Fecha de recepción: 5 julio 2021
Fecha de aceptación: 3 octubre 2021
Fecha de publicación: 8 febrero 2022
URL: https://oceanide.es/index.php/012020/article/view/98
Oceánide número 15, ISSN 1989-6328
DOI: https://doi.org/10.37668/oceanide.v15i.98

María Amor Barros del Río
Universidad de Burgos, España
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2537-7405

Irish Youth, Materialism and Postfeminism: The Critique behind the Romance in "Normal People"

Abstract

Normal People, the TV series, aired in Ireland during the pandemic lockdown in spring 2020 and became an instant hit. This romantic drama, based on Sally Rooney's acclaimed novel, offers an updated representation of the tensions inherent in the process of growing up for Irish youth, a context extensive to other Western countries. The aim of this article is to explore the critique behind the romance through an in-depth interpretation of the protagonists' problematic process of coming-of-age. For this purpose, the dramatic aspects of this cinematic narrative are explored in terms of composition, narration and focalization. Under the critical lens of postfeminism, this article analyses how psychological violence and explicit and rough sex are used in the series as forms of (mis)communication, with a particular interest in the combination of camera work, dialogues and silences. Finally, this article assesses to what extent *Normal People* naturalizes mundane life and succeeds in adhering to the romantic plot within the frame of neoliberal and postfeminist values.

Keywords:

Sally Rooney; *Normal People*; romance; materialism; postfeminism

Resumen

La serie televisiva *Gente normal* se emitió en Irlanda durante el confinamiento de la pandemia Covid-19, en la primavera de 2020, convirtiéndose instantáneamente en un gran éxito. Este drama romántico, basado en la aclamada novela de Sally Rooney, ofrece una representación actualizada de las tensiones propias del proceso de crecimiento de la juventud irlandesa, un contexto también extensible a otros países occidentales. El objetivo de este artículo es analizar la crítica subyacente a la historia romántica a través de un estudio en profundidad del paso a la edad adulta de los protagonistas en una sociedad neoliberal. Para ello, se exploran los aspectos dramáticos de esta narrativa cinematográfica en términos de composición, narración y focalización. Desde una perspectiva crítica postfeminista, este artículo analiza el uso de la violencia psicológica y el sexo como prácticas comunicativas, con especial atención al uso de la cámara, los diálogos y el silencio. Finalmente, se evalúa hasta qué punto *Gente normal* logra con éxito normalizar un modelo de vida mundano y se adhiere a la trama romántica dentro de un marco ideológico neoliberal y posfeminista.

Palabras clave:

Sally Rooney; *Gente normal*; romance; materialismo; posfeminismo

Young Irish writer Sally Rooney, labelled as "Ireland's most successful millennial novelist" (Cameron 2020, 409), belongs to a generation of Irish writers who have been breaking new ground since the crash of the Celtic Tiger. These "post-crash stars of fiction", in Justin Jordan's words (2015),[1] have been able to reshape traditional articulations of identity formation in the present recessionary context, eliciting in their works innovative forms of expression that resonate with readers. Rooney's novels *Conversations with Friends* (2017), *Normal People* (2018) and *Beautiful World, Where Are You?* (2021) address the concerns of the young generations and their place in the world.[2] Her prose is precise and intimate; her style is fragmented and plays around with time lapses, contributing to a "perceptive portrayal of mental and emotional landscapes" (Clark 2018), so that her characters' development processes dominate the slow pace of the plot. In her work, intimacy is accompanied by minimalist descriptions and nuanced experiential scenes.

Normal People tells the on-and-off love story of two Irish adolescents, Marianne and Connell, from their high-school years in a small village to the end of their college years at Trinity College, in Dublin. The hit TV adaptation of this Bildungsroman closely follows the novel's general plot and focuses on the flowing intimacy and affection that develops between Connell and Marianne. Formally, the series is broken up into twelve half-hour episodes, with Lenny Abrahamson and Hettie Macdonald each directing one half. This format is well-suited to the younger generations (under twenty-five years of age), who are the target audience of the TV adaptation. Furthermore, young actors Daisy Edgar-Jones (Marianne) and Paul Mescal (Connell) achieve a degree of complicity that appeals to the audience and fosters engagement and identification with the characters. As in the book, the adaptation includes intense emotional scenes, including what *The Irish Post* labelled "the longest sex scene ever aired on Irish television" (O'Connor 2020), succeeding in spurring the audience's interest. This, and the fact that the series aired during the pandemic lockdown in spring 2020, made of *Normal People* a global hit. The viewing figures for the first week were 16.2 million viewers on BBC iPlayer and by August 2020 it had reached 54.8 million views. Undoubtedly, *Normal People* became the most popular drama of the year.

The objective of this article is to explore the critique behind the romance through an in-depth interpretation of the protagonists' problematic growing up process. Following Manfred Jahn's proposal (2021) for narratological film analysis, this article assesses the dramatic aspects of the TV series through three distinguished but complementary elements in film analysis, namely composition, narration and focalization. Also, this cinematic narrative unveils the dramatic tensions undergone by the millennials, a generation characterized by "the impossibility of finding a way to be" (Cameron 2020, 421). Hence, under the critical lens of postfeminism, this article analyses how psychological violence and explicit and rough sex are used in the series as forms of (mis) communication, with a particular interest in the use of dialogues and silences.

Normal People is set in contemporary Ireland, a country that fell into recession in 2008 after a period of economic boom known as the Celtic Tiger. Although these upheavals made a negative impact on many aspects of Irish people's lives, social expectations of success in terms of material wealth and luxury did not waver.[3] As a result, the impossibility of reaching previous standards of living infused frustration and bewilderment amongst the young generations who, shaped by the fractal essence of neoliberalism, responded with feelings of individual responsibility and shame for their perceived failures and exclusion. These effects entailed strongly gendered practices enmeshed with founding features of global neoliberalism and fostered male anxiety for material success and practices of female body objectification.[4] The ideology behind this cinematic adaptation is radically materialistic and the protagonists navigate a context defined by individualism, vulnerability and gendered and material inequality. Hence, *Normal People* epitomizes a postfeminist cultural product contextualized in Irish recessionary neoliberalism where "*normal* is a state of unmitigated precarity", as Fox, Cronin and Conchubhair (2020) have claimed.

One of the first things that calls the reader's attention is the experimental format of the novel, with a style similar to diary writing in the present tense, a double-perspective narrative and the use sections instead of chapters.[5] All this poses a challenge to the series' adaptation, which required a subtle combination of verbal and visual codes. Hence, the series' composition, understood as "the theoretical agency behind a film's organization and arrangement" (Jahn 2021), seeks to give coherence to the plot through a careful selection of passages compressed within twelve episodes and arranged in three distinguishable parts:

The first five episodes are constructed in a linear and progressive way, leading the viewers from the first casual conversations between Marianne and Connell, through their secret sexual encounters and the different social contexts where they meet and try, awkwardly, to hide the true nature of their relationship. Episodes one to three are set in the fictional town of Carricklea, where Connell's social success amongst his peers is undisputable. The scenery is purposely selected and he appears in outdoor spaces, enjoying social and sport events and group conversations. On the contrary, Marianne is frequently seen alone, walking the school corridors or lying on her bed in the darkness. This first part of the show is intended to situate the audience in context, with a strong focus on class and gender. The social breach that separates the protagonists is overcome by their mutual attraction.

Episodes four to seven change scenery and show the protagonists' lives in Dublin, where their roles are completely reversed. In an urban environment, Connell feels out of place whereas Marianne has become popular and enjoys thriving yet unfulfilling relationships. Scenes of her surrounded by people who seek her attention alternate with Connell walking alone on Dublin's busy streets or at the library, swallowed by its harsh concrete structure. As events unfold, the audience witnesses them eventually reuniting. The linear progression is only broken in episode six, where a retrospective account of events explains Connell's breakup with Marianne. After a first scene where a glass slips into the sink and breaks, viewers are transported to a sequence of prior events that ultimately explain Marianne's tears. Symbolically, the crystal glass represents their relationship, and the episode reveals Connell's inability to face the wealth gap that renders him an outcast, epitomized in the housing crisis, particularly acute in Dublin. At this point, the series underlines the effects of materiality on the young generations, a dislocation that Connell expresses as follows: "I can't connect this life and that life. It just doesn't fit" (Episode 6, 13:55). The dramatic consequences of structural excesses during and after the Celtic Tiger are met with his inability to ask for

Marianne's help. As Jaworski has stated, "speech can often act as a deterrent to and terminator of communication" (1992, 8), and so Connell's anguish is represented in a paradigmatic scene where both protagonists are sitting side by side by the swimming pool and are totally inhibited from expressing their most inner fears and feelings. Forced by the limitations of dialogue, an artistic piece of camerawork captures the couple's intimacy with alternating close-up shots of Connell's tender kiss on her shoulder and Marianne's closed eyes and stillness. This close range approach contributes to the success of the scene and captures the minute details of their deep yet unspoken feelings for each other. Elusive looks and long silences coexist with the following loose sentences:

> Connell: I… Marianne?
> Marianne: Yep?
> Connell: Uh… It's nothing.
> Marianne: OK. (Episode 6, 31:00)

Here, Connell's tension is evident in both his unarticulated speech and the camera's focus on his painful facial expression, suggesting an inner struggle.[6] His lack of wealth and economic independence marks his permanent feelings of inferiority towards Marianne and the world she represents. Because contemporary societies are strongly marked by materiality, Connell develops a sense of inferiority that characterizes his tendency towards self-exclusion. Furthermore, several times along the TV series Connell hears from other characters that he does not deserve Marianne. Niall, his roommate, and his own mother, Lorraine, insist in his not being good enough for her. These messages symbolize society's pressure regarding male behaviour, reinforce his poor self-esteem and result in no improvement of their relationship. In other words, those who cannot achieve high standards of living feel shame and humiliation and face social exclusion and rejection. From episode six onwards, Connell's sense of not belonging acquires relevance, with the series progressively unfolding the pressure he feels to achieve social acceptance through wealth.

In Marianne's case, her emotional insecurities make her get involved in toxic, abusive relationships that objectify her and leave her feeling empty. Her emotional insecurity makes her incapable of standing on her own two feet and she seeks meaning through sexual abuse at the hands of her partners. Female body objectification is a recurrent practice amongst millennials and the series bears witness to it. When Connell casually asks Marianne if she would send him a photo of herself naked, she says she would, but only in return for a naked photo of himself, a request that remains pending, as the following dialogue illustrates:

> Connell: 'I'm not sure you'd want a picture of my dick, would you?
> Marianne: 'Only fair. You probably shouldn't. I'd never delete it. I'd look at it every single day and I'd take it to my grave. (Episode 6, 11:36)

This scene epitomizes what Rosalind Gill has called "the sexualisation of culture" (2007a, 150), a set of gender-biased practices that objectify female bodies for male amusement. It is no coincidence that in episode six, after a humiliating scene where she is bullied by her brother to the indifference of her mother, a tearful Marianne takes selfies of her naked body. By doing so, she submits to self-objectification and individuation, confirming that that "the relationship between culture and subjectivity […] also operates on and through emotions and forms of selfhood" (Gill 2017, 620). As the series unfolds, these episodes give the audience an insight into the protagonists' complex inner worlds and their struggles for social and self-inclusion, with a marked emphasis on the bruises left by class and gender bias. They serve as a prelude to the following part of the show where annihilation and self-destruction are to be enacted.

Episodes eight to eleven symbolize a turn in the protagonists' lives, which are radically mediated by gendered neoliberal dictates. Marianne impersonates the contradictions of postfeminist discourses that identify female agency with individual freedom and body commodity.[7] The series makes use of artful camerawork to draw attention to the female body and the punitive practices it endures. The complex interplay of materiality and gender inflict Marianne with emotional damage, and her insecurities adopt a more corporeal form, which emulates postfeminist practices framed by the notion of individual lifestyle choice. Her decline intensifies in the second half of the series as she engages in consecutive annihilating sexual relationships. Her drift towards abusive and destructive sexual partners reaches its peak in episode nine, where she willingly endures masochistic practices and suffers the pain and humiliation that she thinks she deserves. Later, in episode eleven, the series expands on the structural and endemic scope of corporeal violence against the female body with her brother physically abusing her. At this point, the series diverts from the novel with Connell coming to her rescue and restoring the traditional romantic pattern that had shifted to the background in previous episodes.

In Connell's case, his growing anxiety and ultimate breakdown plays out in episode ten, where he epitomizes what Neilson has called "existential anxiety", that is, "a mental unease induced by the self-reflexive perception of life's precarious character" (2015, 184). His friend Rob's suicide and his own struggles to meet social and self-expectations eventually lead to a mental breakdown to the point that he needs psychological treatment. In the end, he overcomes his deepest fears thanks to Marianne's emotional (albeit digital) support. The careful composition of these episodes successfully maps out the destructive consequences of neoliberal dictates on the lives of Irish youth. The alternation yet complementarity of Marianne and Connell's individual spirals into self-destruction and annihilation illustrate the challenges and voids contemporary capitalist societies pose on its members, both in terms of gender and class.

Finally, episode twelve reconciles the audience with traditional discourses of romance and materiality. Marianne and Connell are recovered from their mental ailments and enjoy a harmonious romantic relationship in their last years at university. After freeing herself from her ties with home and family, Marianne seems at ease with conventional forms of socialisation. Connell impersonates social success as he is acclaimed by his peers for his excellence in literature and is offered a scholarship in the USA. Symbolically, this ending keeps intact the neoliberal discourse in which everything is in its place so long as professional success and emotional support are ensured. The audience is left with an open future ahead of Connell, whose literary career is about to take off. His decision to leave despite Marianne's choosing to

stay secures the supremacy of male social success versus the more conservative choice of his female counterpart. Hence, the series returns to the romantic plot with its depiction of love as a safety net which endows the protagonists with self-assurance and a more defined sense of identity in their world.

In general terms, the composition of the series is functional and effective. It appeals to the Irish audience because it draws on classic Irish tropes such as the rural-urban exodus, the dysfunctional family and migration, without neglecting other features that identify contemporary Ireland such as the housing crisis, the presence of the social media in daily life and a global Ireland that the Irish youth easily identifies with. Such oppositions, albeit reductive, are "ideologically effective and imaginatively resilient" (Reynolds 2020, 5) because they offer some kind of security and a simplified reading of life.

The series follows the sequence romance-drama-romance to finish with a happy ending that ultimately pleases the audience. The underlying danger of this finale is that it naturalizes material aspiration, self-confidence and resilience as the right dispositions for surviving in neoliberal societies. All in all, the TV show attempts to preserve the spirit of the book with some minor divergences, leaving an open ending with the young protagonists continuing their quest for adulthood separately.

Formal experimentation is not the only challenge faced by this TV adaptation. In order to present the characters' interiority, the aforementioned structure is built upon an array of devices that provide the plot with meaningful nuances that deserve further analysis. Undoubtedly, the quietness and isolation of the characters in the novel is a major challenge to the film script. Although Rooney's novels are rich in dialogues, much of *Normal People*'s essence can be found in the introspective development of the characters' personalities and the novel's use of an interior monologue through an omniscient narration in the present tense. As a result, it forces the construction of the series with extreme word economy. This device is evident in the following passage from the novel:

> For her, the scholarship was a self-esteem boost, a happy confirmation of what she has always believed about herself anyway: that she's special. [...] For him, the scholarship is a giant material fact, like a vast cruise ship that has appeared out of nowhere . . . That's money, the substance that makes the world real. There's something so corrupt and sexy about it. (Rooney 2018, 160)

In the TV series, the nuances of this passage are reduced to a limited but meaningful dialogue between Marianne and Connell, who meet at a terrace in Dublin:

> Connell: How are you feeling about Schols?
> Marianne: How are YOU feeling about them, Connell?
> Connell: Mmm, ... How am I feeling about my entire future being potentially secure or mind-numbingly difficult? Yeah, it's ... casual. (Episode 7, 10:17)

Note that this short dialogue in episode seven is based on unanswered and rhetorical questions, transferring to the audience the task of weighing the importance of the topic for Connell. While Marianne eludes and dismisses the discussion as an unimportant issue for herself, intonation, repetition and explanation are indicative of the relevance of the matter for him. Unanswered questions and vague, loosely formed sentences are frequently accompanied by strategic camera shots that transmit the emotional and psychological content described in the novel. As minimal dialogues abound, the narration relies heavily on the use of audio-visual techniques, among which close ups and close settings are paramount. This "internalist perspective"(Palmer 2011, 80), very present in the series, stresses introspection, subjectivity, interior monologue and focalization of fictional minds. In episode five, Marianne and Connell sit opposite to each other at her place in Dublin and they comment on the nature of their relationship back at school. The scene is built around long silences, elusive looks and bodily stillness in an intimate and close setting to create "external simulations of internal states" that often relate to "instances of psychonarration in prose narratives" (Alber 2016). As a result, the audience learns about Marianne's embarrassment for having been vexed by him at the time but, most of all, for having put up with it. In general terms, the series deploys rationed but meaningful dialogues in contexts of intimacy. After-sex scenes are frequently used for these purposes, where silence highlights their closeness and goes "beyond the limits of words to deal with the unspeakable" (Jaworski, 1992, 8). Alongside, aerial views of the protagonists' naked bodies lying side by side on top of the bed metaphorically symbolize their mutual confidence and restfulness. This sort of unrealistic shot is a visual strategy that inscribes the filmmaker in the discourse to underline the relevance of the moment.

Silence plays a major role to stress the loneliness and isolation of the protagonists in contemporary Ireland. Silence, understood as "a tool of oppression" (Ahmed 2013, xvi), is particularly detectable in Connell's incapacity to express his fears and longings. His lines are reduced to the bare minimum and both script and camera work coalesce in scenes that depict his unvoiced anguish. An interesting perspective of silence as "a sign of malfunction in conversation" (Coates 2015, 122) comes into play as the story unfolds, along with the protagonists' respective processes of self-destruction. The marked absence of dialogue demands focalization through other external signs in order to give complete meaning to the scenes. According to Jahn (2021, 9), focalization is "the ways and means of presenting information from somebody's point of view". Because of the level of intimacy and interiority contained in the novel, the TV adaptation necessarily relies upon complementary strategies to convey the protagonists' complex development. Facial expressions and bodily positions are key elements that enable interpretation of the mental states of the characters, but focalization on other entities and change of perspective are two other useful strategies employed. Two significant examples of Marianne and Connell's spiral into self-destruction can be found in episodes nine and six respectively. Marianne is asked by Lukas, her sexual partner in Sweden, to pose for a photo shoot that evolves into a sadomasochistic performance. Half-nude, Marianne is shot kneeling on the floor, hands tied, and a dark canvas in the background. By means of a dual-perspective shot, the camera confronts the audience with an objectifying image of Marianne, capturing her indolence, apparent emptiness and total apathy with regards to the situation she is in. This technique, which is associated with passages of free indirect discourse in the

novel, exemplifies how "the female body in postfeminist media culture is constructed as a window to the individual's interior life" (Gill 2007b, 256). Posing helplessly in front of the camera, different scenes of sexual submission alternate with Marianne's passive attitude. During these scenes, the audience can hear Connell's reassuring voice reading out his last email. Emulating an omniscient narrator voice, this technique epitomizes Marianne's internal struggle against self-objectification: the sequence ends with her refusing to submit and ultimately rejecting such degrading sexual practices.

Similarly, the series makes use of external focalization to help the audience understand Connell's breakdown. In episode six, the camera focuses on an email rejecting a short story Connell submitted for publication.[8] This strategy serves to keep the audience informed about his current state of mind as it reads: "Unfortunately, we don't feel it's quite ready for inclusion. We felt it lacked confidence and a clear voice" (Episode 6, 22:23). During that episode, Connell loses his summer job leaving him with no way to make a living or stay in Dublin for the summer. Incapable of asking Marianne if he can move in with her, he returns home. These events trigger his dramatic feelings of personal failure, and the situation comes to a head in episode ten. An artful close-up shows part of a psychological evaluation being filled in. It reads as follows:

> Self-Dislike
> 0 I feel the same about myself as ever.
> 1 I have lost confidence in myself.
> 2 I am disappointed in myself.
> 3 I dislike myself. (Episode 10, 00:01)

Only after option number three has been circled does the audience see that it is Connell filling-in the evaluation. Retrospectively, the episode points at his friend Rob's suicide as a pivotal moment, triggering his ultimate breakdown. To illustrate this, episode eleven includes shots of Connell's physical deterioration, accompanied by unsettling background music, and is mostly constructed upon alternating scenes of therapy sessions, discussions with Helen, his girlfriend, and soothing and revealing online meetings with Marianne.

As expected, the TV series makes use of other external devices that enrich focalization, such as the use of music and sound effects, which convey the protagonists' internal mental states. To compensate for the absence of dialogue and internal thought processes, the TV adaptation makes use of incidental music, composed by Stephen Rennicks. The soundtrack manages, considerably well, to emulate the protagonists' inner feelings in specific scenes throughout the series. An example of some particularly effective use of background music can be found in the scene where Marianne takes naked photos of herself, with shadowy illumination and close-ups of her crying, accompanied by sad backing music; the combination proves successful in transmitting the protagonists' feelings of powerlessness and emptiness. Thanks to music supervisors Juliet Martin and Maggie Phillips's careful track selection from the 1990s and early 2000s, the cinematic adaptation displays a compelling soundtrack which exudes a tone of "euphoric melancholia" (St. Clair 2020). The series makes use of music to inflect the appropriate tone and feeling in the pursue of articulating Connell and Marianne's unvoiced emotions. Particularly conveying is Irish singer Anna Mieke's "Warped Window", played at the end of episode one. Barely a word is spoken between Marianne and Connell but the song speaks for them. Imogen Heap's "Hide and Seek" helps the audience understand Marianne and Connell's troubled feelings for each other while enjoying Sligo's beautiful coastal landscapes. The Villagers' "Everything I Am Is Yours" is also a meaningful choice. It starts with acoustic guitar strums and begins playing as Connell emerges from a deep bout of emotional distress at the end of episode ten, as the audience hears the lyrics: "I am just a man tipping on the wire. Tight rope walking fool". According to the critics, these choices have contributed to a "perfectly curated soundtrack" (Kemp 2020) and definitely fulfil their function as an essential part of the show's muted tone.

To conclude, the TV adaptation of *Normal People* tells an appealing and troubled love story between a boy and a girl in contemporary Ireland. The combination of romance and drama is artistically enriched by a superb casting, an artful camera work and a compelling soundtrack. Its composition is arranged into three distinctive parts. First, it portrays the romantic but unspeakable relationship between Marianne and Connell in a linear and progressive way, then it slowly builds to a dramatic climax where the respective breakdowns of the protagonists take centre stage and, finally, it concludes with a positive ending that epitomizes the traditional romantic plot and restores the conventional order, in the place of the previous chaos. As the visual and narrative analysis shows, this structure succeeds in maintaining the argument and keeping the audience engaged.

Undoubtedly, the centrality of the couple is absolute in the TV series, with their intense sexual encounters and their unvoiced, tormented feelings for one another and we could conclude that *Normal People* has a "conversational" nature (Bracken 2020, 148), despite the voids and silences it is impregnated with.[9] The subject of the novel is the dynamics between Marianne and Connell, who exist together rather than separately. But this love-story narrative also makes use of an appealing combination of classic and contemporary Irish tropes that ultimately guarantee its success: the traditional rural-urban exodus pattern and the troubled family relationships are updated with current practices of globalization, such as the regular use of digital media and international mobility. On top of that, the series also explores the consequences of rampant capitalism in Ireland, particularly visible in the housing crises, the privileges enjoyed by the upper classes and the economic challenges faced by the less wealthy. As a result, disengagement and disintegration of social networks and human bonds are at the core of the series, which covertly denounces the contradictions intrinsic to globalization and their devastating effects upon the protagonists.

To express Marianne and Connell's interiority, the series resorts to silence. Lack of dialogue and unfinished sentences serve to represent their vulnerability and fragility, and their inability to manage their process of development in an aggressive and destructive context. Word economy and interior settings are meaningfully reinforced by close camerawork, which provides the necessary sense of immediacy and intimacy and emulates the introspective development of the characters' personalities. Oftentimes, the compelling soundtrack selected to accompany these scenes plays an efficacious role and helps to get across the intended message. As a result, transportation, or "the

extent to which viewers are absorbed into the narrative they are processing" (Shrum 2006, 64), is successfully achieved through the mentioned visual and auditory effects that facilitate identification with the personal drama.

Normal People portrays a young generation, the millennials, struggling and at a loss. Through silence and miscommunication, the TV series represents the problematic articulation of identity formation in contemporary societies and illuminates dramatic gender and class issues. Marianne epitomizes different forms of gender and sexual abuse that range from verbal vituperation to physical violence and destructive sexual practices. Connell embodies guilt and anxiety to the point that he has a breakdown and requires psychological assistance in order to overcome his conflicts. Hence, beyond the emotional and sexual scenes that sell well, the audience faces strongly gendered practices aligned with neoliberal ideologies that translate into male anxiety and female body objectification. In the hostile environment they attempt to navigate, the isolation of the individuals remains grim and unresolved despite the aura of romance that ultimately softens the drama.

In the light of this complex narrative, the strategy employed by the series to secure success is an open ending that conjugates the romantic plot with neoliberal and postfeminist values. And so, *Normal People* valorises and normalizes mundane life: the underlying tragedy endured by the protagonists is strategically alleviated, the audience appeased and the inexorable isolation of the individual in a hostile world legitimated. In the finale, the TV series leaves room for the protagonists' material success and depicts love as the ultimate force that saves all. The critique fades away, but the audience's fears are soothed and, more importantly, the series sells well.

Works Cited

ABRAHAMSON, Lenny and Hettie Macdonald. 2020. *Normal People*. Element Pictures, BBC Three. Series 1. https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p089g8rs (Last access: February 5, 2021).

AHMED, Sara. 2013. "Foreword: Secrets and Silence in Feminist Research." In *Secrecy and Silence in the Research Process: Feminist Reflections*, ed. Róisín Ryan-Flood and Rosalind Gill, xvi–xxi. London and New York: Routledge.

ALBER, Jan. 2016. "The Representation of Character Interiority in Film: Cinematic Versions of Psychonarration, Free Indirect Discourse and Direct Thought." In *Emerging Vectors of Narratology*, ed. Per Krogh Hansen, John Pier, Philippe Roussin and Wolf Schmid, 265–84. Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter.

ANDERSSON, Linnea E. 2020. "*Conflict Discourse in Television Series: The Functions and Uses of Silence in Relation to Social Class*." MA Diss., Göteborg University. https://gupea.ub.gu.se/handle/2077/64182 (Last access: October 16, 2021).

BARROS-DEL RÍO, María Amor. 2018. "Fragmentation and Vulnerability in Anne Enright's *The Green Road* (2015): Collateral Casualties of the Celtic Tiger in Ireland." *International Journal of English Studies* 18 (1): 35–51.

BENTLEY, Jean. 2020. "*Normal People*: Author on the Pressure of Adapting Her Best-Selling Novel for Hulu." *The Hollywood Reporter*, April 29. https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/tv/tv-news/normal-people-author-pressure-adapting-her-best-selling-novel-hulu-1292353 (Last access: January 12, 2021).

BRACKEN, Claire. 2020. "The Feminist Contemporary: The Contradiction of the Critique." In *The New Irish Studies*, ed. Paige Reynolds, 144–60. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.

BRACKEN, Claire and Tara Harney-Mahajan. 2017. "A Continuum of Irish Women's Writing II: Reflections on the Post-Celtic Tiger Era." *Lit: Literature Interpretation Theory* 28 (2): 97–114.

CAMERON, Olga Cox. 2020. "The Persistence of Passivity as Foundational Myth in Women Writing Women in Ireland: A Thread between Mid-20th-Century Repression and Cutting-Edge Millennialism." *Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society* 25 (3): 409–28.

CLARK, Alex. 2018. "Conversations with Sally Rooney: The 27-year-old Novelist Defining a Generation." *The Guardian*, August 25. https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/aug/25/sally-rooney-interview-normal-people-conversations-with-friends (Last access: January 23, 2021).

COATES, Jennifer. 2015. *Women, Men and Language: A Sociolinguistic Account of Gender Differences in Language*. London and New York: Routledge.

DRISCOLL, Catherine. 2002. *Girls: Feminine Adolescence in Popular Culture and Cultural Theory*. New York: Columbia UP.

FAGAN, Honor G. 2003. "Globalised Ireland, or, Contemporary Transformations of National Identity?" In *The End of Irish History?*, ed. Colin Coulter and Steve Coleman, 110–21. Manchester: Manchester UP.

FOX, Renée, Mike Cronin and Brian Ó Conchubhair 2020. "Introduction." In *The Routledge International Handbook of Irish Studies*, ed. Renée Fox, Mike Cronin, Brian Ó Conchubhair, 3–14. London and New York: Routledge.

FREE, Marcus and Clare Scully. 2018. "The Run of Ourselves: Shame, Guilt and Confession in Post-Celtic Tiger Irish Media." *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 21 (3): 308–24.

GILL, Rosalind. 2007a. "Postfeminist Media Culture: Elements of a Sensibility." *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 10 (2): 147–66.

———. 2007b. *Gender and the Media*. Cambridge: Polity.

———. 2017. "The Affective, Cultural and Psychic Life of Postfeminism: A Postfeminist Sensibility 10 Years on." *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 20 (6): 606–26.

JAHN, Manfred. 2021. "A Guide to Narratological Film Analysis." English Department, University of Cologne. http://www.uni-koeln.de/~ame02/pppf.pdf (Last access: February 1, 2021).

JAWORSKI, Adam. 1992. *The Power of Silence: Social and Pragmatic Perspectives*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.

JORDAN, Justine. 2015. "A New Irish Literary Boom: the Post-Crash Stars of Fiction." *The Guardian*, October 17. https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/oct/17/new-irish-literary-boom-post-crash-stars-fiction (Last access: January 12, 2021).

KEMP, Ella. 2020. "*Normal People* Soundtrack: All the Songs Played on Sally Rooney's Hit Drama." *NME*, April 28. https://www.nme.com/blogs/tv-blogs/normal-people-soundtrack-music-sally-rooney-2655491 (Last access: January 17, 2021).

MALMGREN, Carl D. 1987. "From Work to Text: The Modernist and Postmodernist Künstlerroman." *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 21: 5–28.

MAYS, Michael. 2005. "Irish Identity in An Age of Globalisation." *Irish Studies Review* 13 (1): 3–12.

NEGRA, Diane and Yvonne Tasker. 2013. "Neoliberal Frames and Genres of Inequality: Recession-Era Chick Flicks and Male-Centred Corporate Melodrama." *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 16 (3): 344–61.

NEILSON, David. 2015. "Class, Precarity, and Anxiety under Neoliberal Global Capitalism: From Denial to Resistance." *Theory and Psychology* 25 (2): 184–201.

O'CONNOR, Rachel. 2020. "Ireland Reacts to *Normal People* and Longest-Ever Sex Scene to Be Aired on National TV." *The Irish Post*, May 13. https://www.irishpost.com/entertainment/huge-reaction-episode-normal-people-last-night-185095 (Last access: January 10, 2021).

PALMER, Alan. 2011. "The Mind beyond the Skin in *Little Dorrit*." In *Current Trends in Narratology*, ed. Greta Olson, 79–100. Berlin: De Gruyter.

REYNOLDS, Paige. 2020. "Introduction." In *The New Irish Studies*, ed. Paige Reynolds, 1–22. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.

ROONEY, Sally. 2017. *Conversations with Friends*. London: Faber and Faber.

———. 2018. *Normal People*. London: Faber and Faber.

———. 2021. *Beautiful World, Where Are You?* London: Faber and Faber.

SHRUM, Lawrence J. 2006. "Perception." In *Psychology of Entertainment*, ed. Jennings Bryant and Peter Vorderer, 55–70. London and New York: Routledge.

SLAUGHTER, Joseph R. 2014. "Bildungsroman/Künstlerroman." In *The Encyclopedia of the Novel*, ed. Peter Melville Logan et al., 93–7. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.

ST. CLAIR, Josh. 2020. "Every Song from the *Normal People* Soundtrack." *Men's Health*. May 4. https://www.menshealth.com/entertainment/a32363182/normal-people-season-1-soundtrack-songs (Last access: January 23, 2021).

SULLIVAN, Kelly. 2020. "Material and Visual Culture in Post-Celtic Tiger Ireland." In *The Routledge International Handbook of Irish Studies*, ed. Renée Fox, Mike Cronin and Brian Ó Conchubhair, 311–22. London and New York: Routledge.

TASKER, Yvonne and Diane Negra. 2005. "In Focus: Postfeminism and Contemporary Media Studies." *Cinema Journal* 44 (2): 107–10.

TERRAZAS, Melania. 2020. "Stereotype Blasting: Alan McMonagle as Satirist and Visionary." *Irish Studies Review* 28 (3): 354–69.

Notes

[1] Some other authors included in Jordan's classification are Paul Murray, Kevin Barry, Donal Ryan, Sara Baume, Oona Frawley, Lisa McInerney, Eimear McBride, Tana French and Mary Costello. This new Irish literary boom, she affirms, is also due to the current dynamism of Ireland's publishing scene. For a more elaborated discussion on contemporary Irish women writers, see Bracken and Harney-Mahajan (2017).

[2] Proof that her work is a sign of the times are the many awards she has received. *Conversations with Friends* (2017) won the Sunday Times Fiction Prize in 2017. *Normal People* was named Waterstones Book of the Year, winner of the Costa Book Award and nominated for the 2018 Man Booker Prize. *Beautiful World, Where Are You?* (2021) was voted Novel of the Year at An Post Irish Book Awards 2021.

[3] For a comprehensive exploration of the Celtic Tiger effects upon Irish society, see Fagan (2003) and Mays (2005).

[4] For a more expanded study of the effects of neoliberalism, see Free and Scully (2018), Negra and Tasker (2013) and Sullivan (2020).

[5] Formal alterations are a form of challenging neoliberal values frequently found in contemporary Irish novels. In *The Green Road* (2015), by Anne Enright, the ravages of neoliberal rationalities are epitomized in the representation of personal and social fragmentation (see Barros-del Río 2018). *Ithaca* (2017), by Alan McMonagle, is set after Ireland was badly hit economically in the summer of 2009 and shows the post-crash writer's upending of female stereotypes and concerns about the objectivization of the female body in experimental ways (see Terrazas 2020).

[6] A recent research carried out by Andersson (2020) explores the correlation between social class and the use of silence in conflict discourse. Even though the discussion of the topic has a speculative nature, this study opens new paths for further investigation.

[7] An array of studies delve into the relation between female agency and body: see Driscoll (2002), Tasker and Negra (2005) and Gill (2007a).

[8] A significant issue that the TV series fails to portray and that the novel expands upon is Connell's ambivalent attitude towards writing. The book devotes a significant amount of lines to the topic, which is presented as Connell's intimate and true form of expression. Also in the novel, his correspondence with Marianne, in the form of emails, is presented as a form of literary training where his inner feelings are expressed. The artistic expression of

the protagonist, which may take the form of a Künstlerroman, is a self-conscious artifice that fosters self-consciousness and identity formation. This strategy, much shortened and simplified in the TV adaptation, is key to the novel of formation. For more information on the matter, see Malmgren (1987) and Slaughter (2014). Its inclusion in the TV series could have brought a more complete perception of Connell's struggle to fit in the world.

9 The novel, as well as its TV adaptation, adhere to the post-Tiger literary trends in terms of voice use: they are much more dialogic than the Celtic Tiger manifestations, which were characterized by solo voices. For a more elaborated analysis on style, see Bracken (2020).

Título:

Juventud irlandesa, materialismo y posfeminismo:
la crítica tras el romance en *Gente normal*

Contact:

abarros@ubu.es