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Sally Rooney's *Normal People*: the millennial novel of formation in recessionary Ireland

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ABSTRACT


Sally Rooney's second novel, *Normal People* (2018), tells the story of two teenagers who become involved in a complicated sexual and affective relationship that lasts from their school days in a small town, into their dynamic and worldly lives at university in Dublin. Set in Post-Celtic Tiger Ireland, this coming-of-age novel experiments with form and content to explore the problematic articulation of identity formation in recessionary Ireland. The emancipatory process of the protagonists is framed by specific cultural notions of the neoliberal discourse such as material success, consumerism and body commodification, which unveil practices of social class inequality and gender polarisation. *Normal People*, embedded with power and loss, displays emotional suffering, guilt, and self-harm to render the damaging effects of individuation and materiality upon the millennial generation in contemporary Ireland.

KEYWORDS

Sally Rooney; Post-Celtic Tiger Ireland; postfeminism; Bildungsroman; millennial

Irish women's writing in recessionary Ireland

In less than a century, Ireland has transitioned from a self-sufficient and protectionist state to a prosperous country in the European Union. Among other factors, the Celtic Tiger phenomenon (mid-1990s to mid-2000s and 2004–2008) made the country a benchmark for economic success. But, exultation was soon followed by a collapse and the crisis that unfolded in 2008 revealed the weaknesses of a fragile boom. This led to the financial bailout in 2010 and a subsequent period of austerity that prompted the deregulation of the welfare state.¹ Within a short period of time, Irish people enjoyed one of the richest economies in the world, suffered an economic collapse and the drastic restrictions that followed, and allegedly recovered again from 2014 onwards. These convolutions in the economic field encompassed dramatic transformations in the social arena. Ireland, once a disciplined, stable and internally coherent social system, changed into a transient and flexible one,² and according to Szakolczai, the country remained stuck in a period of permanent vacuum, a liminal state from which it seemed unable to emerge.³ Liminality, defined as “in-between situations and conditions characterized by the dislocation of established structures, the reversal of hierarchies, and uncertainty about the continuity of tradition and future outcomes,”⁴ is an interim that should be temporary and transient by nature, but after the Celtic Tiger it became a permanent ontological indeterminacy.

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Accordingly, the contemporary Irish imaginary turned into a “massive void [. . .] in terms of collective self-identity”⁵ with no new signifiers in the horizon. Inevitably, these tensions affected cultural values too, shattering what Gerry Smyth called the “idea of Irish national identity.”⁶

The years of recession gave way to a discourse of personal responsibility and guilt, and the logic of austerity worked for redemptive purposes.⁷ In neoliberal economies, Post-Celtic Tiger Ireland included, economic contraction resulted in repolarisation of class and gender, both in discourse and representation, with a marked regressive orientation.⁸ This phenomenon is particularly visible in the media, with female bodies frequently identified as commodities and the habits and interests of the wealthy presented as universal. Additionally, sexual behaviour developed as a marker for identity, and often equated with subjection, involving some degree of domination in love-sex relations.⁹ Furthermore, these trends have affected female sexual behaviour, which, according to Susanne Lettow, has incorporated different forms of subjection.¹⁰

As a response to these major changes, many Irish authors have been using their art to engage with questions about political agency and identity, as several scholars have noted,¹¹ providing “a sustained reflection on the precarity of individual life in the face of national and planetary challenges.”¹² Particularly, the current moment in Irish women’s writing has become a platform against the excesses of the Celtic Tiger boom and bust. Anne Enright’s *The Green Road*, Claire Kilroy’s *The Devil I Know*, Eimear McBride’s *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing*, Deirdre Madden’s *Time Present and Time Past*, and Sara Baume’s *Spill Simmer Falter Wither*, can be labelled as recessionary texts because they illustrate the flourishing years and the devastation of subsequent cuts, bringing to the fore trauma and vulnerability as some of the effects of the post-boom era.¹³ They not only criticise commodification and material exploitation of femininity, but also focus on the material realities of precarious and isolated forms of living. They demand from the reader an “affective immersion” as they delve into the consciousness of the female character to experience the effects of her damage.¹⁴ These and other authors belong to a “renaissance” of Irish letters that journalist Justine Jordan has labelled “the post-crash stars of fiction,”¹⁵ among which novel author Sally Rooney deserves special attention for her articulation of identity formation in a recessionary climate.

Labelled as the “Salinger for the Snapchat generation,”¹⁶ Rooney is one of those young writers whose work is clearly set in today’s Ireland, a land whose economic success turned out to be merely a mirage. Born and raised in County Mayo, she moved to Dublin to study at Trinity College. She writes poetry, essays, and short fiction, but she is best known for her novels *Conversations with Friends* (2017), *Normal People* (2018), and *Beautiful World, Where are You* (2021), which have achieved critical acclaim.¹⁷ This author, who is also editor of the literary journal *Stinging Fly*, writes about the lives of young people in Ireland and her works have been said to represent the voice of a generation, the millennials.¹⁸

Ideologically, Sally Rooney is a feminist and a confessed Marxist, and her political consciousness pervades her work as much as the precariousness of her characters’ lives. She has often complained about the impact of Post-Celtic crisis in Irish society, and how it hinders young people in their search for independence, an issue she knows all too well from personal experience.¹⁹ Consistently, her works align with other recessionary texts and are underpinned by the problematic articulation of youth identity within the frame of a recessionary neoliberal discourse. Although her novels still cling to some canonical

topics of Irish fiction, in particular questions regarding identity formation, they clearly divert from other typically Irish issues such as nationalism and the Catholic Church. Rather, her female characters move around in urban settings and have international aspirations, live hand to mouth, and try to relegate their nuclear and dysfunctional families to a remote corner.

Her novels, particularly *Normal People*, reflect the new generations' contradictions and epitomise twenty-first century Irish writers' response to "the chaos and intensity of the contemporary [...] as a moment of acceleration and flux."²⁰ Job insecurity, exorbitant rents, instant messaging and casual sex coexist with different forms of physical violence, conflictive family relationships, a strong sense of not belonging, class and privilege. All these elements contribute to creating a liminal atmosphere that Rooney's characters, young women and men on the brink of becoming adults, attempt to navigate. As other contemporary women writers, Rooney displays an intimate yet relational perspective to explore the categories of class and gender under the neoliberal discourse that dominates Post-Celtic Tiger Ireland.²¹ But, it is in *Normal People* where Rooney showcases a more complex attempt at depicting the transition from adolescence into adulthood, a life period where the management of "events of becoming"²² is critical for the construction of the subject. The object of this study is twofold: to dissect the formal innovations of this novel of formation, and to analyse critically Rooney's representation of class, gender and relationality in the context of recessionary Ireland.

Normal People: An innovative novel of formation for Irish millennials

Normal People tells the story of two Irish teenagers, Marianne and Connell, who get involved in a complicated and intermittent sexual and emotional relationship that lasts from their school days in a small town, into their dynamic and worldly lives at university in Dublin. In short, the novel revolves around the coming-of-age process of the protagonists, two people who strive to fit into society. The author displays this process from a double perspective: as the narration explores the intimate relation between subject and the political and economic structures that shape the individual subjectivity, the contradictory and changing values that the young generation is forced to contend with are revealed. Rooney incorporates relationality as a harnessing point for self-construction focusing on the tête-à-tête relationship between her two protagonists. The plot is close to the Bildungsroman pattern in that it expresses the relationship between two young individuals and society, but at the same time, it incorporates its own particularities, inviting the reader to approach it as a variable construction "whose literary and social functions change depending on who defines them and when."²³ But, at the same time, her novel expands into the collective dimension of growing up in a neoliberal context, characterised by commodification and consumerism, liminality and instability, also common to other western cultures. To accommodate to this double goal, Sally Rooney alters the morphology of the traditional Bildung form.

In the Irish postcolonial context, the Bildung form emerged as a discourse of resistance where the individual is unable to find his place in nationalist Catholic Ireland, as Joyce's *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* epitomises. For decades, issues of identity and subjectivity were clearly linked with the nation-state, and other innovative narratives of growth and integration, such as Roddy Doyle's *A Star Called Henry* and Edna O'Brien's *The*

Country Girls Trilogy and Epilogue, resorted to transformation and hybridisation with a focus on “self-scrutiny, non-identarian self-criticism, reconsideration of the significance of sexual Bildung, and doubting history.”²⁴ But, more recently, the rapid transformations produced by globalisation, and the difficulties of adapting the novel of development to the characteristics of present-day liquid modernity have given way to unprecedented literary expressions. Much affected by the economic upheavals of the last decades, they turn towards the blatant social and political crisis and how it affects the individuals from a broader scope of global dimensions in what Haekel has called the “Post-National literature.”²⁵ Accordingly, *Normal People* alters essential elements of the Bildung format to adapt to the current Irish context.

The novel tells the story of two students whose social positioning shifts over time as is customary in novels of formation. Space remains an essential feature in the novel, with the two characters’ progressive physical distance from their place of origin into the wider world, and their negotiations to gradually achieve social inclusion. But mobility in the physical sense is intertwined with social mobility, and so the novel adapts to the Post-Celtic Tiger context dominated by precarity and engages with political agency and subjectivity. Hence, *Normal People* necessarily complies with the Irish contemporary context, and its Bildung form adopts a more flexible format, stretching and colliding with the normative conventions of the genre, and ultimately resulting in a particularly hybrid form.

The novel is divided into sections that cover a timespan of four years, from 2011 to 2015. Each section is named after the month and the year when the plot takes place to produce a sense of natural chronological advancement in the self-construction process of the two protagonists.²⁶ But this format, close to life-writing or diary writing, does not match harmoniously with the Bildung progression. In fact, the sequences unfold with significant time-lapse alterations and the key moments in the plot follow no predetermined advancement. Hence, the reader is led through uneven time lapses that can vary from “Five minutes later (July 2014)” to “Six Months Later (February 2015).” This serves to underline the irregular rhythm of the storyline and to highlight the difficulties encountered in the emancipatory process. Added to this, the present tense dominates the narrative in order to emphasise the immediacy and temporariness of the course of events. This way, the novel highlights the liminal existence of today’s Irish youth as “a state of in-between-ness and ambiguity,”²⁷ and suggests a precarious relation with the future. Through all these alterations, *Normal People* reshapes the traditional novel of development, and adjusts it to the particular context of recessionary Ireland.

Especially interesting is the double perspective achieved through the narrative voices. In this second novel, Rooney achieves a more complete account of events and emotions than in *Conversations with Friends* where events and feelings were filtered solely through Francis’ perspective. In *Normal People*, Rooney experiments with Marianne’s and Connell’s views devoting separate and random sections to each protagonist.²⁸ Their different but complementary intimate perspectives are present from the beginning of the novel in order to enlarge the reader’s understanding of the intricacies of growing up in contemporary Ireland.

Realism pervades Rooney’s novels. As a dominant form of writing in contemporary Irish literature, it allows the implementation of literary techniques and strategies of the modernist writers, such as interior monologue and stream of consciousness. These

distinguishing features are also detectable in *Normal People*, where each entry is written in the present tense through an omniscient but intimate narrative voice. This deliberate choice minimises authorship in favour of fluidity and suggests a certain temporariness, a sense of immediacy that dodges any prospective projection. This focus on the interiority, defined as a “precise, perceptive portrayal of mental and emotional landscapes,” sustains the Bildung narrative.²⁹ Intimacy is achieved by avoiding quotation marks in dialogues and by narrating introspective moments and scenes of relevance that approach the stream-of-consciousness style, as the following paragraph illustrates:

He knocks on her door if he can't find her in the living room or the kitchen. I just want to talk to you, he says. Why are you acting like you're scared of me? Can we talk for a second? She has to come to the door then, and he wants to go over some argument they had the night before, and she says she's tired and wants to get some sleep, but he won't leave until she says she's sorry for the previous argument, so she says she's sorry, and he says: You think I'm such a terrible person.³⁰

Rooney does not delight in descriptions. Through flashes of individual experiences, she favours minimal settings and gives her prose a disruptive and fragmented style, a feature common to other recent Irish novels.³¹

Thematically, *Normal People* concentrates on the complicated love-sexual relationship that Marianne and Connell have from their school days into university. As a millennial novel, *Normal People* succeeds in projecting an overwhelming sense that the young generation in Post-crash Ireland is at a loss. Trapped between the expectations of the glorious Celtic Tiger era and the austere and self-blaming discourse of recession, they navigate hand in hand in troubled waters. Social inequality, housing problems, consumerism and dysfunctional families, “externalities” as Rooney names them,³² pop up throughout the narrative and in that hostile context, the only redemption the author allows her characters is their mutual support. Added to their uncertainty about the future, the novel exposes the generational breach between the protagonists and their parents. Rooney's protagonists tend to be “analytical and dissociative,”³³ with regards to their families. Quite evidently, *Normal People* debunks the ideological construction of the nuclear Catholic Irish family demonstrating that Connell's single-parent and loving family performs better than Marianne's insensitive mother and abusive brother. The effects of different family forms and experiences are clearly visible in the protagonists' divergent ties with their hometown and their sense of belonging.

Accordingly, this novel of formation highlights rootlessness to contest the notion of coherent and stable identity. Its characters move forward in an ongoing process of estrangement with no attachment to a place or a collectivity, nor to their roots. On the contrary, individuality stands out as a common characteristic of this wandering generation whose lack of commitment is the order of the day despite the emotional suffering it entails, and whose affective relations are volatile. Religion, too, seems to have lost its defining function in postmodernist Ireland and acquires a residual or anecdotal role for the characters in the novel.³⁴

Rooney also adapts the journey of the traditional Bildungsroman paradigm to the context of contemporary Ireland. Although the plot is set in Carrickle, a small town in Sligo, and then moves to Dublin, the novel surpasses physical borders and explores a more universal pattern for youth emancipation in contemporary capitalist societies,

with special attention to the protagonists' troubled processes of identity construction at the intersections of class and gender.³⁵ In this unusual coming-of-age novel, the journey serves as a catalyst to unveil the social breach in contemporary Ireland. It is the change of places, from rural to urban, that allows the plot to develop and shapes the characters' scope of agency.³⁶

Marianne and Connell, and Irish youth to a larger extent, are governed by external factors that limit their scope of agency. *Normal People* underscores class and gender as the two categories that epitomise the damaging effects of the Post-Celtic Tiger landscape, counteracted solely by their interdependent relationship. A thorough analysis of their articulation in the novel informs Rooney's underlying critique of alienation and its impact upon the individuals.

Class and wealth as material power

Rooney's narrative bears witness to the determinism of materiality in Post-Celtic Ireland. From the beginning, the reader learns that Marianne is an excellent but unpopular student whereas Connell represents social success among his peers. They attend the same school but their social backgrounds represent polar opposites, with Connell's single mother cleaning for Marianne's wealthy family. It is not by chance that the inequality of the Irish social system is brought to the fore in this novel. In this Post-Celtic Tiger context, Rooney forces an unexpected encounter between two individuals whose social positions could hardly be more different.³⁷ This double breach, which is social and material, testifies to the author's Marxist ideology and determines the shifting and unbalanced nature of the protagonists' love-sex relationship.

To stress the excesses of contemporary Ireland, Rooney garnishes the backstage of the novel with snapshots of the material effects of the financial crisis. Mistrust of the system and uncertainty about future prospects are at the core of young Irish people's anxiety about continuity and progression. The bailout and the corruption that led to the Celtic Tiger crash are tangible and commonplace issues, to the point that Jamie's father, Jamie being one of Marianne's temporary partners, "was one of the people who had caused the financial crisis – not figuratively, one of the actual people involved" (124).

Rooney's millennial characters are well aware of current affairs, and they know that the line between cause and effect is too thin. The housing problem in contemporary Ireland does not go unaddressed in the novel either.³⁸ It is known that the fall in domestic and commercial property prices contributed to the post-2008 Irish banking crisis and Rooney's critical gaze brings it to the fore when Connell and Marianne drive to an abandoned housing construction site and comment on the matter as follows:

Just lying empty, no one living in it, he said. Why don't they give them away if they can't sell them? I'm not being thick with you, I'm genuinely asking. She shrugged. She didn't understand why. It's something to do with capitalism, she said. Yeah. Everything is, that's the problem, isn't it?. (34)

This collateral casualty of the Celtic boom and crash is a sensitive issue that the novel explores at a micro level too, with a focus on its effects upon Irish youth. Dublin's high cost of living and exorbitant rents force Connell to move out for the summer, back to his home village, causing a breach in their relationship and leaving him with a feeling of failure:

"When he left her building he did cry, as much for his pathetic fantasy of living in her apartment as for their failed relationship, whatever that was" (124). This way, Rooney illustrates how the profound transformations undergone in recessionary Ireland exert a damaging effect upon the young generations.

The pernicious effects of life in hierarchical contexts are a recurring topic in *Normal People*. As soon as the protagonists enrol in Trinity College, Marianne's wealth upgrades her social status while Connell is relegated to a subaltern position, as the narrator bluntly explains:

Rich people look out for each other, and being Marianne's best friend and suspected sexual partner has elevated Connell to the status of rich-adjacent: someone for whom surprise birthday parties are thrown and cushy jobs are procured out of nowhere (99).

In these lines, Rooney denounces the role of class privilege in a system that naturally perpetuates wealth accumulation and social status.

As in *Conversations with Friends*, where Frances lived precariously in a Dublin flat owned by her uncle, life in Dublin is presented as an ordeal in *Normal People*. Connell has problems with paying his rent in Dublin and feels ashamed to ask Marianne for permission to move in with her. Devoid of the capacity to support himself, this is one of the most distressing moments for Connell, and eventually leads to a misunderstanding and distancing between the pair:

It looks like I won't be able to pay rent up here this summer. Marianne looked up from her coffee and said flatly: What?

Yeah, he said. I'm going to have to move out of Niall's place.

[...] Her face hardened, without displaying any particular emotion. Oh, she said. You'll be going home, then.

He rubbed at his breastbone then, feeling short of breath.

Looks like it, yeah, he said.

[...] His eyes were hurting and he closed them. He couldn't understand how this had happened, how he had let the discussion slip away like this. It was too late to say he wanted to stay with her, that was clear, but when had it become too late? It seemed to have happened immediately. He contemplated putting his face down on the table and just crying like a child (123-124).

Sally Rooney's novels portray a young generation framed by symbolic identity markers that intertwine and situate them in a permanent state of liminality that encompasses tensions and conflict. This is particularly notable in the way the novel expresses the reciprocal relation between class and gender, which in a neoliberal context entails the exertion of power. This idea is evidenced from the beginning: Connell decides to keep the affair secret for fear of losing his social prestige, and Marianne submits to his will for fear of being left with nothing. But, the author also addresses more complex elaborations of patriarchy that border on possession and domination, as the following passage shows: "He had never tried to delude her into thinking she was socially acceptable; she'd delude herself. He had just been using her as a kind of private experiment, and her willingness to be used had probably shocked him" (63). Here, Connell embodies a dominant male stereotype and

justifies his relationship with Marianne in deeply rooted materialistic terms. Far from being the exception, the author extends this gender-biased behaviour to other male and female characters, suggesting the pervasiveness of these cultural practices. For instance, there is a scene where Connell's friend shows pictures of his naked girlfriend on his phone. This form of commodification of the female body is not exclusive of the male characters. Soon in the novel, the reader finds that Peggy, Marianne's friend, also submits to sexual intercourse in exchange for material reward because "she meets a lot of men who like to fund her lifestyle by buying her handbags and expensive drugs [...]. She favours slightly older men [...] with lots of money and sensible lawyer girlfriends at home" (63). As these examples demonstrate, in *Normal People*, gender roles are often attached to the binary male social success versus female body commodification, a pattern also explored in her previous novel, *Conversations with Friends*, where young and penniless Frances engages in a sexual relationship with wealthy and married Nick.

But the narrative does not fall into essentialism. Far from that, it explores how the underlying frictions between social status and traditional gender roles affect the male characters too. In *Normal People*, Connell lives in a permanent sense of fragmentation, a burden expressed by the author: "With only a little subterfuge he can live two entirely separate existences, never confronting the ultimate question of what to do with himself or what kind of person he is" (28). The reader finds in Connell a young man deeply troubled by material wealth, which for him is "the substance that makes the world real" (160), or rather, the lack of it. His identification with neoliberal values of material abundance equating success dooms him to permanent insecurity and a limited scope of agency.

From the very beginning, he is overly conscious of his modest background, a matter that stands out even more when he joins Trinity College in Dublin. There, his peers' looks, manners and conversations revolve around wealth and appearances. He resents his inadequacy to belong to that world and feels alien to their universe: "They just move through the world in a different way, and he'll probably never really understand them, and he knows they will never understand him, or even try" (68). This self-excluding attitude implies that, for Connell, social class is an impenetrable limit, and instead of attempting to work it out, he blames Marianne for enjoying a comfortable situation: "That's why it is easy for you, by the way, he said. Because you're from a rich family, that's why people like you" (88–89). This pervading sense of helplessness seems to fall upon the individual, who displays a sceptical attitude towards the benefits of a college degree: "[...] it is not like English is a real degree you can get a job out of, it's just a joke, and then he thinks he probably should have applied for Law after all" (48). Here, the novel addresses the rupture of the social contract in recessionary Ireland. In previous generations, a university degree had implied a subsequent job and independence. But, in post-financial crisis Ireland, this sequence is interrupted and the young generation is left with a vacuum ahead. Accordingly, Connell experiences frustration and suffers from a lack of future prospects.

Love and sex as emotional power

Rooney depicts Marianne, her female protagonist, as a young woman who is very dependent on affection and whose craving for acceptance and kindness materialise in the form of love-sex relationships, among which her bond with Connell stands out.

Beneath the surface of romance, the author explores more deep-rooted forms of conservative ideologies of gender linked with materialism.³⁹ The female body, and its physical and social implications, plays a prominent role in the narrative of *Normal People*, especially because of the explicitness of corporeality.⁴⁰ The topic, already present in the post-boom public discourse where corporeal metaphors abounded,⁴¹ has taken root in Rooney's novels. In *Conversations with Friends*, the author presents the female body, by its own nature, as a cause of great pain, as Frances suffers terribly from endometriosis. Furthermore, the problematic nature of corporeality is also addressed in her representation of selfhood as a disturbance to be rejected: "For a while I stood there just looking at myself and feeling my repulsion get deeper and deeper, as if I was experimenting to see how much I could feel."⁴² Added to this negative perception, the female body takes on a major role as a site of abuse, as in this novel Frances cuts a gash on the inside of her thigh when Nick, her lover, leaves her.⁴³

Without going too far afield, in *Normal People* Marianne epitomises the objectification of the female body in two different but complementary ways. On the one hand, the reader learns that she has suffered from physical and psychological violence since her childhood. The dysfunctional family, a "feature in Irish society,"⁴⁴ plays a prominent role in Rooney's protagonists. Marianne's deceased father was violent and presently it is her brother, Alan, who uses her as a target to vent his frustrations and occasionally is verbally abusive and physically violent with her. These practices are normalised by Marianne's mother and by herself with different outcomes. The former directs her anger and frustrations at her daughter and individuates blame on her for being mishandled: "Denise considers this a symptom of her daughter's frigid and unlovable personality. She believes Marianne lacks 'warmth,' by which she means the ability to beg for love from people who hate her" (65). This extract epitomises individuation of failure as a typical artifice of neoliberalism. Also in the novel, Marianne's pervasive sense of guilt is closely related to humiliation and becomes chronic, partly as a result of her mother's contempt, as the following lines suggest:

Last time I was home my brother told me I should kill myself. [...] Would you not tell your mother if he talked to you like that? She was there, says Marianne. [...] What did she say? He asks. As in, how did she react? I think she said something like, oh, don't encourage her. (182)

This dynamic alters the normative function of family as a safe and loving site and displaces responsibility solely on the individual. As a result, personal guilt is fostered and agency is forfeited.⁴⁵

On the other hand, Marianne materialises her lack of self-confidence using her body as a site of objectification and punishment, especially during sexual intercourse. She is prone to submission, a practice that she reckons gives her a vague feeling of self-assurance: "I just like to know that I would degrade myself for someone if they wanted me to" (132). She experiments with vituperation, disdain and rough sex with her lovers, only to be left with "a depression so deep it is tranquillising" (190). Her ventures in more risky sexual practices include physical violence, choking and berating, all of which brings her little comfort because "her body feels like a carcass, something immensely heavy and awful that she has to carry around" (113). For her, physical humiliation and pain is a form of submission to achieve self-expiation: "Sometimes I think I deserve bad things because I'm a bad person" (133). As Dianna Taylor has contended, humiliation is a manifestation of the

self-relation in neoliberal contexts.⁴⁶ In *Normal People*, Marianne takes her guilt to the extreme of physical self-annihilation as a form of redemption. At her own suggestion, Jamie, one of her partners, takes to beating her during sex, a practice justified as follows: “It’s not that I get off on being degraded as such, she says. I just like to know that I would degrade myself for someone if they wanted me to. [. . .] It’s about the dynamic, more than what actually happens” (132). These practices reach a higher degree with Lukas, her Swedish partner, as “the game” includes vituperation and other forms of domination. Yet, “the quality of gratification is thin and hard, arriving too quickly and then leaving her sick and shivery” (190). These practices of body exploitation become the scapegoat of Marianne’s emotional vulnerability, and a form of performative bodily resistance too. As a woman, she navigates the narrow margins of her social and sexual condition, oscillating between submission and resentment towards her own practices. Initially, she willingly agrees with the rules of the game and accepts the secrecy of her relationship with Connell: “Their secret weighed inside her body pleasurably, pressing down on her pelvic bone when she moved” (17). Later in the novel, she realises that the initially exciting secret had been keeping her ostracised in a subaltern position. Together with humiliation and emptiness, she finally admits to embarrassment for having put up with it.

Relationality: an anchor in the tempest

Amid the challenging forces that constrain the process of development of the two protagonists, their friendship and fondness for each other stand out as the anchor of the plot. Despite a context where individuation, humiliation and domination prevail, Sally Rooney succeeds in presenting the essence of identity subject construction in relation with others. She affirms: “I don’t really believe in the idea of the individual, [. . .] I find myself consistently drawn to writing about intimacy, and the way we construct one another.”⁴⁷ Relationality, defined as “an essential feature of the current transmodern era,”⁴⁸ stands out in *Normal People* as a necessary element of the protagonists’ growing process. In general terms, says Driichel, humans, are “inherently relational creatures who come into existence in relation to others and who continue to need each other throughout our lives.”⁴⁹ Psychologically, affirms Johnson, “the self is relationally constituted through discourse and the ways in which individuals treat and are treated by others within social encounters.”⁵⁰ The ramifications of this idea in the novel are extraordinary.

Judith Butler insists that “we are not only constituted by our relations but also dispossessed by them as well.”⁵¹ Hence, categories such as sex and gender become problematic in *Normal People*, because they are, in Butler’s words, “a way of being for another or by virtue of another.”⁵² Under this lens, Rooney exposes the complexity of interdependence for the construction of the female subject and her social integration. At high school, the secret relationship between Marianne and Connell keeps her an outcast and hinders her social integration. Later, at university, she learns how to use her body to resist and fight her subaltern position by choosing wealthy partners, such as Jamie or artistic Lukas, who “[. . .] does have immaculate taste. He’s sensitive to the most minuscule of aesthetic failures, in painting, in cinema, even in novels or television shows” (190).⁵³ This double game epitomises young women’s contradictory negotiations of discourses of gender and the self in neoliberal societies, a complexity that Rooney effectively expresses in the following terms: “There’s always been something

inside her that men have wanted to dominate, and their desire for domination can look so much like attraction, even love" (192).⁵⁴ As a result, the female body encompasses a double, but not exclusive function, as a potentially enabling tool for social integration and/or success, and as recipient of violence and abuse, to the extreme that the subject dissolves in favour of the utility of the body: "[. . .] she eats whatever he tells her to eat, she experiences no more ownership over her own body than if it were a piece of litter" (190–1).⁵⁵ With these words, *Normal People* denounces the precarious and controversial position of the female body in neoliberal societies that limit relationality to commodification, and the destabilising effects that this objectification have upon women.

But, in this novel, the utilitarian projection of corporeality as "an item of property, as though it has been handed around and misused in various ways,"⁵⁶ coexists with rare glimpses of self-recognition in others, as the following lines show:

At times a person will make eye contact with Marianne, a bus conductor or someone looking for change, and she'll be shocked briefly into the realization that this is in fact her life, that she is actually visible to other people. (191)

The realisation of interdependence as a positive element comes at the end of the novel, where the growing process is advanced and life experience, albeit short, brings perspective. Connell and Marianne's intermittent relationship becomes a safe space, a driving force that rectifies malpractice: "It has been years now. [. . .] She is an abyss that he can reach into, an empty space for him to fill" (236). Foreseeing a long-term separation from Connell, she is able to admit the benefits of the pair's emotional attachment despite their ups and downs: "He brought her goodness like a gift and now it belongs to her" (266), and concludes that "They've done a lot of good for each other. Really, she thinks, really. People can really change one another" (266). These closing lines confirm Marianne and Connell's troubled relation as "the emotional and narrative touchstone of the piece."⁵⁷ With this idea in mind, *Normal People* debunks the premise of individuation as a dogma of neoliberal discourses and appropriates interdependency as the only viable means to enable this innovative novel of formation in the context of Post-Crash Ireland.

Conclusions

Normal People is a politically engaged novel that puts into words the tensions and difficulties encountered by youth in Ireland. Representing the millennial generation, this novel of formation uses the love story of two adolescents to explore the complex articulation of growing up in recessionary Ireland, a transient space where its inhabitants find no firm ground. Her literary contribution mingles youth, class and gender, and portrays a damaged and wandering generation that can find no solace in the liquid materiality of contemporary Ireland.

To this end, the author adapts the traditional *Bildung* format, giving birth to a complex and innovative novel of formation that breaks new ground in the contemporary Irish literary arena. Rooney's fiction is fragmented in order to deter the natural advancement of the *Bildung* form and highlight the difficulties found in the emancipatory process. Because linear progression is not functional in this particular context, the author designs

a more convenient form, a patchwork of loose scenes that reflect the new generation's entrapment in the everlasting present time. An omniscient narrative voice subjected to the present tense underlines that liminality.

The novel also incorporates thematic developments framed by the casualties of the Irish financial meltdown and its effects on the protagonists' lives. Precariousness, a sense of nostalgia for a buoyant past, and the uncertainty of what is to come, define its protagonists through symbolic identity markers aligned with a neoliberal discourse. Sally Rooney's critical eye for material hierarchies polarises the problematics of identity formation by witnessing social class inequality and gender polarisation, two restricting and damaging effects of capitalism that intertwine and situate the protagonists in an interim of becoming. This is epitomised by Connell's permanent state of anxiety in his attempts to belong and Marianne's misuse of her body, both as a sexual commodity, and a site for redemption. Also, these tensions and conflicts are underpinned by varying manifestations of domination, guilt, loss and suffering, in tune with recessionary neoliberal discourses. But in such a hostile environment, Rooney draws on relationality to preserve the Bildung process, otherwise unattainable by the individual. In the end, interdependence stands out as the only means to counterbalance the damaging effects of individuation and gendered commodification.

Normal People is an innovative novel of formation that succeeds in navigating the omnipresence of capitalism to illustrate in its own way the damaging effects of individuation and materiality upon the young generations. This way, *Normal People* exemplifies a millennial coming-of-age novel in recessionary Ireland. It only remains to be seen where the contemporary Irish literary field is heading in the creative expression of this generation's idiosyncrasy.

Notes

1. Many studies have focused on the multiple inequalities existent in contemporary Ireland. From the perspective of political economy, see Kirby, *The Celtic Tiger*; For a critical cultural approach, see Maher, *Cultural Perspectives*; For a philosophical interpretation, see Bufacchi, "Ireland After."
2. For a more elaborated conceptualisation of liminality and liminal hotspots, see Greco and Stenner, "From Paradox."
3. For an elaboration of the concept of liminality and its manifestations in contemporary Ireland, see Szakolczai, "Living Permanent"; Aktari-Sevgi, "Liminlity"; Kuhling, "Zombie."
4. Horvath, Thomassen, and Wydra, *Breaking Boundaries*, 2. Other authors coincide in relating liminality with indeterminacy and occasions of transition. See Greco and Stenner, "From paradox."
5. Kuhling, "Zombie," 407.
6. Smyth, "Irish National," 134.
7. These dramatic changes have made a noticeable impact on Irish society. The atmosphere of exultation during the Celtic Tiger period preceded discourses of guilt during recession, which included personal withdrawal and corporeal discipline. See Free and Scully, "The Run."
8. Numerous studies have focused on the relation between recessionary neoliberalism and gender. Susanne Lettow analyses the ways neoliberal strategies of marketisation have domesticated women's emancipatory movements. Lettow, "Editor's Introduction," 501–512; Mary Murphy and Pauline Cullen study the relation between austerity and the economic and social regression of Irish women. Murphy and Cullen "Irish Feminist"; Debbie Ging offers an acute insight of the effects of consumerism upon practices of gender. Ging, "All-Consuming."

9. Media discourses in neoliberal contexts have exerted a paramount effect upon beliefs and social habits. Gender construction models, particularly during adolescence, have been linked with wealth and body commodification. See Driscoll, *Girls*. Even postfeminism has been deemed particularly vulnerable and adaptable to the neoliberal discourse. See Negra "Introduction". Furthermore, these trends have affected female sexual behaviour which, according to Susanne Lettow, has incorporated different forms of subjection.
10. For a more detailed analysis see Lettow, "Editor's Introduction."
11. See Flynn and O'Brien, "Introduction"; Kelly, "Ireland's Real"; Mianowski, *Post Celtic Tiger*; Haekel, "Post-National"; Flannery, *Form, Affect*.
12. Sen, "Risk and Refuge", 14.
13. For an expanded elaboration of recessionary texts, see Cahill, "A Girl", Bracken, *Irish*, and Bracken and Harney-Mahajan "A Continuum".
14. Bracken's definition of "affective immersion" addresses collectivity, a means to counteract isolation of the individual. For a more elaborated explanation of the term, see Bracken and Harney-Mahajan, "A Continuum"; Bracken, "The Feminist."
15. Other authors included in Justine Jordan's classification are Paul Murray, Kevin Barry, Donal Ryan, Oona Frawley, Lisa McLnerney, Tana French and Mary Costello, to name a few. This new Irish literary boom, she affirms, is also due to the current dynamism of Ireland's publishing scene. Jordan, "A New Irish."
16. These are Richard Godwin's words, editor at Faber, after having interviewed Sally Rooney. See Godwin, "Is Being."
17. Her debut novel, *Conversations with Friends*, was nominated for the 2018 Swansea University International Dylan Thomas Prize and the 2018 Rathbones Folio Prize. *Normal People* was named Waterstones Book of the Year, nominated for the 2018 Man Booker Prize and short-listed for the Costa Book Awards. Sally Rooney was featured poet in *Stinging Fly* in 2015 and has published non-fiction in the *Dublin Review*. Her short story "Mr. Salary" was published in *Granta* in 2016. The serial adaptation of *Normal People* broadcast on RTÉ One in April 2020 with great success. For a critical appraisal of the series, see Barros, "Irish Youth."
18. The millennials, "a recognisable social identity" in Bingham's words, are a generation of people born between the 1980s and the 2000s. They are said to be self-fulfilling, to invest their trust in individuals rather than in institutions, and to have entered an over-competitive post-crash labour market. For more information on the millennials, see Bingham, "Identifying"; McBennett, *The Impact*.
19. For a closer and personal look at Rooney, see the following interviews: Nolan, "An Interview"; Nolan, "Sally Rooney"; Barry, "How Sally Rooney."
20. Reynolds, *The New Irish*, 6.
21. For a more elaborated discussion on contemporary Irish women writers see Bracken and Harney-Mahajan, "A Continuum."
22. Greco and Stenner have identified this concept as "the psychosocial experience and management of transitional episodes". In Greco and Stenner, "From Paradox," 148.
23. Bolaki, *Unsettling*, 10.
24. Mansouri, *The Modern*, 229.
25. Haekel, "Post-National", 19.
26. Sally Rooney's first novel, *Conversations with Friends*, also shows formal experimentation traits with an internal division into two "Parts", namely "Part one" and "Part Two."
27. Beech, "Liminality," 287.
28. This strategy forces the reader to look back at Edna O'Brien's *The Country Girls Trilogy and Epilogue*, a masterpiece where Cait's initial leading voice gradually gives way to Baba's perspective. In this non-conventional Bildungsroman, Edna O'Brien resorted to the alter-ego technique and the resulting polyphony gave form to the dystopian female universe of the central decades of the twentieth century. In 2018, Rooney makes use of both male and female voices to explore the oppressive present and dystopic future foreseen by youth in contemporary Ireland. For a more detailed review of the formal innovations displayed by Edna O'Brien in her acclaimed trilogy, see Barros-del Río, "Thematic."

29. Clark, "Conversations with."
30. Rooney, *Normal People*, 229. Further references will be given parenthetically.
31. This strategy is also detectable in Eimear McBride's *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* (2013), a novel that displays a chaotic narrative that "remains at a fragmented pre-articulate state", as Cahill has put it. Cahill, "A Girl is", 160; and in Anne Enright's *The Green Road* (2015), where the author "provides a kaleidoscopic view of family ties", as Barros-del Río has described. Barros-del Río, "Fragmentation," 38.
32. See note above 29.
33. Gray, "Making Her Time," 67.
34. In recent decades, Ireland has suffered a dramatic transformation in the religious landscape with a new and relative diversity of confessions and growing numbers of non-believers. Traditionally, Catholicism had been central to the Irish identity, but during the Celtic Tiger years, the Irish turned their interest towards "the neo-religion of consumerism". See Kuhling "The New Age". For a general appraisal of religion in contemporary Ireland, see and Piola "Le Paysage", and Cosgrove et al. "Ireland's New Religious". These spiritual changes can be detected in Post-Crash literature too. For instance, in *The Devil I Know*, by Claire Kilroy, religiosity is replaced by the market and consumerism. See Burke "Claire Kilroy"; Also, Ní Chuilleanáin's recent poetry revisits religious traditions to reveal contemporary conflicts. See Lavalle "Perceptions".
35. Interestingly, the increasing number of Irish contemporary YA fiction where the focus is placed on the transition from teenage into adulthood and how it is affected by trauma, damage and vulnerability, is noticeable. Among others, *Normal People* may be taken into consideration, as well as Eimear McBride's *A Girl is a Half-Formed Thing* (2013) and Louise O'Neill's *Asking for It* (2016) have. As Susan Cahill has pointed out, these literary manifestations of the post-boom and recessionary era are part of contemporary currents of trauma and loss where questions of articulation and representation remain problematic. See Cahill, "A Girl is."
36. The relation between space, culture and identity in Ireland has been a matter of conscious exploration in Irish literature. Traditionally, novels of formation have recurred to a change of scenario, from the country to the city, to challenge traditional spatial practices and venture into new forms of socialisation. Edna O'Brien's acclaimed novel, *The Country Girls* (1960), set a milestone in breaking new ground for the female protagonists' process of emancipation.
37. Social inequality is a recurrent topic in Sally Rooney's works. In *Conversations with Friends*, Frances delights in living precariously, a situation that contrasts with her best friend's wealth and carelessness. The author replicates a similar pattern in *Normal People* with Connell and Marianne.
38. Rooney joins other contemporary Irish authors who have also explored the impact of gentrification and speculation in the Irish context. Among others, Kevin Barry, Sara Baume, and Claire Keegan stand out. See Sen, "Risk."
39. Recent research demonstrates that neoliberal ideologies, among which Post-Celtic Tiger Ireland is no exception, nurture the concept of the female body as a commodity. See Fischer and Dolezal "New Feminist."
40. The idea of the body as a physical means that relates to mortality, vulnerability and agency, and its twofold dimension as both personal and public, has been developed by Judith Butler. See Butler, "Violence."
41. See Free and Scully, "The Run."
42. Rooney, *Conversations*, 181.
43. For a more complete review of Rooney's first novel, see Fernández, "Conversations."
44. Morales-Ladrón and Elices Agudo "Family," 7.
45. Taylor, "Humiliation."
46. Taylor, "Humiliation," 434.
47. Barry, "How Sally". This is not a new idea in Rooney's writings. Her understanding of subject construction is also present in *Conversations with Friends*, where Frances, the protagonist, and Bobbi, her friend and lover, enjoy a relationship of mutual interdependence.

48. Martínez-Falquina "My Body," 119.
49. Drichel, "The Most Perfectly," 5.
50. Johnson, "Goffman," 448.
51. Butler, "Violence", 13.
52. Ibid., 14.
53. Ibid., 190.
54. Ibid., 192.
55. Ibid., 190–191.
56. Ibid., 236.
57. Mahon, "Towards" 5.

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