

# The Economy of Sex, Gender and Love in Sally Rooney's Novels

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Rupčić, Ema

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UNIVERSITY OF RIJEKA

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DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE

**Ema Rupčić**

**The Economy of Sex, Gender and Love in Sally Rooney's Novels**

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## **Abstract**

This thesis will explore the concept of sex, gender, and love in Sally Rooney's novels *Normal People* and *Conversations with Friends*. Moreover, it will explore the basic characteristics of capitalism and postmodernism outlined by Jameson (1984) and Fisher (2009), and will illustrate how key issues in today's capitalist society directly and indirectly influence and shape the psyches and choices of Rooney's characters by examining them through the Lacanian terms: the big Other, the father figure, alienation, and separation.

The second part of this thesis breaks down the unconventional relationships in both novels by analysing how the balance of power in them is influenced by the ideologies that stem from the concept of the patriarchal society. In addition to that, this thesis will explore how the novels gesture towards ways of breaking from the social norms imposed by capitalism.

**Keywords:** Sally Rooney, *Normal People*, *Conversations with Friends*, gender roles, love, toxic masculinity, capitalism, Mark Fisher, Fredric Jameson, Jacques Lacan

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## 1. Introduction

Since publishing her first novel *Conversations with Friends* in 2017, Sally Rooney has taken the literary world by storm, and has been dubbed the voice of a generation. The popularity of this Irish novelist grew even more after the release of her second novel, *Normal People*, in 2019, which was adapted into a television series by the BBC.

The two novels became instantly popular as they depict what it means to be a young person trying to find one's place in the world. In *Conversations with Friends*, the reader follows Frances as she navigates life trying to understand who she is and how to sustain various unconventional relationships with people around her. Frances is a twenty-one-year-old student in Dublin who writes spoken poetry and performs it with her outspoken, extroverted, and opinionated ex-girlfriend Bobbi. The two meet Melissa, a journalist who wants to write a profile piece about them to promote their work which results in Bobbi and Frances befriending her and her husband Nick. Nick and Melissa are a slightly older married couple whose marriage is crumbling as they are completely opposite personalities. By befriending them, Frances and Bobbi enter a more mature and better-off world and enjoy parties and vacations abroad. The plot is centred around the relationships between the characters, especially the one between Nick and Frances who start having an affair. The course of their relationship is very turbulent as it forces them to face their own flaws and insecurities while, simultaneously, trying to find their own place in the capitalist world. The characters struggle to overcome their personal fears and anxieties that can be seen as the consequence of either their complicated family relationships or the imposed rules society has set upon them. Revolving around communication and relationships, *Conversations with Friends* tackles various themes such as gender roles, class division, and mental illnesses that are the direct consequence of the patriarchally influenced capitalist climate.

Likewise, the core of her second novel *Normal People* is the relationship between Connell and Marianne, two secondary school students from different social classes who fall in love. Even though Marianne is intelligent, she is seen as an outcast in school. Moreover, she grew up in an unstable and toxic family environment and is constantly verbally and physically abused by her older brother Alan. Connell, on the other hand, is popular and liked by his peers. However, he is very anxious and obsessed about his social status. Marianne comes from a wealthier background, while Connell is a member of the lower middle-class—his mother works as a cleaner for Marianne’s family. Connell and Marianne start a relationship that they keep in secret as Connell fears how it would be perceived by his peers. At one point they break up but reunite at Trinity College in Dublin where narrative changes – Marianne is the popular one because of her social status, while Connell is seen as an outcast. Soon after getting back in touch, they start a turbulent and intense relationship at the core of which lies a deep understanding and mutual fascination. Periodically they break up and get back together, realising they are unable to live separately. Like *Conversations with Friends*, *Normal People* does not focus solely on relationships, but explores the (un)sustainable concept of individuality posed by the capitalist society intertwined with class division and mental illnesses.

Both novels revolve around identity, class division, sex, and gender and how those are manifested in today’s society. These topics can also be found in Rooney’s essay ‘Even if You Beat Me’ in which she described her career as a debater that, in my opinion, greatly influenced her writing style. Rooney saw the debating world as a society on a smaller scale – a certain hierarchy was present, status was of great importance, and women were always perceived in a differently that corresponded to the imposed patriarchal gender roles. It is no surprise, then, that Rooney decided to incorporate these issues in her own novels, exploring

them in a different light. The fact that she was a debater, is also visible in her novels as they are written in a concise and slightly detached tone. I would argue that both *Conversations with Friends* and *Normal People* lack a classic aesthetic value as they are written in an analytical style in which various interpretations of modern societal issues are the focus of the discussions that propel them. The characters often have intellectual discussions about various topics or analyse their own behaviour thus one can rarely find a lengthy description with a variety of adjectives in Rooney's work. However, I would argue that the simplicity and straightforwardness in her writing compensate for the lack of aesthetics in the novels as the dialogues are intense, concise, and sharp.

Rooney's intellectual approach to the novels is subtly used to unveil the common denominator of both *Conversations with Friends* and *Normal People* – capitalism. As Baucina (2021) in her review noted “the politics of Rooney's novels are less a great red flag than a strand of red thread woven through a more complex composition”. Even though it is not obviously stated, the behaviours and choices of the characters are the direct consequence of capitalism. It lurks in the background of both novels, subtly setting the characters in motion. This goes in line with Rooney being a self-proclaimed Marxist who was, as Dess (2019) notes, probably highly influenced by Fisher's (2009) work *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* in which he offers an insight on how capitalism has infiltrated our subconscious. Many of the issues present in Fisher (2009), such as class division, mental illnesses, and education can be found in Rooney's novels. Fisher's (2009) work can be seen as a “sequel” to Jameson's (1984) *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Jameson (1984) explained the main characteristics of postmodernism and offered sort of a prophecy of how things would unfold in the future under the influence of capitalism. Fisher (2009), however, offers an update and

deconstructs a world that has already been devoured by the capitalist system and all its pitfalls.

This thesis focuses on how the capitalist world in the background influences the conscious and subconscious choices of the characters in Rooney's novels, as well as how it offers them or deprives them of various opportunities based on their social status. By following the journey of Rooney's characters, I will explore how sex, gender roles, intelligence, and class division influence the formation of their identities and how they possibly escape the oppressive machinery of the illusive capitalist system.

The first chapter offers an overview of Jameson's (1984) and Fisher's (2009) works, as they analyse in detail the consequences of capitalism and its base characteristics. Fisher coined the term capitalist realism which sums perfectly the society through which Rooney's characters are (un)successfully trying to navigate.

The second chapter of this thesis focuses on the concept of the father figure which is rapidly declining in the contemporary society. This chapter also explores the parallel between the father figure in a more constricted environment, i.e., family and the role of the father in the society by analysing it through Lacanian terms. The consequences of an unstable or non-existing father figure on the human psyche will also be analysed, connecting them to the masochistic tendencies of the female protagonists of Rooney's novels.

The third chapter focuses on the social world marked by class division and privilege that is a recurrent issue in both novels. This chapter also explores mental illnesses that can be perceived as a direct consequence of the capitalist world and the paradoxical tendency of the capitalist system to reject responsibility for them. The question of identity in an unstable and always changing world will also be discussed in this section.



The fourth chapter revolves around the definition of relationships in the modern world. Moreover, it explores the communication between the characters that is the centre of Rooney's novels as well as the notion of relationship as an alternative world and haven that shelters people from the chaos and inconsistency of the capitalist world. This chapter will also analyse the power dynamics between the characters and how gender roles and patriarchy influence it. In the end, I will focus on individualism, a concept seen as indispensable by capitalism, and whether or not it is fully achievable.

## **2. The characteristics of the postmodernist and capitalist society**

In order to understand the psyche and the choices of the characters in Rooney's novel, it is crucial to briefly outline the climate of the society in which they are living. These conditions consciously and subconsciously shape their identities and desires, and are also the cause of their personal crises and negative emotions. Subtly, yet effectively, Rooney positioned politics and philosophy in the background of the relationships and everyday life of the characters, enabling us to connect them with our own experiences of the capitalist world we are living in today.

For the purpose of analysing the culture and society depicted in Rooney's novels, I will extensively draw from the works of Frederick Jameson and Mark Fisher which describe the climate in which, not only Rooney's characters, but all of us, live.

Jameson defines postmodernism as a period in which "premonitions of the future, catastrophic or redemptive, have been replaced by senses of the end of this or that (the end of ideology, art, or social class; the "crisis" of Leninism, social democracy, or the welfare state" (Jameson, 1984, p.53). The idea that in the postmodernist era everything comes to an end, yet no novelty is brought in the cultural sphere is a prominent theme in Jameson's work. He further elaborates that idea emphasising that one of the key characteristics of postmodernism is nostalgia, which emerges as a consequence of reappropriating and modifying the past. Before analysing the concepts of historicism and nostalgia, it is important to mention other characteristics of postmodernism that Jameson (1984) develops in his work.

The first characteristic Jameson (1984) describes is depthlessness. To elaborate on this concept, Jameson (1984) analyses and compares the high-modernist painting "Peasant Shoes" painted by Van Gogh and the postmodernist "Diamond Dust Shoes" made by Andy

Warhol. Van Gogh's painting possesses depth – it is intricate and evokes an emotion in the spectator while Warhol's painting lacks originality and depth, i.e., it does not convey any intricate meaning. Jameson (1984) analysed the two paintings with the purpose of defining the basic distinction between the modernists and postmodernists, or, as he puts it

the postmodernisms have in fact been fascinated precisely by this whole 'degraded' landscape of schlock and kitsch, of TV series and Readers' Digest culture, of advertising and motels, of the late show and the grade-B Hollywood films, of so-called paraliterature with its airport paperback categories of the gothic and the romance, the popular biography, the murder mystery and science-fiction or fantasy novel: materials they no longer simply 'quote', as a Joyce or a Mahler might have done, but incorporate into their very substance (Jameson, 1984, p. 55).

The postmodernists mainly reduced their works and themselves to commodification and commercialization, to simpler forms of art that are suitable for mass consumption. By analysing the two previously mentioned paintings, he introduced the concept of depthlessness which is "a new kind of superficiality in the most literal sense" (Jameson, 1984, p.60). Even though Jameson (1984) focused mainly on the analysis of art, it is clear that he wanted to emphasise how the postmodernist psyche in general celebrates the aesthetics, the superficial, instead of providing depth and meaning. The concept of depthlessness is a prominent theme in Rooney's novels as she portrays a society based on meritocracy that paradoxically values social status over intelligence, as will be shown in the analysis of Connell's story. Another characteristic of postmodernism that is closely connected to the concept of depthlessness is the waning of affect.

To define the waning of affect, Jameson (1984) again compares two representatives of modernism and postmodernism – Munch and, again, Warhol. While Munch's painting *The Scream* evokes emotions and represents alienation and solitude as the key features of modernism, Warhol's depictions of Marilyn Monroe or Edie Sedgwick "are themselves commodified and transformed into their own images" (Jameson, 1984, p.61). Jameson goes further and claims that

concepts such as anxiety and alienation are no longer appropriate in the world of the postmodern. [...] This shift in the dynamics of cultural pathology can be characterised as one in which the alienation of the subject is displaced by the fragmentation of the subject. (Jameson, 1984, p.63)

Again, by analysing art which directly mirrors the psyche of the society, Jameson (1984) described the mentality of the postmodernists. Through his comparison of Warhol and Munch, Jameson (1984) emphasised the disappearance of emotions as the consequence of the fragmentation of the subject. Jameson elaborates this by saying the cause of the waning of affect is

the 'death' of the subject itself – the end of autonomous bourgeois monad or ego or individual – and the accompanying stress, whether as some new moral ideal or as empirical description, on the *decentring* of that formerly centred subject or psyche (Jameson, 1984, p.63).

Monroe and Sedgwick are reduced to images, without any emphasis on the subject itself. According to Jameson, in postmodernism one can notice "a liberation from every other kind of feeling as well, since there is no longer a self present to do the feeling" (Jameson, 1984, p. 64). What is present now, are 'intensities' that are "free - floating and impersonal, and tend

to be dominated by a peculiar kind of euphoria” (Jameson, 1984, p. 64). As the affect wanes, intensities take its place as the subject, i.e., the self in postmodernism is dead. The waning of affect manifests itself through the approach to mental illnesses in Rooney’s novels, especially in male characters. Toxic masculinity, as the consequence of patriarchy, forces Connell and Nick to conceal their emotions as their appearance as dominant and stoic males is more important than their actual mental state, causing them to feel anxious and depressed. This demonstrates how the concepts of depthlessness and the waning of affect are closely related. The main focus is on the aesthetics, i.e., the appearance, while depth and emotions are ignored by the system. Likewise, the female characters have to conduct themselves according to imposed gender roles – Frances is forced to be a good daughter who takes care of her abusive father, while Marianne has to subdue herself to her controlling brother. They cultivate masochistic tendencies which act as, in Jameson’s (1984) terms, intensities. Physical pain serves as a solace from the emotional pain and fills the characters, just briefly, with an addictive sense of euphoria through which they maintain control over themselves and their feelings.

The waning of affect, as Jameson (1984) argues, is also closely related to the notion of temporality as we live in a synchronic perception of time rather than a diachronic one. To understand why Jameson claims that, it is necessary to define certain concepts related to that. The first is historicism which, as Jameson defines it, is the “random cannibalization of all the styles of the past, the play of random stylistic allusion” (Jameson, 1984, p. 65-66) that repurposes the real history for the consumption of the masses. From this, pastiche emerges as the “the disappearance of the individual subject, along with its formal consequence, the increasing unavailability of the personal style” (Jameson, 1984, p.64). Pastiche can also be seen as a consequence of the waning of affect. As the postmodern subject is dead, it is

impossible for it to manifest itself and inhabit a certain style. Consequently, there is no other option than to recycle what is already known and present it through the lens of postmodernism. The tendency to imitate the past and rely on it to produce “new” content demonstrates the overriding lack of originality in the postmodernist era. This seems paradoxical as the media today are enforcing uniqueness and originality as imperatives. In *Conversations with Friends*, Frances is faced with this constant pressure to be original, different, and extroverted which negatively impacts her mental state. It seems impossible to be original in a world where everything is, as Jameson mentions, a simulacrum, and the implications this climate has on the mental health of the individual can be disastrous. This point will be discussed in more depth later in this thesis.

Pastiche is closely related to Plato’s concept of simulacrum which Jameson defines as “the identical copy for which no original has ever existed” which “comes to life in a society where exchange – value has been generalised to the point at which the very memory of use-value is effaced” (Jameson, 1984, p.66). The entire system of values has shifted in the postmodern society to a focus on exchange and profit, leaving the development of the subject, culture and art in the background. The main problem is that, as Jameson (1984) argues, not only does art imitate past forms, but it also changes the past. The past is changed and commodified as “the retrospective dimension indispensable to any vital reorientation of our collective future – has [...] become a vast collection of images, a multitudinous photographic simulacrum” (Jameson, 1984, p.66). As Jameson notes, the nostalgia for a certain past is expressed solely through the aesthetic function of the period and the “new connotation of pastness and pseudo - historical depth, in which the history of aesthetic styles displaces real history” (Jameson, 1984, p. 67). History is presented to us in a non-authentic

way as it is overly stylized and adapted with the purpose to attract the masses. Jameson maps out the ways in which it is stereotyped and distorted:

cultural production is thereby driven back inside a mental space which is no longer that of the old monadic subject, but rather that of some degraded collective 'objective spirit': it can no longer gaze directly on some putative real world, at some reconstruction of a past history which was once itself a present; rather, as in Plato's cave, it must trace our mental images of that past upon its confining walls.  
(Jameson, 1984, p.71)

The aesthetic, i.e., the image, is privileged while real history is subdued to commodification. Jameson shows how depthlessness, the waning of affect and the loss of historicity, the main characteristics of postmodernism, are intertwined and enhance each other. Together they result in the death of the subject as they quash any originality that may prompt the development, not only of the individual, but also of culture in general. The breakdown and annihilation of the subject is also rooted in the perception of time in postmodernism which is tied to the previously mentioned false representation of history.

According to Jameson, the postmodern subject is unable to "organize its past and future into coherent experience" (Jameson, 1984, p.71) which inevitably leads to the fragmentation of the subject. This fragmentation, consequently, is characterised by the sense of schizophrenia. Jameson borrows the Lacanian definition of it as "a breakdown in the signifying chain" (Jameson, 1984, p.72). Lacan modified Saussure's theory on the signified and the signifier and gave the signifier the superior position as "the signifier enters the signified" (Lacan, 2001, p.115). Jameson connects Lacan's theory on the signifier and schizophrenia with his notion of temporality and claims that

personal identity is itself the effect of a certain temporal unification of past and future with the present before me [...]. If we are unable to unify the past, present and future of the sentence, then we are similarly unable to unify the past, present and future of our own biographical experience of psychic life. (Jameson, 1984, p.72).

Jameson (1984) continues to explain this theory by saying that, with the breaking of the signifying chain, the subject is forced to experience only the present.

Fisher (2009) in *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative* elaborates on the concept of time in a similar way to Jameson. Fisher (2009), however, sees the synchronicity of time as a direct consequence of capitalism by noting that “capital follows you when you dream. Time ceases to be linear, becomes chaotic, broken down into punctiform divisions” (Fisher, 2009, p.34). Fisher’s statement is closely related to that of Jameson (1984) who claims that the failure to grasp and understand our own temporality leads to the fragmentation of the subject. Indeed, the concept of temporality in capitalism causes distress in the subject and, as consequence, it manifests itself in various mental illnesses, such as the depressions and forms of anxiety experienced by many of the characters in Rooney’s novels. Fisher (2009) offers an example in which he demonstrates how consumerism and the reduction to the present affects young people. He recounts an episode with a student who persistently wore headphones during classes even though he could not hear the music coming from them. Fisher explains this as the incessant need to be plugged into the matrix which directly influences the perception of time as Jameson (1984) noticed.

The consequence of being hooked into the entertainment matrix is twitchy, agitated interpassivity, an inability to concentrate or focus. Student’s incapacity to



connect current lack of focus with future failure, their inability to synthesise time into any coherent narrative, is symptomatic of more than mere demotivation.

(Fisher, 2009, p.24)

If Fisher here refers to students and education, this theory can be applied to all generations. The allure of the consumerism represented through, as Fisher (2009) calls it, the “entertainment matrix” turns people into addicts, conditioning them to be always available, always immersed in it, constricting them to a “culture that privileges only the present and the immediate” (Fisher,2009, p.59). In this type of culture, as previously noted, the subject is fragmented.

In his book, Fisher (2009) offers a variety of acute analyses of capitalism and its effect on the individual, society and on culture. His arguments will be returned to throughout this thesis and connected to the world in which Rooney places her characters. The first one of these concerns the role of the father in modern society.

### 3. The decline of the role of the father

Most of the characters in Rooney's novels have a complex relationship with their fathers. Before his death, Marianne's father was physically aggressive towards her and her mother. As a consequence, Marianne accepted violence as a form of control. Frances's father was an unreliable alcoholic and thus, she could never clearly define her feelings for him. She constantly avoids him but remains financially dependent on him and shows worry for his safety. Bobbi's father represents everything she claims to despise in the capitalist society, yet she chooses to ignore it and never confronts him directly. On the other hand, Connell never had a relationship with his father because he does not know who he is. He never asked about his father and refuses to find him. Even if he essentially does not have a toxic relationship with his father like the other characters, the lack of this relationship had an effect on him. In short, the relationship each character had with their father had an impact on them and, at least partially, shaped their identity and their relationships with other people.

In his book, Fisher (2009) uses the analogy of the family to demonstrate the effects of a paternal role, or the lack of it, on the capitalist society. Quoting Žižek, Fisher claims that we live in an era in which the father function has declined (Fisher, 2009). In psychoanalysis, and according to Lacan, the father is always associated with the law and "when this law breaks down, or if it has never been acquired, then the subject may suffer from psychosis (Benvenuto, Kennedy, 1996, p.131)". The father is a symbol of stability and limitation necessary for that stability to occur. If there is no father, chaos emerges. Žižek (1992) refers to Lacan and his concept of the Name of the Father. Lacan developed the concept of the Name of the Father while discussing the Oedipus complex. He defined the Name of the Father as a part of the symbolic function that is identifiable with the law, (Benvenuto, Kennedy, 1996),

the function which limits our enjoyment. As Žižek (1997) notes referring to Lacan, it is the “real father”, i.e., the prohibiting father or

the father of the uncompromising “No!”, who seems effectively to be in retreat; in his absence, in the absence of his prohibitory “No!”, new forms of the fantasmatic harmony between the symbolic order and *jouissance* can thrive again (Žižek, 1997).

Žižek claims that we live in the era of the anal father which he defines as “the reverse of the Name of the Father [...] who definitely *does* enjoy: the obscene little man who is the clearest embodiment of the phenomenon of the ‘uncanny’” (Žižek, 1992, p.125 - 127). The anal father is the opposite of the Name of the Father, i.e., he is the “Father - Enjoyment” (Žižek, 1992, p.125), “the nauseous debauchee, threatening yet ridiculously impotent, who simply does not fit the frame of the “complementary relationship between *yin* and *yang* and the like” (Žižek, 1992, p.127). In his book, Fisher (2009) shows how the emergence of the anal father relates to the concept and TV show, *Supernanny*. Instead of controlling their children and establishing clear boundaries, parents follow “the trajectory of the pleasure principle, the path of least resistance, that causes most of the misery in the families” (Fisher, 2009, p.71). In this case, it is the role of the *Supernanny* to guide the parents and help them establish rules, i.e., laws that children must adhere to in order to escape the “idiotic hedonism” (Fisher, 2009, p.71). If the children are not controlled, they are constantly searching for their “absolute right to enjoyment” (Fisher, 2009, p.71), i.e., what they are searching for is, in Lacanian terms, *jouissance*. *Jouissance* is what occurs when the subject surpasses the pleasure principle. If that occurs, the result is not more pleasure but pain since there is a limit to the pleasure one can take, making *jouissance* “the suffering that he [the subject] derives from his own satisfaction” (Evans, 1996, p.93). Fisher (2009) ties capitalism with this concept by saying that

“the problem is that late capitalism insists and relies upon the very equation of desire with interests” (Fisher, 2009, p.71). Late capitalism subdued the “paternal’ concept of duty into the ‘maternal’ imperative to enjoy” (Fisher, 2009, p.71). This concept is applied to the society in general where this submission of the law and boundaries to enjoyment is “doubled at the level of cultural production by the refusal of ‘gatekeepers’ to do anything but give audiences what they already (appear to) want” (Fisher, 2009, p.72). As Fisher (2009) notes, we cannot turn back to the big “paternal superego” of the “stern father”, however, order and guidance must be established in order for the society to be challenged as “addiction is the standard state for human beings, who are habitually enslaved into reactive and repetitive behaviours by frozen images” (Fisher, 2009, p.73). This can be connected to Jameson and his concept of commodification. What is served to the public, by the media, the government, by the big Other in general, is commodified, i.e., repurposed for the masses and characterised by depthlessness. This type of commodification is noticeable in the approach towards health in capitalist societies, which is outlined thus by Fisher:

there are limits to this emphasis on good health: mental health and intellectual development barely feature at all, for instance. What we see instead is a reductive, hedonic model of health which is all about ‘feeling and looking good’. To tell people how to lose weight, or how to decorate their house, is acceptable; but to call for any kind of cultural improvement is to be oppressive and elitist. [...] The problem is that only certain types of interest are deemed relevant, since they reflect values that are held to be consensual. (Fisher, 2009, p.73).

Morality is elided while attributes that can be commodified are accentuated. The media have a leading role in promoting and disseminating depthlessness, therefore, Fisher (2009) claims

it is necessary for them to change their approach. Quoting Adam Curtis, Fisher (2009) underlines how television serves as an emotional rather than moral guidance. The constant imperative to enjoy, i.e., the disappearance of the paternalistic figure in the media and society has produced not “a bottom-up culture of breathtaking diversity, but one that is increasingly infantilized” (Fisher, 2009, p.75). One of the reasons for that, according to Fisher (2009), is that people are unaware of what they truly want since their true desires are hidden from them. The consequences of commodification and depthlessness is the emergence of the previously mentioned simulacrum – nothing new emerges as everything is a copy. Consequentially, the individual is not challenged, and the result of the capitalist society is not, as Fisher (2009) notes, a society of risks but quite the opposite. This type of risk could be introduced with the intervention of the Marxist Supernanny. According to Fisher (2009), the Marxist Supernanny

would not only be the one who laid down limitations, who acted in our own interests when we are incapable of recognising them ourselves, but also the one prepared to take this kind of risk, to wager on the strange and our appetite for it (Fisher, 2009, p.76).

Both Fisher’s (2009) and Jameson’s (1984) remarks outlined in the introductory part of this thesis have a common denominator – change must occur in order to stop the annihilation of the subject. According to Fisher (2009), change comes with the Marxist Supernanny; the one who will establish boundaries vanquished by the loss of the paternal figure and emphasise the development of culture while avoiding the cliches of postmodernism described by Jameson (1984). A solution is necessary as the individual suffers in this state of, as Fisher (2009) defines it, capitalist realism which is a “pervasive atmosphere,

conditioning not only the production of culture but also the regulation of work and education and acting as a kind of invisible barrier constraining thought and action” (Fisher, 2009, p.16). Capitalism realism has infiltrated every aspect of our everyday life, shaping our identities. The characters in Sally Rooney’s novels were born into capitalism and suffer the consequences of the climate of capitalist realism. Their ideas, choices, hopes and issues are shaped by the society in which they are living: their journeys into maturity take into account the role of capitalism. In the following chapter, the characters’ searches for identity and struggles with mental illnesses and the relationship between these and capitalism will be discussed.

### **3.1. Masochism**

The female protagonists of both novels, Frances and Marianne intentionally hurt themselves. One of the reasons they do this lies in the fact that they are missing a stable father figure in their lives who might define boundaries, and offer protection and security. Marianne’s parents had a toxic and abusive relationship as her father physically assaulted both her and her mother. He treated them as inferiors, permanently distorting the notion of romantic and familial relationships for Marianne. The way her father conducted himself towards the female members of the family had a direct impact on her relationship with her brother Alan. Seeing how his father treated his mother and sister, Alan grew up adopting his father’s behaviour as he was openly abusive towards Marianne. Even though he was not physically abusive towards their mother, (or, at least, this is not specifically mentioned in the novel), Alan controlled her and placed himself in the position of power causing her to completely fail as a mother since she never stood up to him or protected Marianne from his outbursts of rage. After the death of their father, Alan tried to assume the role of the father figure, which he expresses via verbal or physical violence.

Do you think you're smarter than me? he said. [...] That's a strange question, she said. I don't know, I've never thought about it. Well, you're not, he said. Okay, fair enough. *Okay, fair enough*, he repeated in a cringing girlish voice. No wonder you have no friends, you can't even have a normal conversation. Right. You should hear what people in town say about you. Involuntarily, because this idea was so ridiculous to her, she laughed. Enraged now, Alan wrenched her back from the sink by her upper arm and, seemingly spontaneously, spat at her. Then he released her arm. A visible drop of spit had landed on the cloth of her skirt. Wow, she said, that's disgusting [...]. Lifting the fourth teacup onto the draining board she noticed a mild but perceptible tremor in her right hand. (Rooney, 2018, p.142)

Throughout the novel, it becomes obvious that Alan feels threatened by Marianne, especially by the fact that she is more intelligent than him. He sees it as an obstacle impeding the assertion of his dominance, and so he verbally and physically assaults her to establish his superiority. This can be tied to the concept of toxic masculinity and patriarchy that impose the belief that women are inferior compared to men. However, it must be taken into account that Alan was also probably indirectly or unintentionally bullied by his father. Even though the father is not mentioned often in the novel, the reader gets the impression that he was an emotionally distant parent who probably set high expectations for his son that he was unable to fulfil.

He [Alan] comes home in the evening and prowls around the house looking for her [...]. 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 horrible person. She wonders if that's true. I try to be nice to you, he says, but you always throw it back at me. She doesn't think that's true, but she knows he probably thinks it is. (Rooney, 2018, p.229)

It is clear from this quote that Alan is an emotionally unstable person that is unable to communicate his feelings as a result of growing up in an unsupportive and unstable environment that lacked an appropriate father figure. Alan takes out his built-up anger and frustrations on Marianne through a never-ending cycle of violent abuse. Therefore, it is not surprising that Marianne identified violence as a form of control. As there was no authoritative father who could set up boundaries and exert control over the wayward son who wants to take over the position of the leader, she was aware that she could not parry Alan in that area and decided to accept the abuse as a form of control that she could not escape from. The only solution for her was to accept it and not show resistance in order to affirm her inferior position and hope it would not escalate any further.

Marianne's upbringing greatly influenced her conceptualization of relationships and the power dynamics in them. When she started dating Jamie, she let him hit her during intercourse in order to submit herself to him. In her conversation with Connell, she reveals why she decided to do that.

It was my idea, that I wanted to submit to him. It's difficult to explain. [...] 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. Does that make sense? I don't



know if it does, I've been thinking about it. It's about the dynamic, more than what actually happens. Anyway, I suggested it to him, that I could try being more submissive. And it turns out he likes to beat me up. [...] I mean, I don't enjoy it. But then, you're not really submitting to someone if you only submit to things you enjoy. (Rooney, 2018, p.132-133)

Marianne not only equated violence with control, but she also saw inferiority caused by violence as a way of gratifying someone. For Marianne, giving up control is, paradoxically, a way to stay in control. Enduring physical violence on her terms means avoiding other forms of punishment or unexpected violent outbursts, as she learned from her relationships with her brother and father. Moreover, because of her inferiority complex, Marianne believes she deserves to be punished. As she mentioned to Connell in the same conversation "maybe I want to be treated badly, she says. I don't know. Sometimes I think I deserve bad things because I'm a bad person" (Rooney, 2018, p.133). Over time, Marianne started to believe everything her brother was saying to her and, consequentially, became very insecure and believed she was a bad person who deserves punishment.

Marianne had a similar relationship with Lukas while she was in Sweden. They played "the game" in which Marianne was submissive and let Lukas hurt her while they would sleep together. "The game" took masochism to another level as Lukas had complete control over her behaviour and the whole process was followed by him verbally demeaning Marianne. Naturally, "the game" ended when Lukas decided, and Marianne did not have a say in it. After it finished, she would take a shower, which might be interpreted as a purification ritual to metaphorically wash away her sins, for which she had received punishment. Marianne completely gave up control in order to satisfy Lukas. I would argue that she engaged in those

types of relationship not only to punish herself but also to get a sense of approval that she never got from her father or brother while growing up. By fulfilling every wish and giving complete power to the other person, she hopes to feel loved, even though she suffers in the process. That is the reason she let Connell hide their relationship and have it completely on his terms – she saw it as the only way to get approval and love from somebody. In her mind, love was equal to control and, by giving up control, she hoped to feel loved.

It can also be noted that Marianne's masochism becomes more amplified as the distance between her and Connell grows. It was first evident in her relationship with Jamie soon after she and Connell broke up, and it culminated in Sweden where she was physically very distant from him. However, there was one moment when she broke down and realised that masochism and violence are not necessarily connected to love. It was during the photoshoot she was doing with Lukas, prior to which she was thinking about Christmas and her hometown.

When she thinks of Christmastime now she thinks of Carriclea, lights strung up over Main Street, the glowing plastic Santa Claus in the window of Kelleher's with its animated arm waving a stiff, repetitive greeting. [...] The Christmas tree in Connell's front room, tinsel bristling, furniture cramped to make space, and the high, delighted sound of laughter. He said he would be sorry not to see her. Won't be the same without you, he wrote. She felt stupid then and wanted to cry. Her life is so sterile now and has no beauty in it anymore. (Rooney, 2018, p.196)

Marianne reminisced about Christmas, moreover she reminisced about Christmas at Connell's house, which was filled with warmth and love, and was a complete juxtaposition with the omnipresent tension in her family. This memory reminded her how love can actually be pure,

simple and fulfilling. Compared to Lukas, Connell made her feel respected and loved without humiliating and abusing her. When Lukas told her he loved her after tying her up during the photoshoot, Marianne, for the first time, wondered if violence and love could and should be separated.

Could he really do the gruesome things he does to her and believe at the same time that he's acting out of love? Is the world such an evil place, that love should be indistinguishable from the basest and most abusive forms of violence? Outside her breath rises in a fine mist and the snow keeps falling, like a ceaseless repetition of the same infinitesimally small mistake. (Rooney, 2018, p.199)

It dawned on Marianne that her concept of love is not necessarily the only concept that exists. It was the first time she questioned whether love should make her feel unwanted and unworthy. It was a crucial event in her life that led to her breakup with Lukas and her standing up for herself for the first time.

Like Marianne, Frances in *Conversations with Friends* saw violence as a form of control. While she was sleeping with Nick, she asked him to hurt her.

Would you ever hit me? I said. I mean if I asked you to. Nick didn't look over at me, his eyes were closed. He said: uh, I don't know. Why? Do you want me to? [...] Yeah, I said. I want you to do it now. [...] I don't think I want to do that, he said. [...] Some people like it, I said. You mean during sex? I didn't realise you were interested in that kind of thing. I opened my eyes then. He was frowning. Wait, are you okay? he said. Why are you crying? I'm not crying. Incidentally it turned out that I was crying. It was just something my eyes were doing while we were talking. [...] I'm not crying, I said. Do you think I want to hurt you? I could feel tears coming out of my eyes,

but they didn't feel hot like real tears. [...] I don't know, I said. I'm just telling you that you can. But is it something you want me to do? You can do whatever you want with me. (Rooney, 2017, p.214-215).

Both Marianne and Frances told their partners on multiple occasions that they could do whatever they wanted with them. Like Marianne, Frances comes from a broken home. Her father was a drunk who often threw things around the house and was emotionally very distant. He cared for Frances, but he could not control his addiction and be a good father figure for his daughter. As with Marianne, there was nobody who could set clear boundaries and rules or serve as a role model. Frances's mother never openly condemned the actions of her father and forced her to maintain a relationship with him even though Frances was reluctant to do so. Her father did nothing to deserve the respect of his daughter, yet her mother was deliberately ignorant of his behaviour and failed to set clear boundaries or teach Frances how to deal with emotional issues. Neither her mother or father assumed the father figure described by Žižek (1997). This led to Frances feeling insecure and unable to clearly communicate her feelings. Instead, she learned to channel her feelings through abuse; by asking others to hurt her or hurting herself. Like Marianne, Frances was prepared to let Nick hurt her with the hope of getting a sense of approval and love which directly mimicked the relationship between her parents. No matter what her father did, her mother always found an excuse for it which possibly led Frances to interpret love as an ability to endure any type of pain caused by the other person and still love them.

Frances often hurt herself when she had trouble dealing with her emotions and saw masochism as a form of punishment. Prior to her encounter with Nick that was quoted above, Frances slept with a man she met on the internet. Even though she told him she did not want

him to be rough, he started pulling her hair, and she chose not to react, fearing it would escalate into something more dangerous. When she came home, disappointed that sleeping with this man did not make her feel normal, she scratched her hand until it bled. Once, after telling Nick that she loved him, and not getting the response she hoped for, she also intentionally hurt herself.

I walked to the bus stop, knowing my humiliation was now complete. Even though I had known Nick didn't love me, I had continued to let him have sex with me whenever he wanted, out of desperation and a naïve hope that he didn't understand what he was inflicting on me. Now even that hope was gone. He knew that I loved him, that he was exploiting my tender feelings for him, and he didn't care. There was nothing to be done. On the bus home I chewed the inside of my cheek and stared out the black window until I tasted blood. (Rooney, 2017, p.217-218)

The feeling of insecurity and betrayal, and her inability to cope with her feelings, led to Frances hurting herself. As she could not communicate her feelings, she needed to find a different way of expressing them. She did that every time she was hurt by somebody. Frances herself was aware of that and characterised these behaviours as acting out.

After Bobbi had broken up with me I hadn't cut any holes into my skin, although I did stand in the shower and let the hot water run out and then keep standing there until my fingers went blue. I privately termed these behaviours 'acting out'. Scratching my arm open was 'acting out', and so was giving myself hypothermia by accident and having to explain it to a paramedic on the phone. (Rooney, 2017, p.288)

Every time she was faced with an emotionally difficult situation, Frances hurt herself in order to maintain control over her emotions, as she was never taught how to do it in a healthy way. She used her physical pain to distract her from the emotional pain she was feeling and with which she was unable to cope. There is a certain parallel in how Frances and Connell processed their emotions. Connell thought of hurting himself when he felt distressed, yet he never acted upon those feelings. Growing up in a patriarchal environment of toxic masculinity had the same influence on how he dealt with his emotions as Frances's upbringing had on her.

In both novels, violence can be seen as a desperate way of maintaining control over someone or oneself. In most cases in *Normal People*, violence was used by men in order to compensate for something. In Alan's and Jamie's situation, it was used to compensate for their lack of intelligence and establish dominance. In her novels, Rooney shows how domestic violence follows the same pattern – the physically stronger male figures use aggression to compensate for what they feel they lack. Abuse is not necessarily linked only to physical aggression, but also encompasses verbal or psychological demeaning or neglect, as in Frances's case. During a discussion about her father with her mother, Frances pondered on gender roles and how that affects victims of abuse.

You must love him, she told me when I was sixteen. He's your father. Who says I have to love him? I said. [...] Was I kind to others? It was hard to nail down an answer. I worried that if I did turn out to have a personality, it would be one of the unkind ones. Did I only worry about this question because as a woman I felt required to put the needs of others before my own? Was 'kindness' just another term for submission in the face of conflict? These were the kind of things I wrote

about in my diary as a teenager: as a feminist I have the right not to love anyone.

(Rooney, 2017, p. 175-176)

Frances here tackles the imposed gender roles in relation to submission. 'Kindness' here actually stands for submission, which is self-destructive. Women are required to be complacent and obedient regardless of how they are treated. Observing her upbringing, it is not a surprise that Frances had serious intimacy issues and that it was difficult for her to stand up for herself and openly express her emotions. In both Frances and Marianne, violence and abuse stem from the character's upbringing, i.e., the missing of an authoritative father figure who should have set boundaries and rules. The father figures in both novels were deeply disturbed and abusive and even though they occupied the place of the father in the family, they did not fulfil the role of the father as described by Žižek (1997). With the missing father, the children strive for *jouissance*, which inevitably leads them to compensate for pleasure in unhealthy ways resulting in their unhappiness.

#### 4. The social world

In the climate of capitalist realism in which culture and art are commodified and manifest a lack of depth, forming an identity that opposes capitalist values becomes an issue. Both *Conversations with Friends* and *Normal People* are coming of age novels that deal with the issue of understanding ourselves and the formation of identity. For most of the characters, functioning and adapting to the world they live in is a tedious process resulting with depression or feeling of low self-worth.

Verhaeghe (2019) mentions that both society and genetics influence the formation of our identity. This means that our identity, at least partially, depends on the political and social sphere that we were born into as it can have both positive and/or negative influence on the formation of it. In order to form our identity, we, to put it in Lacanian terms, come in contact with the big Other which is “both another subject, in his radical alterity and unassimilable uniqueness, and also the symbolic order which mediates the relationship with that other” (Evans, 1996, p.136). Lacan explained this concept in his mirroring stage. In this stage, the child seeks to identify herself with the mother who mirrors the child’s needs. If the mother responds adequately to the needs of the child, it results in the “gradual development of the ‘self’” (Verhaeghe, 2019, p.368). In other words, the child tries to send a message to the mother and, if the mother responds appropriately to the child’s needs, the child is able to identify with the mother. If the mother, who represents the Other to the child, does not resolve the child’s needs appropriately, the child develops “an alien self” (Verhaeghe, 2019, p.368) and may enter in the state of alienation. This analogy can be applied to a larger scale, i.e., to the social life of the individual. In this case, the Other becomes society, the law, or any other entity that the individual is trying to identify with. If these Others do not “mirror a



supposed essence to the subject” (Verhaeghe, 2019, p.368), the subject feels alienated. Verhaeghe (2019) notes that it is impossible to escape the identification process with the Other(s) as it is an essential part of entering the society and building an identity. He continues by claiming that our interaction with the big Other “implies two sides: the organism with its limits and potentialities; the social world (the Other) that may hinder or enhance the realization of these possibilities” (Verhaeghe, 2019, p.369). Moreover, one can be alienated without actually realising it; as Verhaeghe (2019) notes: “The working class have identified with the social norms, value systems and social stigmas of the ruling class, as a result of which they unknowingly endorse a system that oppresses them” (Verhaeghe, 2019, p.369). In other words, if one tries to identify with the Other and fails, it inevitably leads to alienation. Alienation is what appears when the subject is unable to identify itself with the desires of the Other. The subject wants to identify with the desires of the Other because “identity is a result of our attempt to be identical with images and signifiers presented by the Other” (Verhaeghe, 2019, p.371).

Alienation is an inevitable process as our lives are conditioned by the big Other. Fisher (2009), quoting Žižek, explained how the big Other manifests itself as the “collective fiction, the symbolic structure, presupposed by any social field” (Fisher, 2009, p.44). The biggest issue with the big Other is that it is ethereal as we are unable to encounter it in any concrete form (Fisher, 2009, p.44), yet it directly influences our lives. The concept of the big Other can be linked to Bourdieu’s definition of habitus. In his *Outline of the Theory of Practice: Structures and the Habitus*, he defined habitus as the product of the structures that constitute a particular type of environment (Bourdieu, 1972, p.175). Habitus, for Bourdieu, is a system of unconscious rules that directly shapes the opinions and decisions of the individual. Or, as he puts it

The structures characteristic of a determinate type of conditions of existence, through the economic and social necessity which they bring to bear on the relatively autonomous universe of family relationships, or more precisely, through the mediation of the specifically familial manifestations of this external necessity (sexual division of labour, domestic morality, cares, strife, tastes, etc.) produce the structure of the habitus which become in turn the basis of perception and appreciation of all subsequent experience. (Bourdieu, 1972, p.177)

Habitus, therefore, is a set of beliefs and subconscious rules acquired through various influences that sets our decisions in motion through a “modus operandi of which he [the agent] is not the producer and has no conscious mastery” (Bourdieu, 1972, p.178). Class, according to Bourdieu, is one of the elements that constitute a specific habitus which enables those belonging to it to have a certain mutual understanding and concordance as they share the same set of rules and values (Bourdieu, 1972, p.179). In Rooney’s novels, there are evident similarities between Frances and Connell because they belong to the same social class; even though their stories and experiences are not exactly the same, they share a common ground, and this is seen to condition their responses to their situations. The concept of habitus and the big Other are crucial in coming to an understanding of Rooney’s novels as we can observe how the characters are obliged to adhere to a set of certain rules and to identify themselves with the symbolic structures in order to achieve a sense of normality and happiness. Failing to do so, results in frustration, depression, and anxiety as a direct consequence of alienation from the society.

Alienation from the society, i.e., from the Other, is something Rooney’s characters face in the novels. Their upbringings, social statuses, sexual orientations, and beliefs

constantly clash with the society they live in. Even though both Rooney's novels are coming-of-age novels in which is expected that characters are constantly trying to form an identity and fail while doing so, she does not attribute their depression or anxiety solely to the process of growing up. Their issues are also the direct consequence of the way they respond to the capitalist world around them and are not simply attributed only to the turbulent process of growing up.

In the first few pages of *Conversations with Friends* it is clear how anxious and insecure Frances is. She herself claims that she "lacks personality" (Rooney, 2017 p. 39). It is without question that Frances has a personality, but for her it was difficult to realise that as she was unable to identify with her surroundings, i.e., the Other(s). Frances is an introvert who lives in a capitalist world suited for extroverts like Bobbi. Bobbi knows how to "sell" herself to others, while Frances does not like to promote herself. Nowadays, every commercial tells the public, i.e., the consumers, to be their authentic selves, to be unique and to stand out. It seems as if there is an unspoken imperative to be different, yet nobody knows what that actually means. To be different means to dress and act in a certain way or use exactly those products that will help you emphasise your 'uniqueness'. This relates to the notion of depthlessness and commodification that Jameson (1984) mentioned in his work. It is important to look a certain way, to aesthetically match the expectations of this uniqueness that, in the end, is not at all unique. Frances struggles with this perception and thus believes she lacks personality. She failed to identify herself with the Other, which, is deeply embedded in capitalist values.

The cause of Frances's alienation is closely related to her social status that acts as one of the multiple Others she failed to identify with. Frances's family belongs to the lower-

middle-class, which affected not only her financial status but also her upbringing. When she arrived at college, however, she was surrounded by rich people at university with whom she was unable to identify, including her closest circle of friends.

Bobbi had a way of belonging everywhere. Though she said she hated the rich, her family was rich, and other wealthy people recognised her as one of their own. They took her radical politics as a kind of bourgeois self-deprecation, nothing very serious, and talked to her about restaurants or where to stay in Rome. I felt out of place in these situations, ignorant and bitter, but also fearful of being discovered as a moderately poor person and a communist. Equally, I struggled to make conversation with people of my own parents' background, afraid that my vowels sounded pretentious or my large flea-market coat made me look rich. (Rooney, 2017, p.95-96).

From this passage, it is obvious that Frances feels alienated from both worlds: the middle-class community, her parent's background, and the richer class to which Bobbi and her friends at university belonged to. Frances felt as if she belonged to neither as she could not completely identify with either class. As previously mentioned, identification with the Other is necessary to form an identity and, if the identification does not succeed, alienation is present. Frances could not entirely identify herself with the middle-class because of her intellectual personality. Her beliefs—she is a self-proclaimed communist—are not in line with the presumed belief system of the richer people around her. She was jealous of Melissa's house and life in general, and she wanted, not to destroy, but to steal it: "I didn't feel any contempt for your house. I wanted it to be my house. I wanted your whole life. Maybe I did shitty things to try and get it, but I'm poor and you're rich. I wasn't trying to trash your life, I

was trying to steal it” (Rooney, 2017, p.297). Frances’s frustrations stem partially from the previously mentioned capitalist realism feeling, the pervasive atmosphere that capitalism is the only possible option. Capitalism enhances class division as it leads to the “return of class power and privilege” (Fisher,2009, p.28). Frances struggles to find her place in the capitalist society, juggling between her beliefs and the need to provide for herself.

I hadn’t been kidding with Philip about not wanting a job. I didn’t want one. I had no plans as to my future financial sustainability: I never wanted to earn money for doing anything. [...] Though I knew that I would eventually have to enter full-time employment, I certainly never fantasised about a radiant future where I was paid to perform an economic role. Sometimes this felt like a failure to take an interest in my own life which depressed me. On the other hand, I felt that my disinterest in wealth was ideologically healthy. (Rooney, 2017, p.23).

When it comes to money, Frances often seems contradictory as she tries to balance the appeal of the upper-class with her beliefs. On one hand, she refuses to attribute any significant value to money but, on the other hand, she is often fascinated with Nick’s and Melissa’s material possessions like their coffee machine and expensive Egyptian wool furniture. She felt this appeal towards the material because it was unattainable to her.

Another consequence of capitalism, the housing crisis in Ireland, was also a factor that contributed to Frances’s frustration with the system and class division. She could not afford her apartment in Dublin and had gone into debt, forcing her to borrow money from Nick and to financially depend on her unstable father. After seeing the idyllic, or at least seemingly idyllic life, that Melissa had, Frances felt the injustice posed by the system and again, felt alienated.

Frances is not the only character who struggles to understand who she is while being burdened with the socio-economic situation and the norms imposed by the society—probably the most important contributing factor to Connell’s mental breakdown is the class system. While in high school, a certain hierarchy was already present even if it was not necessarily in correlation with the financial status of the students. Although he came from a working-class family, Connell enjoyed a certain status.

Back home, Connell’s shyness never seemed like much of an obstacle to his social life, because everyone knew who he was already, and there was never any need to introduce himself and create impressions about his personality. If anything, his personality seemed like something external to himself, managed by the opinions of others, rather than anything he individually did or produced. (Rooney, 2018, p.70).

Certain parallels can be drawn between Frances and Connell. Frances believed she did not have a personality while Connell felt as if there were two versions of him existing simultaneously. No matter how they perceived themselves the result remains the same – they both felt alienated as they were unable to identify with the Other. Connell was unable to identify himself with the Other of patriarchy that rejected his feelings, nor he could identify himself with how the Other, i.e., his classmates, perceived him. As Verhaeghe (2019) notes, an individual can be alienated without necessarily being aware that s/he is alienated, which is exactly how Connell felt during high school. He adhered to the unwritten rules of the hierarchy by ignoring Marianne to preserve his status, yet it did not result in him being happy and feeling fully accepted by his peers for who he is as he had to conceal his true self. Connell’s situation can be reviewed in light of Verhaeghe’s (2019) comment, cited above, about how

the working classes' identification with the ruling class has resulted in their oppression. Even though Connell tried to identify with the Other and comply with its rules, it did not result in him feeling content. Connell's experience with the hierarchy in high school mirrors, although in a gentler manner, the class system he encountered in the real world.

When Connell arrived at college, his anxiety increased, and his confidence drastically plummeted.

Now he has a sense of invisibility, nothingness, with no reputation to recommend him to anyone. Though his physical appearance has not changed, he feels objectively worse-looking than he used to be. He has become self-conscious about his clothes. All the guys in his class wear the same waxed hunting jackets and plum-coloured chinos, not that Connell has a problem with people dressing how they want, but he would feel like a complete prick wearing that stuff. At the same time, it forces him to acknowledge that his own clothes are cheap and unfashionable.

(Rooney, 2018, p.70)

The moment Connell enrolled into college, he stepped into a world in which he felt as if he did not belong. He was painfully aware of his social status and, once again, he felt alienated. This alienation, however, was more intense than the one he felt in high school as the class difference between him and the rest of the students caused him to feel frustrated and insecure. Rooney depicts Connell's anxiety and depression in a painfully authentic way, showing how it affected every aspect of his life.

His anxiety, which was previously chronic and low-level, serving as a kind of all-purpose inhibiting impulse, has become severe. His hands start tingling when he has to perform minor interactions like ordering coffee or answering a question in

class. Once or twice he's had major panic attacks: hyperventilation, chest pain, pins and needles all over his body. A feeling of disassociation from his senses, an inability to think straight or interpret what he sees and hears. Things begin to look and sound different, slower, artificial, unreal. The first time it happened he thought he was losing his mind, that the whole cognitive framework by which he made sense of the world had disintegrated for good, and everything from then on would just be undifferentiated sound and colour. (Rooney, 2018, p.206)

His anxiety reached its peak when his high school friend Rob had died. Even though they were never close friends, Connell felt guilty for the fact that Rob descended into alcoholism and in the end killed himself. The true reason behind Rob's death was never revealed although it was hinted in the novel that he was depressed, something that Connell could relate to. Rob's death affected him deeply as he was a part of his old life that he desperately wanted to go back to but could not. Even though Rob was not a good friend to him, he was a symbol of his old life, the one he was able to understand and manage.

At college, he was surrounded by richer student which made him feel self-conscious about his social status. His life at Trinity turned out to be the opposite of what he had expected it to be.

I probably thought if I moved here I would fit in better, he says. You know, I thought I might find more like-minded people or whatever. But honestly, the people here are a lot worse than the people I knew in school. I mean everyone here just goes around comparing how much money their parents make. [...] I just feel like I left Carricklea thinking I could have a different life, he says. But I hate it here, and now



I can never go back there again. I mean, those friendships are gone. Rob is gone, I can never see him again. I can never get that life back. (Rooney, 2018, p.217)

Connell wanted to escape the small-town, conservative mindset of Carricklea to further develop and better himself in a different, intellectual surrounding. Even though he was highly intellectual, he could not achieve his full potential. His hometown hindered his intellectual growth, as intellect was not prized in a small community that did not offer any possibilities for its further development. Thus, higher education and leaving Carricklea was the only viable option that would enable him to fully develop himself intellectually. However, he feels that he has exchanged one form of superficiality for another, one in which he is unable to compete with his peers. His intellect and potential were elided as image and status were more appreciated in these social circles. His intellect could not be commodified thus he remained isolated. Connell found himself surrounded by people who represent the worst aspects of capitalist society – people with superficial values, concerned with their aesthetics and image; those who are the incarnation of the previously mentioned concept of depthlessness outlined by Jameson (1984). Connell felt as if he did not belong anywhere – he could not go back to his old life because it did not exist anymore, and the small-town community could not fulfil his needs. On the other hand, he could not adapt to the posh and superficial upper-class he encountered at Trinity. Both places that he could have called home seemed to reject him. As this novel shows, intellect, which cannot be easily commodified, is taken for granted and overlooked in a capitalist world concerned primarily with aesthetics and appearance. The concept of home offers stability to the individual and when one loses one's sense of it, it can shake one to one's core. The inability to pinpoint a definition of home caused Connell to become alienated which resulted in him feeling severely depressed and anxious.

Connell's financial status put a direct strain on his relationship with Marianne. Being aware of the great difference in their social status, Connell had trouble openly asking Marianne if he could move in with her due to his financial difficulties. Because of her fear of rejection and insecurity, Marianne failed to read between the lines and hear the unspoken request that Connell made. This avoidable misunderstanding is likely to cause frustration in the reader as Rooney, up to that point, creates intense and emotionally charged dialogues between the two characters that flow seamlessly. It may seem incredulous that something could interrupt the immaculate flow of their communication, yet I believe Rooney did that in order to emphasise how deeply social conditions can affect someone as they are subconsciously embedded in every pore of our daily life. Connell was painfully aware that he was perceived differently by others at Trinity because he comes from a working-class family so, occasionally, he attributed to Marianne the opinions of others, believing she shared the same thoughts as others of her class. Blinded by their own insecurities, they failed to communicate efficiently which resulted in them breaking up, even though neither truly wished for that to happen. Marianne's subsequent relationship with Jamie fuelled Connell's suspicions even more, as "Jamie's dad was one of the people who had caused the financial crisis – not figuratively, one of the actual people involved" (Rooney, 2018, p.124). Jamie is the embodiment of everything Connell despises about the rich; he is a spoiled, frustrated, racist misogynist, enjoying undeserved benefits acquired by the exploitation of the system's tendency to cater to the rich.

Another important aspect that influenced the characters and their perception of themselves in relation to their social status is the role of the university. Trinity was seen as a haven for Connell in which he could explore his potentials, yet the climate he found himself in was demoralising. Fisher (2009) noticed that "education, [is] far from being in some ivory

tower safely inured from the 'real world', [it] is the engine room of the reproduction of social reality, directly confronting the inconsistencies of the capitalist social field" (Fisher, 2009, p.26). The university is a peculiar place – it is a site that has a relationship with the real world while also functioning as a place of experimentation. The social and financial hierarchies found there mirror the 'real world' while, at the same time, the safety-net provided by a university enables students to take risks, especially when it comes to their career choices. The years at Trinity served as a trial period during which the characters partially faced the harsh reality while still having the opportunity to form their identity in a safe environment.

Connell's depression and insecurity do not stem solely from his financial or social status. From the beginning of the novel, it is clear that Connell is an introverted, shy and insecure person. When he speaks, his sentences are concise and he displays physical signs that he is uncomfortable; his ears often turn red, or he squirms uncomfortably and averts his gaze. Even though he is described as the "strong and silent type" (Rooney, 2018, p.165), he is actually very sensitive and insecure, but he is trying to hide it from others.

Like Frances, Connell often feels alienated as a consequence of the inability to adequately identify with the big Others around him. Even though Connell enjoyed a certain reputation in high school and was considered one of the "popular kids", he never felt entirely fulfilled by that as he was unable to connect to his friends on a deeper level. Because he wanted to maintain that status, he continuously repressed his feelings and true thoughts in order to not be ridiculed and excluded from his group of friends. He grew up in an environment of toxic masculinity, premised on the idea that men are stoic, strong and always in control of their feelings. Toxic masculinity is a direct by-product of the system of patriarchy that is still the predominant belief system in our society, even if some progress towards its

abolishment has been made. As these novels illustrate, the patriarchy is not only detrimental and degrading towards women but has serious implications for the mental health of men, especially the younger population.

When Connell and Marianne started their relationship, Connell was never fully able to openly tell her how he felt about her. He always spoke to Marianne in a semi-cryptic manner which immensely frustrated her: "I'm just nervous, he says. I feel like it's pretty obvious I don't want you to leave. In a tiny voice she says: I don't find it obvious what you want" (Rooney, 2018, p.235). The consequence of him growing up in a patriarchal society is that he was unable to clearly communicate and express his feeling as it was deemed unmanly. It is clear that Connell did that subconsciously rather than intentionally hiding his feeling, as the main issue with patriarchy, and capitalism, is that it is ubiquitous and has the ability to subconsciously enter into every pore of our lives.

Melissa's husband Nick, like Connell, was brought up in an environment of toxic masculinity and that had a strong impact on the way he communicates with people around him and how he perceives himself. His marriage failed while he was openly struggling with depression, and his passivity and reluctance to take the initiative were repulsive to Melissa. Patriarchy obliged Nick to hide his emotions and appear as the stoic male figure. This aspect of patriarchy is closely connected to Jameson's (1984) waning of affect explained in Chapter 2, which puts aesthetics and appearance in a superior position, and meaning in an inferior one. The pressure to be dominant and emotionless crushed Nick and forced him to become anti-social and depressive, unable to function in the world of upper-class parties and gatherings. Both Nick's and Connell's cases demonstrate how society and the imposed gender roles can have destructive consequences on a person's mental health.

In his book, Fisher (2009) notes how depression has become one of the most treated mental illness in Britain (Fisher, 2009, p.19). Quoting Oliver James, he claims that there exists a certain “correlation between rising rates of mental distress and the neoliberal mode of capitalism” (Fisher, 2009, p.19). According to Fisher (2009), capitalism directly and indirectly causes the individual to suffer. It creates an increasing gap between the classes, not only in a financial sense, but also in the way different classes perceive each other, as can be witnessed in Connell’s case. Another important aspect of Connell’s depression was the fact that he struggled financially. As Fisher notes, “capitalist realism has successfully installed a ‘business ontology’ in which it is *simply obvious* that everything in society, including healthcare and education, should be run as business” (Fisher, 2009, p.17). Consequentially, both healthcare and education are more expensive as capital lies at the core of its existence. Connell could not afford his stay at Trinity without work, and he continuously struggled to sustain himself financially which put him under enormous stress. Another aspect of the ‘business ontology’ Fisher identifies is the “privatization of stress” (Fisher, 2009, p.19).

Capitalist realism insists on treating mental health as if it were a natural fact, like weather. [...] Instead of treating it as incumbent on individuals to resolve their own psychological distress, instead, that is, of accepting the vast *privatization of stress* that has taken place over the last thirty years, we need to ask: how has it become acceptable that so many people, and especially so many young people, are ill? (Fisher, 2009, p.19).

According to Fisher (2009), capitalism fuels insecurity, depression, and anxiety, especially in young people. He states that, by allowing the system to privatize these conditions, i.e., letting the individual believe that s/he is the sole cause of his/her own inability to cope with the

world, any “question of social systemic causation is ruled out” (Fisher, 2009, p.21). Capitalism seeks to put an emphasis on individualism and individual responsibility. As Verhaeghe (2019) notes, “contemporary neoliberal ideology presents a version where everybody must strive for excellence; to develop your talents is an individual responsibility and in the event of failure, blame is on yourself” (Verhaeghe, 2019, p. 367). Although Connell is shy and introverted, his depression and anxiety cannot and should not be attributed solely to his presumed incapacity to cope with the ‘real world’. His depression has a systematic cause, yet he is unable to distinguish the cause of it, because the system itself has an ethereal quality; it is impossible to pinpoint it and to get a solid grasp on it.

## 5. Relationships as alternative worlds

### 5.1. Communication

One of the most compelling aspects of both novels is the way Rooney depicts the communication between the characters. The plot is centred around beautifully written dialogues accompanied by subtle yet effective body language. The communication between Connell and Marianne is the main pillar of their relationship since engaging in it liberates them as they feel safe expressing their true feelings to each other.

The conversations that follow are gratifying for Connell, often taking unexpected turns and prompting him to express ideas he had never consciously formulated before. [...] At times he has the sensation that he and Marianne are like figure-skaters, improvising their discussions so adeptly and in such perfect synchronisation that it surprises them both. [...] Knowing that they'll probably have sex again before they sleep probably makes the talking more pleasurable, and he suspects that the intimacy of their discussion, often moving back and forth from the conceptual to the personal, also makes the sex feel better. (Rooney, 2018, p.97)

Their communication is invigorative for both of them for various reasons. They both feel alienated from the rest of the world and perceive their communication as a haven in which they can express their thoughts and emotions freely. An almost unspoken mutual understanding is at the core of their relationship which makes it so intense and liberating. Even after they break up, they remain in contact via e-mail and Skype, as they crave the feeling of security that stemmed from their conversations. Their dialogues mostly have a soothing and calming quality that grounded the characters and distanced them from the tedious and

constant misunderstandings they have with other people. Moreover, they were both on a similar intellectual level, thus, they were able to conduct meaningful discussions and stimulate each other's intellect while talking about mutual and personal interests. In a capitalist world that, according to Jameson (1984), deprives society of depth and affect, Connell and Marianne managed to create their personal microcosmos, resisting commodification with intellectual development. Their communication enhanced their sexual life, almost as if their ability to sustain such perfectly coordinated conversations acted as an aphrodisiac for them. The intimacy between them surpassed the sheer physicality of sex and, mostly for Connell, served as a vehicle to communicate the feelings he had trouble verbalising due to having grown up in an environment of toxic masculinity.

Despite their multiple break-ups, Connell and Marianne managed to find their way back together as they were unable to stay away from each other because they could not find the same type of understanding from other people. They were equally broken and maladjusted to society, but felt complete and safe around each other. Marianne saw Connell as an escape from the burdening feeling of loneliness while Connell felt like he could show his true personality and vulnerability only in front of Marianne. This co-dependence resulted in them having a strong and open communication that benefited the development of their relationship in general. Slowly but surely, their relationship surpassed mere infatuation and physical attractiveness and evolved into something deeper and more meaningful.

The communication between Connell and Marianne is rather different than the one between Frances and Nick. Connell and Marianne mostly communicate efficiently, despite being burdened with personal issues that involve anxiety, class differences or insecurity, while Frances and Nick often fail to communicate efficiently as they are both afraid to express their



feelings and thoughts freely. However, a parallel between their and Connell and Marianne's way of communicating can be drawn as Nick and Frances also shared a mutual understanding for each other that no other person could provide.

I would miss dominating you in conversation, I said. [...] Go on, he said. I think you would miss it too. Being dominated? Of course I would. That's like foreplay for us. You say cryptic things I don't understand, I give inadequate responses, you laugh at me, and then we have sex. (Rooney, 2017, p.199).

Like Connell and Marianne, the communication between Frances and Nick enhanced their sex life as they both saw it as a stimulating game. Moreover, because of the similarities between them and the fact that they are both introverts who have difficulties expressing emotions, each for their own reasons, they bonded over how 'inadequate' they are. Even though Frances described their conversations as "competitive and thrilling" and "like a game of table tennis" (Rooney, 2017, p.43) meaning it was clearly stimulative in some respects, their fights and issues often remain unsolved. On multiple occasions, Nick remains baffled after a conversation with Frances, telling her more than once, "I never have any idea what you feel about anything" (Rooney, 2017, p.89). Because of her insecurities and inability to process her feelings, Frances conceals her true emotions using cynical comments and sarcasm as she did when Nick broke up with her over instant messages.

Nick: obviously we can't see each other very often

Nick: and having an affair is reasonably stressful

me: haha

me: are you breaking up with me

Nick: if we never actually see one another

Nick: then the affair just consists of like

Nick: worrying about the affair

Nick: do you see what I mean

me: I can't believe you're breaking up with me over instant messenger

me: I thought you were going to leave your wife so we could run away together

(Rooney, 2017, p.89)

In reality, Frances was hurt but decided to use sarcasm as a defence mechanism in order to protect her own feelings. Combined with Nick's passivity and reluctance to openly express his emotions, their communication is frustrating and often pointless as they are unable to solve issues that appear during their relationship. However, the blame for the lack of success of the communication between Frances and Nick lies in both of them as they are dealing with similar issues and are afraid of being hurt by the other person.

Due to the fact that they had to keep their relationship a secret, Rooney sets a lot of their communication online over instant messages and e-mails. Even though instant messaging should have had facilitated their communication, it hindered their capacity to understand each other better. Not only did Rooney choose the Internet as a medium because of its relevancy in this age, but she also showed how it can, paradoxically, make the communication even more unsuccessful. In one e-mail, Nick said to Frances that "it's obviously hard for me to tell what you actually want and i don't really know if you were joking about being hurt. you're a very stressful person to talk to online" (Rooney, 2017, p.91). Without seeing the other person's body language and facial expressions, it can be easy to misinterpret the message they are trying to send, especially in the case of Frances who intentionally masks her true emotions. Online communication runs the risk of depriving a conversation of depth and meaning, and so one could argue that this failure of

communication can be attributed to the technological advances brought about by the development of capitalism (Jameson, 1984, p. 77). Whatever the case may be, it was clear that Frances tried to use her cryptic responses not only to protect her feelings but also to gain an advantage that would allow her to take control over the situation and the relationship in general.

## **5.2. Power and control**

The dynamics between the couples in both novels is subtly centred around the notion on power and control, i.e., who has the upper hand in the relationship. In both novels, the stereotypical male dominance is not present, at least not in the relationships between the main characters. Through the characters of Nick and Connell, Rooney defies the notion of toxic masculinity, as they openly renounce exerting control over their female partners, and do not display any desire to be in a position of power. Even though Frances is perceived as a “vaguely disruptive sexual presence” (Rooney, 2017, p.56) by Nick’s friends due to her being much younger than him, Nick never treated her as an object from who he simply derived pleasure or reassurance. On the contrary, he was mindful about her feelings and cautious not to hurt her, at least not intentionally. In his relationship with Melissa, Nick was always perceived as a secondary character who was in the shadow of his extroverted wife. Melissa herself probably contributed to this feeling as she was clearly frustrated and unhappy with her husband which can be seen in the e-mail she sent to Frances after she had found out Nick was sleeping with her.

Nick doesn't want to leave me & I don't want to leave him. We are going to keep living together & being married. I'm putting this in an email because I don't trust Nick to be straight with you about it. He has a weak personality & compulsively tells

people what they want to hear. [...] He likes partners who take complete responsibility for all his decisions, that's all. You will not be able to draw a sustainable sense of self-respect from this relationship you're in. [...] Fighting with him is impossible because he's pathologically submissive, & you can't scream at him without hating yourself. [...] I wouldn't murder Nick but it's important for you to know that if I tried, he would absolutely go with it. Even if he figured out that I was planning his murder he wouldn't bring it up in case it upsets me. I've become so used to seeing him as pathetic & even contemptible that I forgot anybody else could love him. (Rooney, 2017, p.234-235)

His own wife perceived him as a spineless person who is willing to obey every command and that surely influenced on Nick's own perception of himself.

Melissa continues her e-mail by stating why she decided to remain with him, despite his passivity and submissiveness: "He tells me your father is an alcoholic, so was mine. I wonder if we gravitate toward Nick because he gives us a sense of control that was lacking in childhood." (Rooney, 2017, p.235) A certain feeling of co-dependence acted like glue in Melissa's and Nick's relationship. She needed someone who could give her a sense of control while Nick needed someone who would take the initiative as he was incapable of doing this. In her e-mail to Frances, Melissa uncovered the truth about her and Frances's relationships with Nick. Because of the absence of a stable father figure during childhood, both tried to compensate for the feelings of instability that stemmed from the lack of a sense of boundaries and control when they were children. Frances struggles with the notion of control in relationships as she both desires to surrender herself to her partner and stay in control of him. While having sex with Nick, she tells him "you can do whatever you want with me"

(Rooney, 2017, p. 215) thus openly renouncing her will. At the same time, Frances enjoys the power she has over Nick.

I could tell that he liked it when I talked to him about how good it felt. It was very easy to make him come if I talked about that too much. Sometimes I liked to do that just to feel powerful over him, and afterwards he would say: God, I'm sorry, that's so embarrassing. I liked him saying that even more than I liked the sex itself (Rooney, 2017, p. 75).

There is a certain parallel between Marianne and Frances when it comes to sex – both use it to feel approval and to stay in power even if they achieve that differently. Frances is extremely insecure, not only of her personality but also her body image. By pleasing Nick, she gets a sense of approval that makes her feel attractive and whole, something she is unable to achieve independently. During sex, she feels needed, thus she likes the intoxicating sense of control that she has over Nick in that particular moment as that feeling easily slips away when they are discussing their emotions or relationship status. Frances is willing to open-up emotionally only if she senses that she has a certain amount of control over the other person. This remains a constant struggle for Frances throughout the novel as she finds herself in a relationship in which she did not know the rules: in one moment, she was aware that Nick would never leave Melissa and accepted that; in another, she felt completely broken because she did not feel important to Nick. When they discussed her jealousy of Melissa, Frances expected Nick to say that she was as important to him as his wife. When Nick failed to do so, Frances thought about how she had lost all the power in the relationship.

I felt like someone had gripped my shoulders and shaken me firmly back and forth, even while I pleaded with them to stop. I knew it was my own fault: I had gone out

of my way to provoke Nick into fighting with me. Now, lying on my own in the silent house, I felt I'd lost control of everything (Rooney, 2017, p. 134)

Frances often provoked fights with the purpose of forcing Nick to display and verbalise his emotions as she needed the evidence that she is needed directly from him. In reality, Frances wanted to have control over the relationship because she was afraid of being lonely.

In her relationship with Bobbi, as a couple and as friends, Frances felt inferior and shadowed by her. Bobbi, being extroverted, self-centred, and belonging to a wealthier class, had the upper hand in their relationship which I believed also had an influence on Frances's self-esteem and the way she approaches relationships in general, as her relationship with Bobbi was the first real relationship she had. The two met in secondary school where people "looked away from [them] maliciously" (Rooney, 2017, p.8) as they flaunted their relationship in front of conservative people who might not approve of it. During their relationship, Frances looked up to Bobbi who assumed the role of a mentor to her. Frances built up her identity by relying on Bobbi's interpretation of her which acted as a double-edged sword. If it were not for Bobbi, Frances probably would have never found a person to identify with. On the other hand, since Bobbi is a narcissist who loves to be the centre of attention, Frances was often left in her shadow which made her feel invisible and affected her own perception of herself. I would argue that Bobbi continued her relationship with Frances mainly to constantly have an audience that she could leave mesmerised with her witty and intelligent remarks. Even though Frances often engaged in various discussions about politics or gender with Bobbi, Bobbi would eventually ignore her if she felt the spotlight was not on her. That does not mean, however, that Bobbi had no feelings for Frances, but I believe she mostly continued her relationship with her because she enjoyed having someone to feed her ego. Moreover, Bobbi

had immense control over Frances which she enjoyed as it made her feel superior. The reason for that may lie in the complex relationship Bobbi had with her family, but I believe her narcissistic personality was at the core of the issues that damaged their relationship. Frances acknowledged how much power Bobbi had over her when writing a story in which she described her as someone she “couldn’t endure [...] a force [she] couldn’t subjugate with [her] will, and the love of [her] life” (Rooney, 2017, p.224). Even Bobbi understood Frances’s fascination with her when she told her “you think everyone you like is special [...]. I’m just a normal person [...]. When you get to like someone, you make them feel like they’re different from everyone else” (Rooney, 2017, p.229). In this moment, I believe, it was clear why Bobbi kept Frances close – to constantly make her feel special.

Even though Bobbi had almost always had the upper-hand in their relationship, there is a certain sense of co-dependence which acted like glue between the two. Dysfunctional as it was, their relationship was also a haven for the two as there was a certain sense of mutual understanding that bonded them. Frances needed someone open and provocative like Bobbi to ensure her perception of her identity, while Bobbi needed someone who would worship her and make her feel important.

Connell and Marianne’s relationship differs greatly from the relationships between the characters in *Conversations with Friends*. Marianne was willing to let Connell control the course of their relationship, yet he was reluctant to place himself in a position of power.

He has a terrible sense all of a sudden that he could hit her face, very hard even, and she would just sit there and let him. The idea frightened him so badly that he pulls his chair back and stands up. His hands are shaking. He doesn’t know why he thought about it. Maybe he wants to do it. But it makes him feel sick. [...] She

doesn't get up. But she would, wouldn't she, if he told her to get up. His heart is pounding now and he feels dizzy (Rooney, 2018, p. 105-106).

Every time Connell realised how much power he had over Marianne, it caused him to feel frightened and anxious. Marianne saw giving up control as a way of displaying her loyalty and love, while Connell could not understand that. Like Nick, Connell was not a dominating male character as he was afraid of how much control he had over Marianne. Connell did, in reality, have complete control over their relationship, yet he never truly wanted it. One may presume that he used his power to control Marianne and keep their relationship a secret in high school, but his behaviour was a direct consequence of his fear of becoming a social outcast. That does not stand as an approval for his actions, but it is important to note that his behaviour did not stem from his desire to establish dominance as he clearly deeply regretted his behaviour. Even though at Trinity the narrative changed, and Marianne had the opportunity to shift the power balance as Connell was seen as the outcast, she never took advantage of that. Despite being surrounded by people there, she never managed to form a meaningful relationship with anyone like she did with Connell. He was the only person with whom she established a deep connection, thus, Marianne decided not to let her ego and desire to be in power get in the way of continuing their relationship. Unlike Frances, Marianne never used sex as a form of control. The sex between Connell and Marianne is seen as a transformative experience fuelled by deep emotions, unlike the sexual encounters Marianne had with other partners.

In both novels, Rooney interestingly tackles the notion of control in the relationship. She challenged the stereotypical presumption that men must be in the position of power by creating characters like Connell and Nick and questioned the patriarchal position that men crave having the upper hand. Moreover, she demonstrated how stereotypes imposed on men



can have grave psychological consequences on them. The balance of power in the relationships poses a difficult question – does giving up control endanger our individuality and independence?

### **5.3. The concept of individuality in the capitalist era**

It is clear that the main characters in both novels are trying to heal their emotional wounds by connecting with other people. The balance of power discussed in the previous chapter is about weighing how much control can and should be given to another person whilst simultaneously preserving one's individuality and independence.

Individuality and personal independence are perceived as something crucial and indispensable in capitalist societies. However, the question of how independent of other people we really are and whether complete autonomy is desirable or even fully achievable is raised in these novels. During her cathartic moment in the church, Frances answers these questions and realises how illusive the idea of complete autonomy is.

Instead of thinking gigantic thoughts, I tried to focus on something small, the smallest thing I could think of. Someone once made this pew I'm sitting on, I thought. Someone sanded the wood and varnished it. Someone carried it into the church. [...] Me, all the clothing I wear, all the language I know. [...] Am I myself, or am I them? Is this me, Frances? No, it is not me. It is the others. (Rooney, 2017, p.294)

This is a crucial moment in the novel for Frances as she becomes aware that it is impossible to be self-sufficient. Frances desperately tried to be emotionally independent of other people and, in this moment, she realised how interconnected every physical and psychological aspect

of life is. People depend on other people – for material possessions and for emotional development. Everything, from the most basic material object to one’s psyche, is a by-product of the existence of other beings thus one cannot detach oneself from a reliance on others.

Frances’s beliefs about self-sufficiency, however, cannot be solely attributed to her difficult upbringing as individualism lies at the core of the capitalist philosophy. Fisher, by quoting Curtis, claims that the false presupposition of the necessity for individualism brings suffering to people as,

In the ‘empire of the self’ everyone ‘feels the same’ without ever escaping a condition of solipsism. ‘What people suffer from’, Curtis claims, is being trapped within themselves – in a world of individualism everyone is trapped within their own feelings, trapped withing their own imaginations. (Fisher, 2009, p.74)

According to Fisher (2009), capitalism benefits from the belief in self-sufficiency as it puts the responsibility of personal growth, business decisions, and mental health in the hands of the individual, thus enhancing the ethereal quality of capitalism itself and shifting the responsibility from the system to the individual. The individual, therefore, is to blame for her/his own incapacity to properly function in society. The consequences, as Fisher (2009) notices, are present in every aspect of life.

The symptoms of the failures of this worldview are everywhere – in a disintegrated social sphere in which teenagers shooting each other has become commonplace, in which hospitals incubate aggressive superbugs – what is required is that effect be connected to structural cause. Against the postmodernist suspicion of grand narratives, we need to reassert that, far from being isolated, contingent problems, these are all the effects of a single systemic cause: Capital. (Fisher, 2009, p.77).

Rooney does not openly criticise capitalism in her novels, yet issues such as those directly listed by Fisher (2009) arise in them. Connell's depression and Rob's suicide could be regarded as having a systemic cause, rather than solely a personal one. Moreover, class differences that underly most of the issues in Rooney's novels can be attributed to the political ideology of capitalism, and are not presented simply as the consequences of the individual insecurities of characters. The influence of other people and society in general can be seen as a series of concentric circles that slowly modify the individual in the centre; our family, closest friends, co-workers, social groups and communities we are part of, and our political leaders – they all shape the identity of the individual by offering a myriad of perspectives, influences, social conventions, and regulations on a daily basis. The idea of individual purity is an illusion, not only because of the multitude of ways others shape our identity but because there is an innate necessity for emotional connection with other people that makes us susceptible to their influence.

To enter into any type of relationship means giving up a certain amount of control and making yourself vulnerable. Frances was afraid to show her vulnerability to others and wanted to stay in the position of power, and so she tried to control her relationships in order to protect her own feelings. Yet every attempt to stay dominant ended in her being even more hurt than before. When she finally rejected the idea of self-sufficiency, she was able to enter into a relationship and accept the unexpected by giving up control. Rejecting pure individuality is a necessity in order to forge relationships with other people, and Rooney showcases that idea subtly yet very effectively in her novels. Her characters, especially Connell and Marianne, never hide their desire and necessity for each other. For Rooney, co-dependence is not a dirty word, it is actually indispensable in this harsh world that does not care for the individual but, paradoxically, puts all responsibility on it. Relationships with other

people are the only constant that grounds us and consoles us in the midst of the overly flexible, shapeshifting capitalist world. Rooney emphasised that even in the structure of *Normal People*. The novel constantly changes the time of narration while the only consistency that remains is the relationship between Connell and Marianne. Even when they are not physically together, their decisions and thoughts are centred, consciously or subconsciously, around each other. In the end, Marianne reaches a conclusion about their relationship that summarises the main idea of the novel.

All these years they've been like two little plants sharing the same plot of soil, growing around one another, contorting to make room, taking certain unlikely positions. But in the end she has done something for him, she's made a new life possible, and she can always feel good about that. [...] He brought her goodness like a gift and now it belongs to her. Meanwhile his life opens out before him in all directions at once. They've done a lot of good for each other. Really, she thinks, really. People can really change one another. (Rooney, 2018, p. 265-266)

The influence of other people is inevitable and Marianne and Connell's relationships shows how much relationships impact on one's life. Marianne influenced Connell to pursue his passion in life while he "brought her goodness" i.e., he saved her from herself and her destructive behaviours.

At this point, one can ask what is a relationship? The answer is, I would argue, an acceptance of the influence of another person that manifests itself through giving up control and showing one's vulnerability. That relationship does not necessarily have to be a romantic one; friendships and family relations also explicitly and implicitly shape our identity and

influence our choices. The relationships we form serve as a haven from the sufferance of living in a harsh world centred around a capitalist notion of individuality.

The protagonists of both novels have a common wish – to be accepted and to be normal. In the chaotic world in which we live where trends constantly change in an almost schizophrenic manner it is hard to pinpoint a definition of normal. According to Fisher (2000), being normal, i.e., being mentally sane means

Accepting the incommensurable and the senseless without question [which] has always been the exemplary technique of sanity as such, but it has a special role to play in late capitalism, that 'motley painting of everything that ever was', whose dreaming up and junking of social fictions is nearly as rapid as its production and disposal of commodities. (Fisher, 2009, p.56)

The characters do not feel 'normal' because they reject the social conventions imposed by the capitalist society and patriarchy. They enter in monogamous relationships, have strong political beliefs that question and challenge the system, and reject the norms that are considered normal as they are unable to fit into that constricted space of what is perceived as normality.

At this point, it is crucial to return to the concept of the big Other. In this thesis, different forms of the big Other(s) were mentioned and the character's responses to them were analysed. Previously, I came to the conclusion that all of them suffered from alienation as they were unable to identify themselves with the various big Others that constitute their surroundings. They did the opposite of what Fisher (2009) defined as the concept of mental sanity – they questioned, broke social conventions, and challenged the system. Both novels end on a positive note – most of the characters managed to become at least partially content

with their lives because they have not completely conformed to societal norms. The answer to alienation, as Verhaeghe (2019) puts it, is in the concept of separation.

Separation presupposes the ability to detach oneself from the original dual relation with the Other, where previously the only possibilities were either to fuse entirely with, or to completely distance oneself from the Other. (Verhaeghe, 2019, p. 377)

At the beginning of both novels, the characters were alienated as they were subconsciously or consciously trying to identify with a multitude of Others that were unable to satisfy their emotional needs, and which were in contradiction with their personal values. Towards the end of the novels, the characters managed to create their own microcosmos in the society they are living in as they decided to adhere to their own rules.

A desire 'of one's own' comes down to a conscious choice for and a conscious interpretation of the Other's desire, with the subject's own drive in the background. Such an interpretation always contains a choice for the subject itself, through which it influences its own identity formation and acquires certain autonomy. (Verhaeghe, 2019, p.376)

Even though the individual is always influenced by various Others, through separation, one can decide how to respond to these Others. As stated before, complete autonomy is unattainable, however, being aware of this and accepting it is indispensable for leading a 'normal life'. Moreover, normality does not necessarily comply with the mentality of the majority and that is what Rooney outlined in her novels. The relationships of the characters do not follow a certain 'normal' set of rules, yet they clearly make the characters more or less content. As Bobbi said while discussing the logistics of relationships with Frances

Who even gets married? said Bobbi. It's sinister. Who wants state apparatuses sustaining their relationship? I don't know. What is ours sustained by? That's it! That's exactly what I mean. Nothing. Do I call myself your girlfriend? No. Calling myself your girlfriend would be imposing some prefabricated cultural dynamic on us that's outside our control. (Rooney, 2017, p.305-306)

Bobbi's definition of a relationship is the embodiment of the previously mentioned concept of separation. After the failed identification with the Other, the subject creates its own response to it, i.e., Bobbie's and Frances's relationships is not sustained by social norms as they decided to enter in an alternative type of relationship without constricting and categorising it. Conell and Marianne followed a similar path by letting the nature of their relationship remain undefined but, at the same time, accepting their mutual co-dependence. The unconventionality of their relationships, however, does not make them superficial or anything less than 'conventional' ones. By creating their own rules and rejecting the 'normal' social values, the characters managed to surpass their issues and adapt to the world they live in. By creating a small part of their own world that is independent of social norms, the characters manage to find a personal haven that helps them function normally, as far as normality can be defined, and adapt themselves to the world around them. Their relationships, however, were not used solely as a protective barrier from the outside world, but are built on understanding, selflessness, and friendship.

## 6. Conclusion

Rooney's novels are often seen merely as coming-of-age, romance novels as, for example, John Greene's *Looking for Alaska*, since she explored the stereotypical issues almost every person faces while growing up. However, I would argue that both *Normal People* and *Conversations with Friends* tackle issues that are far more serious and complex. They are not *just* novels about the tedious process of growing up, but novels about forming meaningful relationships, not only with other people, but also with ourselves in the atmosphere of, as Fisher (2009) puts it, capitalist realism. Various issues such as class division, meritocracy, and patriarchy that plague today's society can be overlooked while reading these novels because capitalism has been internalised in people's psyches. Rooney demonstrates the aggravating consequences this atmosphere can have on individuals: how it destroys their sense of self-worth, hinders their achievements, and shifts the blame for any failures from the system onto the individual. Like Fisher (2009), she emphasises how capitalist society negatively influences mental health, as the majority of her characters suffer from mental illnesses that are not exclusively the consequence of their individual issues. Capitalism, lacking a stable father figure concept, produces a society of suffering and alienated individuals who cannot rely on the system to help them solve their problems.

Rooney condensed and situated the universal threats of capitalism into the microcosmos of relationships in order to render these issues more clearly visible. She rarely openly addresses global issues but rather casually incorporates them into the lives of her characters and demonstrates how subtly and unconsciously they modify their decisions and predetermine their possibilities in life. Even though it may seem that Rooney depicts a pessimistic picture, she offers a solution – escaping the necessity of individuality and



accepting the change that is brought about by the influence of other people. She does not see co-dependency as a problematic issue, but as a concept that is as indispensable as it is desirable, as it enables us to grow emotionally and intellectually.

In addition to that, Rooney explores the burden of striving for normality, an undefinable and fickle concept that changes erratically in today's world. Despite them not feeling normal, all the characters are indeed normal people trying to find meaning and happiness in a world that systematically depletes the society of depth and strives to commodify every aspect of cultural and intellectual development. Their feeling of alienation stems from their surroundings, not from themselves. The recipe for happiness, according to Rooney, is anarchy on a smaller scale – her characters question the values of the Other(s) of the capitalist society and escape the norms imposed by them while simultaneously accepting the need for others; or, to put it in Verhaeghe's (2019) terms, they separate themselves from the constricting categorisation of the failing system. Separation, however, cannot be viewed as complete detachment from the world. Through small acts of separation, the characters adapt to the society they live in by accepting its *modus operandi*. They find a way to deal with life and the challenges it poses. Frances, for example, accepted co-dependency while Connell stays within the safe realm of the university where he feels comfortable enough to take risks on his own terms. Both novels end on a positive note – change is possible and coexistence outside/with the broken system is achievable.

Rooney's novels can be read as raising awareness of the burdens today's society puts on young people. They are critiques of the capitalist system folded in deep explorations of individuals' psyches and desires. Her clear, bold, and uncompromising tone, combined with

her immaculate understanding and depiction of human intimacy, leaves no reader indifferent, and truly makes her the voice of a generation.

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