he cannot connect with her life experience. According to Clark, pain is a “pre-existing condition, a product of social circumstances as much as of personal experience [...] a way of drawing our attention to our isolation and forcing us to think about its causes” (2019). Hence, very soon there is a realisation that communication will always be disrupted because neither Connell or Marianne can relate with certain aspects of each other’s lives. Their divergence is so pronounced that they never want to discuss it until half-way through the narrative, when Marianne realises that she can be insensitive towards Connell’s feelings of inferiority when he is visiting her in Italy (Rooney, 173).

Nevertheless, Connell has the opportunity to be different with Helen because her experience of life is closer to his, they share a common class background, and he can

comfortably fit in the expectation of the provider role with her. Whereas Helen sustains Connell in the spectrum of normality, Marianne is a reminder of the oppression that Connell suffers due to his class. Some critics have defended that this disparity is one of the author's strategies to have her "cake and eat[s] it by [...] [presenting] Connell as intelligent, as well as a fantasy working-class hunk" (Heatherly, 2020), who unavoidably will fulfil the "clichés" that "show how conventional notions of masculinity and femininity have been reinforced by class power dynamics" (Heatherly, 2020). I believe, however, that the relatability the readership experiences towards the characters and the relationship lies in the fact that it manages to escape those precise stereotypes. Some critics have pointed at the reason for this being that Rooney is "writing about love—in which people can hurt each other but still mean a great deal to each other, and even relationships that are clearly doomed can go on and on and on" (Grady, 2019). Even when this perspective has been directly linked to having elements that are "a little old-fashioned, like something out of a 19th-century marriage novel" (Grady, 2019), I believe that it has also enhanced the narratives that millennial heterosexual relationships can be "despite its vulnerabilities, [...] worthwhile and self-sustaining" (Jarvis, 2020). That is, when both parts are willing to make an effort to work on their bond.

Despite this, it is Connell's general feeling of inferiority, which most working-class fellows in "middle-class dominated spaces of university" (Heatherly, 2020) would identify with, that makes the distance between the couple more pronounced. Socio-cultural background contributes to the instability that characterises "millennial romance [...] [as] fickle, endlessly fraught" (Do, 2020). Recent literature has tried to explain how relationships in contemporary times have experienced a move towards a tendency that researchers have called cold intimacies: "romantic relationships causing social bonds to become objects of consumption, becoming easily disposable as they lose their real

meaning” (Palmer in Arocha and Carter (eds.), 2020: 129). I would like to suggest that this pattern of meaningless relationships is firstly experienced by Connell in his family dynamics. Connell learns from Lorraine that it is acceptable to discard and silence relationships, which signals at the need that both Connell and Marianne have for a “perverse request for recognition” (Clark, 2019) of their emotions. Ultimately, even though they both desperately need to acknowledge each other, this never happens and all they are left with is silence. Connell finds that words often fail him: “No, no. Sorry. I had a weird … I feel weird. I don’t know” (Rooney, 106; original ellipsis). This is not surprising, as he uses this as a method of “stonewalling” (Marar, 161) to refuse to engage with Marianne, instead of expressing his feelings openly. As I see it, this behaviour is justified in the narrative through the lack of positive relationship models in the novel. Connell cannot help but to form unstable bonds with women, because of the nature of his ‘coldness’ towards deviating from the hegemonic model of masculinity and the barriers to intimacy that he self-imposes.

Whereas it may seem to some critics that Connell and Marianne’s relationship is doomed since the beginning (Jarvis, 2020) because of the impossibility that the heterosexual model of millennial intimacy presents, I find that there is hopeful message in the narrative. Through the potential to change that Connell has, there is a possibility to achieve mature, fulfilling love. However, I consider it vital that we do not forget that, contrary to what Easton claims in her blog, Connell does not show a: “refusal to engage in toxic masculinity” (2021). He usually complies to the norms set by the patriarchy because this seems easier to do than facing the possibility of open confrontation with normativity. Nevertheless, the prospects of the relationship between Connell and Marianne could change if he acted on his potential to change, and moved on from the conformity to the hegemonic project. Otherwise, the only destiny for Marianne and

Connell is to carry on reproducing a dysfunctional relationship pattern that cannot reach the levels of stability necessary for them to progress emotionally. Therefore, it seems that the positive aspects to this relationship, which is indeed life-changing for both characters, are constantly diminished by the obstacles that cannot be overcome: their lack of communication and Connell's barriers to intimacy.

Conclusions and Further Research

In the present dissertation, I have focused on analysing the masculine identity of one of the main characters of Sally Rooney's *Normal people*, Connell Waldron. The aspect that I was looking to cover were the repercussions that his gender, socio-economic and regional background had on his mental health and intimate relationships. My main purpose was to provide an alternative reading to previous criticism, which defined Connell as a display of traditional masculine gender roles, and even a representation of toxic masculinity. Instead of supporting this view, I suggested the word 'brittle' to describe the type of masculinity he presents, as the defining traits of the character are essentially contradictory: a crumbling insecurity topped by an apparent solid surface. In relation to this, the other goal of this dissertation was to ascertain to what extent Connell's masculinity affects the intimacy with his partner, Marianne, and how well the relationship portrayed in the narrative succeeded to represent millennial relationships.

Chapter 1 outlined how mainstream perceptions of masculine behaviour have influenced the description of the masculinity presented by this character. To contrast with the popular notion of 'toxic' masculinity, more scholarly definitions were offered and the term 'brittle' was introduced to describe the behaviour that Connell presents throughout the novel. As a young man that is essentially good, the main issue that he faces is confronting hegemonic patriarchal social expectations that will grant him dominant status. He finally challenges the *status quo* of the patriarchy because the narrative points at how detrimental it would be to comply to its social order, instead of recognising feelings to build deeper intimate bonds. At the beginning, in his hometown, Connell is the faithful representation of someone that fits in the wider society and is able to overlook his own notion of right and wrong to integrate in the dominant unrefined male culture. However, as I have explained, this changes when he goes to university and discovers that

his class is a hindrance to fit in a system in which the model of domination is heavily influenced by socio-economic factors. Hence, it is only in the context of his marginalisation that Connell can realistically aspire to change and start questioning his past decisions. Through this process, the narrative shows how there is hope for those men who live trapped in the constraints of an oppressive mindset when they are willing to commit to break the pattern and move towards healthy conducts that include seeking help for poor mental health.

Chapter 2 explored how the on-and-off relationship presented in the novel is unavoidable for the couple. This is due to Connell's barriers to intimacy, which cannot be overcome unless he puts the effort and the work to try to change the behaviour that he has adopted in order to be accepted by the wider male community. It seems that Connell's poor choices have led him to a state in which he feels helpless to rely on intimate partners or to express his emotions. He seeks emotional recognition from his partners, but, at the same time, feels the need to be socially powerful. In that sense, whereas he seems to achieve a sense of normativity with Helen, it seems that Connell and Marianne will never achieve a state of fulfilment in their intimacy because of his fundamentally traditional notions of masculine roles in relationships. Despite this, the narrative shows some optimism towards achieving personal improvement through heterosexual relationships, as intimacy can grant safe spaces for both women and—especially—men to experience understanding and recognition, even if this is solely achieved in the sexual lives of individuals.

As expected, this study has limitations, the clearer one is that it only focusses in one of the author's novels. In Rooney's work, there are several examples of the 'brittle masculinity' model that I have attempted to introduce—Felix in *Beautiful World, Where Are You?*; Nick in *Conversations with Friends*; Nathan in *Mr. Salary* (2019). Even though

not all of those men seem to show as much potential to change as Connell Waldron, it seems that in all of the author's novels there is a pattern of a male character that could be described using similar parameters to those that characterize Connell. This reinforces the argument that the approach taken for this study could potentially be the start of a useful contribution to a debate that is much needed in the creation of safe spaces to discuss the relationships young men have with themselves and with others.

Besides the limitation of focussing on only one of the author's works, the other evident one is that the female perspective of the relationship is not explored. This study will, unfortunately, does not possess the scope to engage with most of the feminist criticism that the novel has produced. Hence, another aspect for further research could be to analyse, from the female character's perspective, how the relationship dynamics can be identified as dysfunctional, and what approaches could heal the issues that lack of communication and unhealthy constructions of masculinity.

The positive note that, in my opinion, differentiates *Normal People* to the rest of Rooney's works is that Connell's intimate bond with Marianne impacts her healing process massively. He does this successfully through his own process of breaking with his deeply ingrained patriarchal mindset. The failure of the relationship, thus, is not an obstacle in the sense that the narrative appears to indicate that there is a possibility for reconciliation in a future in which both of them, but especially Connell, address their barriers to intimacy and communication to take full responsibility for their actions and decisions.

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