

# Reading the Relationship in Sally Rooney's Conversations with Friends (2017.) through the Lens of (Post-) Celtic Tiger Ireland

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UNIVERSITY OF RIJEKA  
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**Reading the Relationships in Sally Rooney's *Conversations with Friends* (2017) through  
the Lens of (Post-)Celtic Tiger Ireland**

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## **Abstract**

This thesis will explore the history of Ireland during the Celtic and Post-Celtic Tiger, and how the aftermaths of these two periods affected the Irish economy. Moreover, it will discuss how the Celtic Tiger shaped the Irish identity, as well as briefly discuss neoliberalism and capitalism that became the leading ideologies during this period. The thesis will also explore how the Post Celtic Tiger affected the Irish and how it impacted, not only Ireland's economy, but also people and society in general. Additionally, the thesis will briefly discuss the domination and the fall of the Catholic Church in Ireland. Celtic Tiger Ireland will be discussed at such length as it will provide information about Irish history that will help the reader gain valuable insights into the plot and characters in Sally Rooney's novel *Conversations with Friends* as its narrative takes place in Ireland during the Post Celtic Tiger period.

The second part of the thesis will focus on Rooney's novel *Conversation with Friends* and provide an in-depth analysis of Frances's character and how her behaviour reflects the post-crash Ireland's political and social scene. This will include the notion of active forgetting that came as a result of the collapse of the Celtic Tiger, as well as the culture of humiliation, self-loathing, and feelings of unworthiness that arose as an aftermath of the Celtic Tiger. Lastly, the thesis will touch on the topic of the lingering influence of the Catholic Church, and the ways it is portrayed in the novel.

**Keywords:** Sally Rooney, *Conversations with Friends*, Celtic Tiger Ireland, capitalism, neoliberalism

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## 1. Introduction

Sally Rooney is a young Irish novelist who gained great popularity due to her simple, yet thought-provoking novels. Her work has appeared in *Granta*, *The Dublin Review*, *The White Review*, *The Stinging Fly*, and the *Winter Pages* anthology. She is the author of the novels *Conversations with Friends* (2017), *Normal People* (2018) and *Beautiful World, Where Are You* (2021). The first two novels achieved such success that they were adapted into television miniseries. Due to her talent, as well as the influence of social media, Rooney quickly became a worldwide sensation.

Rooney was born on February 20<sup>th</sup> in 1991 in Castlebar, Ireland, where she grew up as the middle of three children. As her mother was the director of a community arts centre, Rooney was exposed to the arts from a young age. She regularly attended theatre, visual art exhibits, and other similar art related events. As a teenager, Rooney was a member of a writing group where she was introduced to writing and creating stories. Already at age 15, she wrote and completed her first novel. Although that was only an attempt at fiction writing, it was her starting point.

She attended Trinity College Dublin, where she studied English and took part in various writing workshops. She was a member of the school's debate team and, by the age of 22, she had earned the title of number-one competitive debater in Europe. In her essay 'Even if You Beat Me', Rooney writes about her experience as a debater. She questions the impact of her participation in competitive debating and how her skill set applies to 'real life'. While Rooney enjoyed "the feeling of flow"(Rooney, 2015, p.6) during her debating performance, she came to realise that winning an argument brought her nothing more than a sense of accomplishment. In other words, she didn't find the act of accumulating points a meaningful way of contributing to the outside world. She also found success to be of a fleeting nature in that it is both easily provided and taken away by other people. Having this realisation, winning arguments and gaining success as such became less important, and Rooney decided to stop competing. However, her desire was still to sustain that effortless verbal expression, and I believe this quality is evident in her novels. The characters in her novels often engage in conversations characterized by a similar flow, wherein one articulates an argument while the other responds with coherent counterarguments.

In the essay, Rooney writes about how she struggled with all the affirmation that came from her success as a debater. This is not the only time Rooney struggled with her success. Rooney did not expect the amount of publicity she received as a result of her two novels *Conversations with Friends* (2017) and *Normal People* (2018), which led to her being described as “the first great millennial novelist” (Christensen, 2021, para.6), a title she was not quite prepared for. In an interview for The New York Times, Rooney explained that she likes her “controlled life” and that she is “trying not to have a meltdown about doing more publicity” (Christensen, 2021, para.2).

Rooney has in fact gained international recognition unexpectedly fast. In a short amount of time, she became a best-selling, critically praised author. Her ability to capture the complexities of modern relationships and emotions in a relatable and introspective manner made her an international phenomenon. Her writing style is characterized by its simplicity, yet it delves into profound themes that resonate with a wide audience. Rooney’s explorations of love, friendship, mental health, and societal dynamics are often set against the backdrop of contemporary issues such as class inequality, gender, identity, capitalism, Marxism, and even religion. Rooney, as talented as she is, was able to include such important themes without making the novels overtly political or philosophical. Her novels are both captivating and relatable, as well as thought-provoking as they subtly reflect on contemporary culture and societal norms.

The novel *Conversations with Friends* (2017) takes place in Dublin and describes the lives of four young individuals: Frances and Bobbi, best friends who were previously romantically involved, and Nick and Melissa, a glamorous married couple in their thirties who they meet after one of their spoken word events. The story revolves around the entanglement that the four of them find themselves in.

Frances, the main protagonist, is an English student with a talent for writing poems, as well as other forms of literature. Frances is portrayed as an insecure, “damaged” individual who is trying to find her way in the world. Her best friend, Bobbi, does not seem to care what anyone thinks of her. She is confident, outspoken, self-assured, and somewhat rebellious. She portrays herself as independent, not needing anyone’s approval. Bobbi openly expresses her strong aversion towards men and often makes fun of Frances for seeking male attention or approval: “And because Bobbi mostly treated men with amusement or contempt, men usually ended up liking me better too. Of course, Bobbi made fun of me about this” (Rooney, 2017,

p.23). However, even though Frances seems to be more insecure than Bobbi, she believes that she is smarter than most of her peers, privately describing herself as “a genius hidden among normal people” (Rooney, 2017, p.33).

Together with Bobbi, Frances takes part in spoken word poetry performances. One night, at one such event, Frances and Bobbi meet a well-known photographer Melissa, who slowly pulls both of them into her world, and Frances reluctantly realises that she is drawn to Melissa’s sophisticated lifestyle, house, as well as her good-looking husband Nick. As Bobbi and Frances spend more time with the couple, Frances becomes more infatuated with Nick and initially forms what appears to be a harmless crush. However, as time passes, their mutual flirtation evolves into a perplexing and complicated connection.

In an interview about the novel *Conversations with Friends*, Sally Rooney explained that her wish for this novel was to implement and explore the bigger philosophical and existential questions, not in a broad, political or social way, but rather in a “miniature” way through people’s intimate lives, through everyday conversations between people in different relationships. This thesis will explore some of the bigger philosophical questions that Rooney deals with, and analyse how the behaviour of the characters and their actions reflect the current, but also the past, political and social context of the environment in which the characters live in. Understanding parts of the Irish history, particularly the Celtic and post-Celtic Tiger era, can provide valuable insights into the plot and characters' behaviours in Rooney’s novel *Conversations with Friends* as its narrative takes place in Ireland during the post-Celtic Tiger period.

The first chapter offers a review of Ireland during the Celtic and Post-Celtic Tiger eras. It describes Ireland during the 20<sup>th</sup> century and explores how it went from a poor country to gaining the sobriquet, Celtic Tiger. Moreover, it discusses how the Irish were influenced by this period of economic prosperity, and how their identity changed as the country went through significant and sudden changes. It introduces the reader to the ideologies of neoliberalism and capitalism, as well as the notion of active-forgetting, and how these elements relate to the Ireland’s political scene. Additionally, it describes the Post-Celtic Tiger period and how the collapse of the Celtic Tiger impacted, not only Ireland’s economy, but also people and society in general. This chapter will also include a brief overview of the domination of the Catholic Church, as well as its fall.

The second chapter discusses the notion of active forgetting through the characters of the novel *Conversations with Friends*. However, it is important to note that, while other characters will be mentioned and briefly discussed, the thesis will focus mainly on Frances's character as her thought process is what the reader learns and knows most about. The notion of active forgetting is best portrayed through the contradiction in Frances's proclaimed beliefs and her actions. Therefore, this chapter provides an in-depth analysis of her beliefs and explores in which way the character contradicts, or "forgets" her own principles. Moreover, the chapter aims to link Frances's behaviour to the Ireland's political and historical context, as well as analyse the ways in which she reflects her nation's attitudes and ideologies.

The final chapter focuses on the culture of humiliation, self-loathing, and feelings of unworthiness Frances experiences as a result of factors such as capitalism, lack of ethics and morality in today's society, their links with healthcare and mental health issues, as well as the lingering influence of the Catholic Church. Similar to the second chapter, this section will also aim to establish connections between Frances's actions and the prevailing attitudes and ideologies of their nation.



## **2. Celtic and Post-Celtic Tiger Ireland**

The development of Ireland has been complex and turbulent, encompassing various historical and social changes. Throughout the centuries, Ireland faced numerous challenges, including famine, political instability, colonialism, the struggle for independence, and economic difficulties.

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Ireland experienced a period of severe famine, known as the Great Hunger. From 1845 to 1849 Ireland's potato crop was ruined by blight, a disease that completely destroys the potato plant. This was devastating for the Irish people as they relied on potatoes as their main source of food and income. Many people died from starvation and millions were forced to leave their homeland to escape the famine. The Irish population declined significantly, and it continued to decline even in the decades after the famine. After the famine ended, Ireland went through a process of a long recovery. Because of the hardships Ireland was facing at the time, it missed out on the modernisation that the rest of the Europe was experiencing. Great Britain, continental Europe, and the United States were undergoing processes such as industrialisation, democratisation and secularisation (Girvin, 2010). Moreover, due to its lack of natural resources and sufficient capital, Ireland remained a largely agricultural country. Therefore, the prospect of industrializing, like its neighbouring nations, was highly improbable, if not impossible.

In 1922, after decades of political strife, most of Ireland became an independent state (later a republic), while the northern part of the island remained under British rule as Northern Ireland. However, Ireland's independence did not help the country's economy, and it even resulted in a severe financial crisis. Not to mention the Great Depression that affected the world in the 1930s, and left Ireland poorer than ever before. With the aim of stabilizing the economy and becoming more self-reliant, Ireland decided to utilize a protection policy and ban most foreign investment and trade (Girvin, 2010). Ironically, this only led to further shrinking of the economy, and caused more Irish people to move to a different country.

By the 1950s, Ireland was even further behind the rest of the Europe than it had been when it gained independence (Girvin, 2010). In the 1980s, the severity of the crisis led to high unemployment and emigration rates (O'Leary, 2011). However, the Irish government knew

something needed to change in order for the country to finally progress and move forward. Already in the 1990s, Ireland had not only recovered from its economic downturn, but it also experienced a surprising growth in its economy. By attracting foreign investments and focusing on education and technology, Ireland positioned itself as one of the most developed countries in Europe (O’Leary, 2011). This period became known as the “Celtic Tiger”.

The Celtic Tiger, which roughly spanned from 1995 to 2007, marked a phase of significant economic growth in Ireland. According to Peters (2011), there are many causes of the Celtic Tiger: low corporate taxes, low wages, U.S. economic boom, foreign investment, stable national economy, budget policies, EU membership, and EU subsidies. Ireland was also an Anglophone country which helped the economic growth as it attracted foreign investment more easily. The Celtic Tiger era instilled a sense of optimism and hope among the Irish population. There were more job opportunities, and unemployment dropped sharply. As a result, many citizens experienced an increased standard of living and felt that the country and society was progressing. The increasing wealth and employment opportunities created favourable conditions for greater tolerance, inclusivity, and civil rights. In the 1990s, feminist activists were able to fight for the legalization of divorce and a greater involvement of women in the workforce (Cullen, 2015). The economic prosperity during the Celtic Tiger period provided the means and opportunities for implementing progressive social changes.

## **2.1 The Celtic Tiger and Irish Identity**

The Celtic Tiger was a time of more than just optimism and a newfound sense of confidence among the Irish. It also came with a “substitute identity” which, according to Fintan O’Toole, expressed itself through mad consumerism, arrogance towards the rest of the world, and a refusal to revisit history and tradition (O’Toole, 2010, as cited in Bonner & Slaby, 2011). The intense focus on economic development and material prosperity possibly led to a reduced emphasis on traditional and cultural awareness among the Irish. Although capitalism is a flawed system, it was perceived as a way of progressing society and moving away from the traditional, potentially backwards, ways of thinking. Therefore, with the rise of the Celtic Tiger, Ireland finally felt that it wasn’t falling behind other countries anymore. In fact, it was becoming a part of modern society and was successfully following the world’s trends, if not setting them for the rest of the world. As a result, the Irish were no longer seen as inferior or as second-class citizens, which influenced the way they saw themselves. The changes not

only affected the Irish economy, but also transformed the once Catholic, agrarian society into, what is today known as, a neoliberal society that came with more liberal attitudes and social policies.

The Celtic Tiger was built on the idea of implementing neoliberal, free-market policies that facilitated massive foreign investment in order to drive economic growth (Carregal-Romero, 2023). Metcalf (2017) argues that neoliberalism is not just a pro-market policy, rather it is a way of “reordering social reality, and of rethinking our status as individuals” (para. 4). Although the focus was on changing and improving the economy, it inevitably affected the broader society. Metcalf (2017) says that, in a neoliberal society, competition is the only principle for all human endeavours, shaping our beliefs and practices. This is because, the essential idea behind neoliberalism is to promote human well-being and progress through the increase of entrepreneurial freedom, individual responsibility, property ownership, and free trade (Becker, Hartwich, Haslam, 2021). Not only did the applied neoliberal ideology create a sense of international competition, between Ireland and other countries, it also sparked a sense of competition among individuals within the country. The overall mindset of a neoliberal society revolves around constant economic improvement, and social development. The need for technological advancements and entrepreneurial endeavours caused many Irish citizens to strive to become more efficient in achieving success, in order to maintain the image of an ambitious, successful society. Consequently, this competition between individuals intensified feelings of disconnection and ultimately giving rise to loneliness and social isolation.

With this neoliberal mentality taking hold in Irish society, there was less of a need to revisit the past, and more focus on current economic success and progress. At the time, the changes and transformations Ireland was going through were extreme and sudden, but they seemed to be bringing positive outcomes. Therefore, the Irish might have found it challenging to reflect on the underlying causes for the change when a better future seemed to be just within a hand’s reach. The main driving forces of the Irish society at the time were ideas of moving forward, progress and development. Dealing with unresolved issues of the past was just getting in the way of “the dominant ideology of the time, which was to make money, buy property and spend ostentatiously” (Cahill 2018, p.426, as cited in Alférez Mendía, 2023, p.150). This state of mind, where one chooses to bury the past and keep moving forward, is what Nietzsche called “active forgetting” (Bracken, 2013, as cited in Alférez Mendía, 2023).

With the rise of a new capitalist mentality (Alferez Mendía, 2023), the mindset of “active forgetting” was one that pervaded Ireland’s society.

## **2.2. Post Celtic Tiger Ireland**

The Celtic Tiger era, regardless of its positive or negative sides, was a time of putting focus on growing the economy, mainly through foreign investment and the property market. However, this was done in ways that later proved to be unsustainable. In 2008, Ireland’s economy entered a downward spiral, leading to the collapse of the Celtic Tiger. Due to low corporate taxes and interest rates, Ireland was an ideal location for foreign investors. Many builders and developers had bought land at inflated prices causing the property market to flourish. However, the property market collapsed during the US financial crisis which affected the entire world. Ireland was especially hit by the crisis, as it highly depended on US investors, but also the US as an important export destination. Once the property market bubble burst, the government faced the possibility of bankruptcy and the Irish people turned out to be among the most indebted in the world (Bonner & Slaby, 2011). In order to try and restabilize the economy, Ireland asked for and received a bailout from the IMF (International Monetary Fund) and European Union (Kitchin, O’Callaghan, Boyle, Gleeson, Keaveney, 2011). Ireland had, once again, gone through a significant transformation. Irish citizens were not only in huge debt, but were also losing their jobs, as companies laid off significant portions of their workforce. Even though the country somewhat stabilized by 2013, the collapse of the Celtic Tiger left a permanent mark on the Irish society.

The idea that the prevailing mindset of constant progress and success caused the Irish to lose touch with their roots and detach themselves from their traditional values and cultural heritage gained popularity in Ireland. Ireland seemed to go from offering hope and optimism, even a new identity to the Irish people, to suddenly leaving many individuals feeling confused and uncertain about their own sense of self. It has been argued that in post-crash Ireland, the confidence, optimism, and consumer-driven mindset that prevailed during the boom years was replaced with the uncovering of trauma, guilt, and shame (Alferez Mendía, 2023). After the collapse of the Celtic Tiger, the government often used expressions such as “we all partied” which successfully deflected attention away from the flaws in the economic

system and put the blame for the collapse on the personal failings of the Irish (O'Malley, 2021). Even President Michael D. Higgins warned that “insatiable greed was returning and that it would be a disaster if we did lose the run of ourselves again” (Free & Scully, 2008, p. 313). The Irish believed that they were largely to blame for the economic crisis, even those who had not gained from the Celtic Tiger in the first place. As a result, recovery in Ireland was expressed through strict personal discipline and humility in order to make up for the previous years of excessive consumption (Free & Scully, 2008).

### **2.3. Domination and the fall of the Catholic Church in Ireland**

The sudden shift from confidence to guilt in Irish society, can be seen as a reflection of the lingering influence of the Catholic mindset that dominated the pre-Celtic Tiger era. Over the centuries, Catholicism has played a significant role in shaping the cultural, social, and political environment of Ireland. During the pre-Celtic Tiger era, the Catholic Church had such a powerful position that it fundamentally shaped Irish identity. Although Catholicism was present in Ireland for many centuries, its position in 20th-century Ireland reflected changes introduced in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In the period of the Great Famine, Ireland's first Cardinal, Paul Cullen, became an important figure as he focused on expanding Church infrastructure and on moulding the nation's religious behaviour and traditions (Turpin, 2022). From that point on, priests held significant authority and were often seen as community leaders, while the Irish were devoted to fulfilling the role of a “good Catholic” (Turpin, 2022). During Ireland's fight for independence, Catholicism became associated with Irish nationalism and the Church became a rallying point for resistance against British rule. This way, the Irish differentiated themselves from the British, and formed their own identity and culture. After Ireland's independence, Catholicism became an even more important influence in the lives of the Irish.

However, in recent decades, the connection between Irishness and Catholicism has significantly diminished. Due to factors such as immigration, the rise of the Celtic Tiger, EU membership, and more, Ireland has become more diverse and open to the changes of social attitudes, ultimately leading to the decline in religious adherence. Along with that, scandals involving the Catholic Church, such as revelations of child abuse and cover-ups, have also made people question the institution's authority. Over the course of the 2000s, people have

disconnected from the Church and lost trust in it, including those who still claim to be Catholic (Turpin, 2022).

However, according to Turpin (2022), Catholicism has not necessarily declined in power, but rather that it has moved to the periphery of people's lives. Many people still claim to be a "cultural Catholic", and that is, in Turpin's words (2022), someone who "sustains a low-cost relationship to a humbled religious tradition..., while often opposing the Church's conservative social influence." Turpin (2022) writes about one of his informants who described himself as having no religion, being born Catholic, not believing in God, but also not being an atheist, as he saw that as "truculence". What this might suggest is that people are possibly still hesitant to completely object to the Catholic Church. They are opposing the Church's conservative attitudes but have respect for its religious functions. Even non-religious people continue with rituals such as baptizing their children, as the Catholic Church is still involved in education and many primary schools are run and sometimes funded by religious institutions. Therefore, people know that being baptized will open more opportunities for desirable school places, help them feel included and accepted, not necessarily by the Church, but by society in general. This shows how the institutional power of the Church is still very much present, and how it has left a lasting impact on Irish society.

### **3. The notion of “active forgetting” in *Conversations with Friends***

Active forgetting can be defined as a process of choosing to forget certain aspects of one’s past in order to be able to move forward and make progress in life. Friedrich Nietzsche argues that “forgetting is essential to action of any kind...it is altogether impossible to live without forgetting” (Nietzsche, p.62, as cited in Hannabach, 2008, p.6). I will argue that the notion of “active forgetting” is a key aspect of *Conversations with Friends* and that it is largely portrayed through the contradiction between the characters’, specifically Frances’s, proclaimed beliefs and her actual behaviour. In the novel, the characters often participate in conversations about principles and discuss how things should be, in terms of religion, history, politics, or just love and human relationships. However, the storyline reveals different ways in which Frances “forgets” her beliefs and goes against her principles.

For example, Frances embodies “active forgetting” through her relationship with Melissa and Nick. Frances is a proclaimed anti-capitalist. She says that she wants to “destroy capitalism” and writes to Nick in an email that “it should be illegal to have a holiday home anywhere” (Rooney, 2017, p.40). Even Bobbi goes against her strict anti-establishment views by going to very expensive restaurants with her father, which is something that Frances does not fail to notice. Frances’s opinions are very strong, and yet she still becomes easily fascinated with the lifestyle of Melissa, a writer and photographer, and her husband Nick, a somewhat famous actor. Upon entering their home, Frances decides to memorise every detail so that she could later describe it to her friends. She even comments on the particular smile Mellissa greets them with, and how she knew that she would “enviously practise this smile later in a mirror” (Rooney, 2017, p.16). Frances was the only one among Bobbi, Melissa, and Nick, who came from a working-class background. Her fascination with the extravagant lifestyle of the couple could be explained by the absence of luxury in her own life. She lives in a society that tended to equate a fulfilled, happy life with material possession and big, successful careers, which makes it difficult not to be intrigued by such a lifestyle. Her strong anti-capitalist views could represent her rebellion towards such a mindset, but it could also reflect the post-crash Irish

“caution” about not indulging too much in materialistic pursuits. By admitting she is intrigued by Nick’s wealthy background and luxurious lifestyle, she goes against the general mindset of post-crash Ireland that saw “personal discipline and humility” as a way of compensating for the Celtic Tiger’s period of excessive consumption. Of course, this is not on a conscious level. When her mother makes a comment about how it’s not like her to get carried away with posh houses, Frances feels especially triggered, as even she herself finds it hard to understand why she admires the couple’s luxurious lifestyle so much.

Frances sees Melissa as a threat, and not only because she is Nick’s wife, but also because Melissa is an accomplished woman with a successful career, a “trophy husband” (Rooney, 2017, p.17), and a beautiful, luxurious home. Melissa has everything that Frances supposedly rejects. Frances claims that she never thought about her future financial sustainability or had any ambition of getting a job one day. She also has a contempt for “the cultish pursuit of male physical dominance” (Rooney, 2017, p.68). However, Frances still finds herself being envious of Melissa’s life. She realises that the accumulating feelings of hatred towards Melissa are only a result of jealousy and desire to have her life. At one point in the novel, Frances decides to call Melissa on the phone to ask her about the story Frances wrote about Bobbi and why she ended up telling Bobbi about it. However, the conversation became more about how they view each other and, in a way, exposes what Frances really thought of Melissa.

In real life 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.219).

No matter how hard she tries to reject the capitalist mindset that puts value on material success, Frances still finds herself envious of those who have achieved it. That is because capitalism is deeply ingrained into our society and there is little to no way that one can live a happy life without being a part of it. Living within the system entails finding a balance where its impact does not lead to personal misery. Frances has let her opinions affect her in a way that detaches her from society, making it challenging for her to find her place within it. Frances’s fascination with the couple’s lifestyle does not mean that she necessarily longs for luxury and “posh houses”, but rather that she wants to feel accepted and as a part of society. In this sense, Frances’s anti-capitalist views might be seen as a coping mechanism that helps



her deal with her lack of interest in finding her role and purpose in society. Frances might be understood to be struggling with her deep-rooted insecurity and fear that she may not measure up to the standards of her society. As a result, she finds herself comparing her life to others which naturally leads her to isolate herself and disconnect from her friends.

When Frances was a teenager, she was lonely and insecure, eager to make new friends, but not knowing how to do so, as she didn't believe she deserved true friendship: "I liked the other girls, I let them copy my homework, but I was lonely and felt unworthy of real friendship. I made lists of the things I had to improve about myself" (Rooney, 2017, p.13). Bobbi was the first person to show Frances that she could be loved and that she is, in fact, worthy of a friendship. Therefore, Frances eventually developed a strong attachment to Bobbi, and often found herself longing for her approval.

The reason why Frances might be easily attracted to others is because of a lack of affection and validation from her parents. Frances had a difficult upbringing and grew up in a dysfunctional family. Her father had always been an unstable figure in her life, and often had "moods" when Frances was a child. These "moods" consisted of taking money from Frances's savings jar or just losing his temper over small things. Either way, Frances was forced to learn how to behave around him and act "cold like a fish" in order to avoid triggering his aggressive behaviour. She was forced to learn how to be emotionally cold in order to have some type of control over a person or situation. Therefore, Frances developed this as a defence mechanism as a child because showing emotions only ever resulted in her being hurt. She continued using this defence mechanism in her relationships with Nick, but also with Bobbi and Melissa. What made things even more difficult for Frances is that she lacked support from her own mother. Her mother would often scold Frances for not being nicer to her father or for not making more of an effort to be a part of his life. She also accused Frances of never loving her father to which she responded: "According to you the only way to love someone is to let them treat you like shit" (Rooney, 2017, p.215). Ironically, she finds herself in a relationship with Nick who makes her feel miserable most of the time. With the lack of love from her father and validation from her mother, Frances was, in a way, doomed to always long for someone else's approval.

Therefore, it is not surprising that, upon meeting Nick, Frances "actively forgets" her values, principles and morals, and chooses to immerse herself in an affair with him. Just as the Irish "actively forgot" the issues of their past as the Celtic Tiger brought them hope, Frances leaves

behind her principles and indulges in a relationship with Nick as she believes he can offer her the affection and validation she desperately craves and longs for. However, Nick maintains an unclear and passive stance regarding his intentions with the affair. He avoids ending his marriage yet desires to keep Frances in his life. This only makes it more difficult for Frances to let go of him, as she clings to the hope that Nick might eventually prioritize her over Melissa. This provokes an internal struggle and a frustration towards herself for allowing Nick to have such significant influence over her, as she learned, even as a child, to be emotionally untouchable and independent. Her own self-image is shaken which causes her to battle her emotions and convince herself that being “the other woman” does not affect her on a deeper level. However, when she realises Nick will never choose her over Melissa, she is faced with the reality of her emotional pain, and how wrong she was about the perception that she had of herself.

I was like an empty cup, which Nick had emptied out, and now I had to look at what had spilled out of me: all my delusional beliefs about my own value and my pretensions to being a kind of person I wasn't. While I was full of these things I couldn't see them. Now that I was nothing, only an empty glass, I could see everything about myself (Rooney, 2017, p.211-12).

In her attempt to remain “untouchable” she pushes everyone away. She is left with no one to confide in about her struggles: “I isolated myself from criticism so I could behave badly without losing my sense of righteousness” (Rooney, 2017, p.163). She believed that keeping her struggles hidden allowed her to maintain the image of a person with strong integrity. Knowing that, her involvement in the affair contradicts her principle of “righteousness”, Frances fears that sharing her struggles would only compromise her image, potentially leading to a lack of sympathy from others. In this way, Frances's mindset could be seen to reflect that of a neoliberal society that supports the idea of self-help and not relying on others. Frances tries to deal with her problems on her own, and rarely asks for anyone's help. If she is unable to manage her struggles independently, she might think that she has somehow failed. After all, Frances is a part of a society where sharing vulnerabilities with others is considered to be a sign of weakness. Even Bobbi tells her that it would “kill” Frances to admit she needed help from “some touchy-feely psychology graduate” (Rooney, 2017, p. 222).

In order to maintain a certain image of herself, Frances isolates herself and chooses to “forget” her principles. The important word here is “chooses” because, as Hannabach (2008) argues, forgetting is not always a passive process. Rather, it can be an intentional endeavour of choosing what needs to be forgotten in order to maintain a level of subjectivity (Hannabach, 2008). That forgetting is not a passive process, but an active one, is visible in the way Frances’s journey turns from being about “actively forgetting” her principles to more about “actively remembering” everything she claims to uphold. The more she tries to forget her values and principles, the more she is forced to face the reality of why she is choosing to forget in the first place. This is reminiscent of how Irish society sought to “actively remember” its history and traditions during the collapse of the Celtic Tiger, as the Irish felt guilty about their indulgences during the Celtic Tiger era.

It could be argued that when it comes to looking at the past, one should seek to take what is good from it, while also analytically approaching its flaws. In this way, it is possible to appreciate history and tradition, but also find ways to improve and make progress, whether on a societal or personal level. During the success of the Celtic Tiger, the Irish past became associated with negatively connoted metaphors such as a ‘haunting ghost’, a ‘despotic master’, or simply ‘the past as waste’ (Becker, 2018). As Becker (2018) notes in his analysis of poems that employ these metaphors of Irish history can be found in Irish poetry is that the process of discarding the past always fails in one way or another. He argues that the past “remains in a liminal position” (p.108) and that it will eventually have to be confronted (Becker, 2018). This is in line with Nietzsche’s idea that forgetting is necessary to move forward as a society, but it is important to figure out “the boundary at which the past has to be forgotten if it is not to become the gravedigger of the present” (Nietzsche, p.62, as cited in Hannabach, 2008, p.6). I would argue that one of the reasons the current Irish society is focused on actively remembering the past in an overtly positive light is to make up for the previous discarding of the ‘troubling’ past.

#### **4. The culture of humiliation, self-loathing, and a feeling of unworthiness in the novel**

From the beginning of her relationship with Nick, Frances becomes dependant on Nick's behaviour. When communicating with Nick via e-mail, Frances would often interpret Nick's emotions as cold or unaffectionate. Thinking Nick had lost interest in her, she would become distant and sarcastic. The instant she notices even the slightest withdrawal of affection from him, she experiences deep humiliation and shame for letting her guard down and sharing her vulnerable side with him. This not only leads to the feelings of humiliation, but also self-loathing and a feeling of unworthiness. Frances is disappointed with herself as she thinks she is "taking things too seriously again" and that, objectively, Nick has not done anything wrong except for withdrawing affection, which according to Frances, "he had every right to do" (Rooney, 2017, p.69). She justifies his behaviour because, after all, he is a married man, and she is just "the other woman". Not realising that he is an adult who is capable of making decisions and is equally responsible for the situation they found themselves in.

Frances also feels humiliation and shame because she found herself in a situation that goes against her principles. Getting involved in an affair with Nick, being fascinated with the luxurious lifestyle of the married couple, and lying to Bobbi about her feelings for Nick, caused her to think that she has done something dishonourable, immoral, and improper. Frances's lack of worldly ambition also causes her to feel shame: "Sometimes this felt like a failure to take an interest in my own life, which depressed me" (Rooney, 2017, p.25). After all, Frances is a part of a neoliberal society that associates human well-being with entrepreneurial freedom and career related success. In such an environment, individual success and economic engagement can create a prevailing standard for measuring one's self-

worth. Frances, by not conforming to the role society imposes, experiences a sense of inadequacy and shame. She also felt shame for not being able to live up to her own expectations of being a “plain and emotionally cold” woman. She underestimated her own vulnerability and realised that she is not immune to feeling hurt. Not only does this affect her self-esteem, but it also brings to the surface her deep-rooted feelings of insecurity and unworthiness. As a result, she self-isolates and does not share her internal struggles with others. Out of fear of being judged she pushes her best friend away, ending up completely alone in her struggle to overcome her feelings of humiliation and shame.

That night it was clear to me for the first time how badly I’d underestimated my vulnerability. I’d lied to everyone, to Melissa, even to Bobbi, just so I could be with Nick. I had left myself no one to confide in, no one who would feel any sympathy for what I’d done. And after all that, he was in love with someone else (Rooney, 2017, p.105).

What has made Frances feel even more alone is her condition called endometriosis. Throughout the novel, Frances deals with excruciatingly painful periods. At first, she puts her agonising pain down to just “bad period pain”, but during an unwelcoming visit to the hospital, she was diagnosed with endometriosis. In the hospital she is not asked about her symptoms, rather she is immediately questioned about her sexual history. The doctors assume she is having a miscarriage, which causes Frances to have extreme anxiety about possibly being pregnant with Nick’s child. Just as she was starting to adjust to the idea of being pregnant, the doctors confirmed that she was never pregnant and was not having a miscarriage. She then was told to wait for the gynaecologist and left alone to deal with the pain on her own. Frances felt foolish, and the idea that she had ever been pregnant seemed “wistfully naïve” (Rooney, 2017, p.130). She felt a sense of shame for feeling grief for a baby that had never even existed. After going through what could be described as an emotional rollercoaster she was expected to continue with her life as normal. Except that, she did not feel normal and had the sense that something in her life had ended, an “image of myself as a whole or normal person maybe” (Rooney, 2017, p.203). Even prior to her diagnosis, she felt damaged and as if something was wrong with her. The diagnosis, she thought, only proved to her that her brokenness as a person was real, and it made it harder for her to keep pretending that it wasn’t. She thought that this illness of hers defined her, and she felt helpless as she knew her life would be “full of mundane physical suffering, and that there was nothing special about it” (Rooney, 2017, p.203). Frances did not want to tell anyone about her illness,

as she felt humiliated and desperate to keep up the image of being a strong, healthy person. She believed that only by doing so could she validate her worth as an individual.

Having endometriosis herself and having experienced the health care involved, Rooney was able to portray the lack of care and ethics in the medical world and how it can have a major effect on women. The history of women being misdiagnosed, neglected, or not taken seriously about their symptoms is unfortunately very long. Interestingly, this topic was also discussed by a 19<sup>th</sup> century writer, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, in her short story *The Yellow Wall-Paper*, which describes a woman going mad after not being taken care of properly. During the Victorian Age, women were constantly being diagnosed with hysteria for having feelings such as anxiety, stress, lack of motivation, or any other symptom of mental illness. The main solution was the “rest-cure”, which not only neglected the real cause of the symptoms, but often led to a worsening of the condition. Although, there is no doubt we have progressed as a society since the Victorian Age, there is a similarity with the way women were treated back then and Frances’s treatment at the hospital in a modern, seemingly progressive, society. Not only did she feel judged by the doctor in the hospital, but she was also simply given contraceptive pills as a solution for her illness and sent home without any explanation or advice about her condition. Instead, Frances later looked up her symptoms on the internet and learned more about her condition on her own than during her time in the hospital.

At one point in the novel, Frances finds herself in so much pain due to her illness and ends up finding comfort in a Catholic church. This is quite contradictory to her character, as she is described as an atheist with strong political beliefs that are in line with the ideology of Karl Marx who is known for criticizing religion and referring to it as “the opium of the people”. Frances even claims that she hated religion as a child, and yet, now that she is dealing with the painful consequence of her illness, as well as shame and loneliness that came from thinking that no one could understand her struggles, Frances finds relief in a church where, to her own surprise, she starts praying:

I’m praying, I thought. I’m actually sitting here praying for God to help me. I was. Please help me, I thought. Please. I knew that there were rules about this, that you had to believe in a divine ordering principle before you could appeal to it for anything, and I didn’t believe. But I make an effort, I thought (Rooney, 2017, p.216).

Even though it may seem contradictory for Frances's character to do this, she is inevitably shaped by the environment she lives in. Ireland is a country with deep roots in Catholicism, and although the influence of the Catholic Church is not as strong as before, the Church's attitude of "humility and self-deprecation" consumes Frances's character. The shame about her actions, thoughts about her "brokenness" as a person, even her illness, are so overwhelming that she begins to question whether she is a bad person and if something is wrong with her. With no other outlets, such as her friends or parents, she tries to find comfort by reading the gospels and finding inspiration in what Jesus says: "I shared in this desire for moral superiority over my enemies. Jesus always wanted to be the better person, and so did I. I underlined this passage in red pencil several times, to illustrate that I understood the Christian way of life" (Rooney, 2017, p.154). Frances searches for any kind of confirmation that she is not a bad person and tries to "redeem" her "bad" behaviour by reading the Bible and finding moral instructions on how she should live her life.

Catholicism is known for providing "guidance" and offering a set of rules to an individual about how they should live their life. However, these rules suggest that there is only one right way, and a variety of wrong ways to live your life. Living under these conditions only leaves room for an individual to "make a mistake" and therefore feel inundated with shame for their perceived failures. According to Catholicism, the only way to overcome this shame is by confessing one's sins and seeking forgiveness through faith. Paradoxically enough, the Catholic Church, which initially gave rise to this sense of shame, takes pride in being an institution that helps to redeem an individual's sins and helps alleviate their burden of shame.

Frances's search for comfort and confirmation through religion can be understood as reflecting the lingering influence of the Catholic Church on Irish society, but also the mindset of post-crash capitalist Ireland. It is possible that Frances finds it hard to find consolation in a capitalist society as, to her, it seems to be deprived of moral and ethical guidance. Capitalism can lead to a feeling of competition between individuals and general lack of empathy because there is a stronger focus on material success. Whereas religion, or the idea behind religion, provides an "ethical outlook" on life which perhaps seems to be missing in Frances's life.

Discussions about the lack of moral and ethical guidance in a capitalist society can be found in the novel through some of the conversations between the characters. At one point, Frances looks through her old messages with Bobbi, before she met Nick, and finds a conversation about love and capitalism. They discuss love as a social value system, and not as an

interpersonal phenomenon, and come to the conclusion that “capitalism harnesses ‘love’ for profit” (Rooney, 2017, p.137). In a world where everything is tied to capitalism, even love becomes a questionable notion to Frances. Bobbi gives an example that even mothers who selflessly raise children without any profit motive end up contributing to capitalism as they “provide workers for free” (Rooney, 2017, p.137). This makes Frances question whether real love exists and if it does, what the point of it is, if capitalism uses it for its own benefit. She claims that she is “anti-love as such”, to which Bobbi replies that she has to do more than say she is “anti-things” (Rooney, 2017, p.137). What this conversation suggests is that Frances is confused as to why she has to give her love and attention to someone, if capitalism, in some way or another, will be profiting from that love. Her strong aversion towards capitalism interferes with her views on love. However, once she involves herself in an affair with Nick and falls in love with him, her definition of love changes. She realises that love is a more complicated phenomenon than she initially thought, as it brings up many confusing emotions and questions about her own sense of self. Love becomes a form of self-realisation that challenges her to think about her self-worth, her values and principles about life, and even her own identity.

The idea that a capitalist society is missing an ethical outlook on life is also seen through the characters’ views on mental health issues. Bobbi, for example, thinks that depression is “a humane response to the conditions of late capitalism” (Rooney, 2017, p.97). Frances agrees with such a viewpoint and adds that capitalism is “the really crazy thing” (Rooney, 2017, p.176). Even just the way Frances was treated in the hospital shows how a capitalist society lacks empathy and understanding. The reason for this could be explained by something that Mark Fisher discusses in his book *Capitalist Realism. Is There No Alternative?* (2009), a book that Rooney has acknowledged has influenced her thinking (Dess, 2019). Fisher (2009) claims that capitalism turned everything in society into business, including healthcare and education. As a result, patients are often seen as numbers, and rather than being treated with empathy, respect, and consideration for their well-being, they are simply reduced to their medical conditions, symptoms, or data points. Although this may seem a bit of a generalization, Fisher cites Oliver James who claims that there is, in fact, a correlation between rising rates of mental distress and the neoliberal mode of capitalism practices in countries like Britain, the USA and Australia (James, 2008, as cited in Fisher, 2009). The reality is that there are a lot of young people today dealing with issues related to mental



health, and if capitalism was a functional system, the “mental health plague”, as Fisher calls it, would not be as easily accepted as it seems to be in today’s society.

Through a seemingly simple novel, Rooney was able to prompt a discussion about profound philosophical and political concepts, such as capitalism and Marxism, and depict how human emotions such as humiliation, self-loathing, and a feeling of unworthiness can be influenced by external elements such as the persistent presence of the Catholic Church’s teachings, and lack of moral and ethical guidance in a capitalist society.

## **5. Conclusion**

Ultimately, the rise and the fall of the Celtic Tiger had an immense impact on Irish society. While the rise reflected Ireland’s ambition to improve and move forward as a country, the fall of the Celtic Tiger served as a powerful reminder that neglecting the past and its unresolved issues can slow down a country’s overall development and even bring progress to a halt. The sudden changes in the country’s political and economic scene even affects individuals in the way they form their opinions and attitudes about the world. Frances is affected by the historical and political changes of her country. Her “active forgetting” of her values and principles, as well as her feelings of humiliation, shame and unworthiness, could all be attributed to post-Celtic Tiger Ireland’s social and political scene.

The novel *Conversation with Friends* is relatable and thought-provoking, and in many ways reflects how today’s society prioritizes material success over human well-being. In my opinion, Rooney tried to deal with this issue by invoking religion in the novel. However, I find Frances’s “spiritual awakening” in the Catholic Church problematic.

In one of her interviews about the novel, Sally Rooney commented on the fact that during the Celtic Tiger, Ireland moved away from the Catholic Church, and capitalism and free market prevailed. She said: "We got rid of the Catholic Church, but we replaced it with predatory capitalism. In some ways that was a good trade off, and in other ways, really bad" (Nolan, 2017, para. 18). The question is in what ways was it a “bad trade off”? Capitalism may have its own issues, but the society that was under the rule of the Catholic Church was not

necessarily characterized by empathy or an ethical outlook on life. Indeed, while it might have emphasized the values of family and community, other, perhaps more important values, only began to be discussed after the Catholic Church had lost its power. Even the idea of family that the Church promotes, and which people often romanticize and long for, also entails strict patriarchal relationships, where the man is the head of the family, and the woman is a submissive mother and wife. From this perspective, the concept of family becomes less romantic.

When people abandon their old customs, for political or other reasons, they tend to develop a fear of the new and unfamiliar. As a result, they uncritically label everything new in society as “bad” and attribute the causes of these new occurrences to, for example, the abandonment of the Church or the strengthening of material values as the main driving force of the society. In that case, the Church in people’s minds becomes a romantic symbol of spirituality, tradition, family, and community, while the wrongs it has intentionally or unintentionally caused for its own material gain, influence, and power, are forgotten. People are often intimidated by changes especially those that suggest equality on all grounds, including racial or gender equality, or even matters that deal with bodily autonomy. This is because they fear that they might lose something, such as their status in society, or just becoming inferior in some way. The church further fuels this doubt and builds resistance against those advocating for the lessening of the church’s influence. Because of this, people tend to reject progressive social changes and vilify new ideologies such as capitalism and neoliberalism.

Therefore, I would argue that the shift from the Catholic Church to capitalism does not necessarily entail a loss of values regarding family or community, but rather a redirection towards other arguably more important principles, such as human rights, bodily autonomy, and gender equality. After all, it was not capitalism alone that gave us the contraceptive pill or, for example, freedom and rights for homosexuals. Rather it was because people had gained a greater freedom of speech and the opportunities to seek justice and equality in society, precisely because society had moved away from the authority of the Catholic and other Churches.

Having said that, with a higher level of emancipation, the need for freedom of thought, speech, and other forms of liberties is increasing significantly. If we look at emancipation as a product of modern liberal society, it is important to remember that the main driver of such society is capitalism. And, as Bobbi in the novel noted in line with Fisher’s thinking,

capitalism will try to make profit out of any new occurrences and changes in society. For instance, gay couples with children or gender fluid teenagers (all of which the Catholic Church labels as sinful), represent new and potentially interesting markets for capitalism, which will promote and sell certain products using alternative means and messages.

In today's society, it is difficult to pinpoint the level of manipulation we are exposed to. Young people, like the ones we follow in Rooney's novel, perhaps struggle with this most as they are in a phase of life where they are forming impressions and developing opinions about the world around them. From the conversations between Bobbi and Frances where they conclude how even mothers are 'victims' of the capitalist system, it is clear that they are both aware of its heartless character. Therefore, Frances opposes anything associated with capitalism, even aspects that are not entirely a byproduct of it. Her attitudes are often naïve, founded on idealistic notions, which in real life often fall flat and fail to live up to her expectations.

Rooney's views on life and even the way she portrays the characters in the novel, reveal that she is progressive in her thinking, but just like Frances, she longs for something from the past. In my opinion, her way of thinking resembles what Turpin called a "cultural Catholic", who "exist in a kind of malleable and socially advantageous superposition with respect to religious matters, to prioritize not rocking the boat" (Turpin, 2009). Rooney is against the Catholic Church yet finds appeal in the idea of Catholicism. She is a Marxist and yet finds a solution to Frances's struggles in seeking comfort in a church.

However, this could simply be because it is a human tendency to look at the past with rose-coloured glasses. It explains why we try so hard to never forget certain faces, moments, and experiences by capturing them through photography, or why music or clothes from the 60s, 80s or 90s are more appealing to us now than they were back then. Revisiting and romanticising the past is not an unusual thing to do as it can sometimes provide a sense of joy, as well as comfort. However, romanticizing the past can also lead to the forgetfulness of the reality that the past is not that different from the present. Along with the seemingly positive aspects of the past that we might think are lost today, there were also so many issues and problems that, perhaps, we do not have to deal with anymore. My point is that while the loss of a sense of ethics in Celtic Tiger Ireland that Rooney portrayed in her novel is an issue that needs to be dealt with, going back to Catholic domination is hardly the answer.

Perhaps, instead of going back to the past in search of solutions, we should explore fresh and innovative approaches that will enable society to progress, rather than taking a step back. Admittedly, this is not an easy task, and I am not suggesting that Rooney should have provided the answers with the novel, but I am merely highlighting that there are ways one can question the problems of today's society without idealizing and romanticizing the past.

Putting that aside, Sally Rooney successfully portrayed how young people are often naïve and full of ideals, but the harsh truths of life jolt them and challenges their perspectives on the world and how they see themselves. While it is inevitable that the bigger philosophical and political notions, explored in this thesis, can have an impact on an individual, Frances is, after all, only a young woman trying to make sense of the world around her. She is learning about relationships, and coincidentally learning about herself. What she is feeling and going through is just a normal part of growing up and maturing. She is confronting the realities of life, where things might not unfold as expected. As many young people do, Frances is dealing with the fact that, in a lot of ways, she has done things she resisted and found unacceptable. Her self-image keeps changing, and she finds it hard to keep up with her ideals and principles while navigating the circumstances she encounters.

*Conversations with Friends* perfectly describes the journey of self-discovery which forces individuals to grapple with questions about their values, beliefs, and aspirations. Frances's character proves that this journey and exploration can be liberating, as it allows her to shape her self-image in alignment with her beliefs. However, she also shows how it can be challenging, as the journey can lead to setbacks and uncertainties about her own identity. Rooney also depicts how this journey cannot be taken alone, and how friends and the people around you affect your personal development and play a significant role in shaping the trajectory of your life. Sally Rooney says that "there is no you without others" and, perhaps, this is what the novel *Conversations with Friends* is all about.

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