

Extended Essay
English B
Category 3: Literature

Title: Sally Rooney's "Normal People" on Identity and Relationships

Research Question: How does Sally Rooney portray the reflection of abuse and mental struggles on identities and relationships through the characters Marianne and Connell?

Word Count: 3981

CONTENTS:

- I.** Introduction
- II.** Connell: Anxiety and the Conflict of Identity
- III.** Marianne: Abuse and its Reflection in Character
- IV.** The Relationship
- V.** Conclusion
- VI.** References

I. INTRODUCTION

This essay aims to analyze how different factors in a person's life shape identities and relationships, through the novel "Normal People" by Sally Rooney. In this investigation, how abuse and anxiety manifest themselves in the characters Marianne and Connell and how it affects their relationship will be looked into.

The novel "Normal People" follows the two protagonists Marianne and Connell, at different timelines of their lives throughout their young adulthood. It is told from both perspectives, which helps portray how each person feels, thinks and is shaped by certain events.

The reason I chose this book is its room for an in-depth analysis. Relationships, connections and communication between individuals are other concepts that intrigue me, which are prominent in this novel. The idea of observing internal thought mechanisms and emotions, even if fictional, interest me.

The concept of normalcy that the book takes its name from is a repeating theme, where the characters struggle to fit into a certain criterion internally. It also reflects how the characters are portrayed as realistic, flawed and "normal" individuals.

As a character, Connell provides a great portrayal of mental struggles and how it affects a person, especially its reflection on insecurity and self-image. For Marianne, her forthcoming trait that affects her identity is the way she perceives herself, with a distorted sense of self-worth, linking to the abuse she endured throughout her life.

In the relationship these characters have with each other, the theme of miscommunication is repeated, which links to the struggles both characters face with their inner self. However, throughout the years their lives continue to intertwine and their dynamic and ability to connect remains unchanged. The characters' way of fitting

into one another's lives and the reflection of the experiences they go through individually on the relationship will be the main focus of the essay.

II. CONNELL: Anxiety and the Conflict of Identity

Connell is first described as a person who seems to fit into the social structure of high school, from Marianne's point of view. As the perspective switches to Connell in the writing, certain characteristics like the fear of social rejection and the need for external validation are revealed. The character unfolds in layers as the book progresses and as more events are revealed from his life.

Connell, as an individual suffers from anxiety, especially in social settings, which is first presented to the reader through his high school experience. Fitting into a socially acceptable group and being accepted as a person by others seems of high significance. The need to preserve his existing image dominates over every other emotion and causes his identity to exist in sharply defined lines. "These images represent what people believe they should and can be on particular occasions, being reality edited yet somewhat glorified images of self." (Schlenker, 274)ⁱ As a result, everything personal about him is guarded and kept to himself, so that he won't have to face disagreement or judgment. "He would have betrayed any confidence, any kindness, for the promise of social acceptance. He had just wanted to be normal, to conceal the parts of himself he found shameful and confusing." (Rooney, 212)

His overwhelming need to be perfect and do the right thing even presents itself in his private life. This makes him struggle while making sense of his emotions. "Connell wished he knew how other people conducted their private lives, so that he could copy from example." (Rooney, 49) The need to fit into an ideal of normalcy, results in the constant internal comparison with other people and causes him to live according to other people's idea of normalcy.

The loss of perception in identity is highlighted in the switch from high school to college, as he gains freedom with whom he will choose to be, because he does not have a previously defined image. “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, 70) This awareness and the sudden change in the freedom of identity comes as a scaring reality, which leads to a sense of “invisibility” and “nothingness”.

The events around his relationship with Marianne is also used to support this need for external validation. As Marianne is considered unfitting and weird in school, he keeps this relationship a secret from everyone and the possibility of people finding out is amplified to such an extent that he compares himself to a serial killer. “...his life would be over. He would walk down the hallway and people’s eyes would follow him, like a serial killer, or worse.” (Rooney, 27) He feels the opinions of others on a very personal level and the way he is perceived by others play an immense role in shaping his life choices. This need for external validation can also be clearly seen when Marianne tells him that he is a nice person and that he is well-liked. “He found himself thinking about that a lot. It was a pleasant thing to have in his thoughts. *You’re nice person and everyone likes you.*” (Rooney, 47) The idea of being liked is associated with comfort and satisfaction, as if he succeeded at becoming the “right” kind of person, when no such conventional definition exists. This hints at Connell’s internalized standards and his search of normalcy in self-perception.

His relationship with Helen also helps reflect Connell’s social needs. This relationship differs both in terms of dynamics and fundamentals from the one he has with Marianne. This desire of being a “good guy” is similar to the concept of a normal person, as it indicates social acceptance and being seen as an acceptable person by

others. This characteristic is seen as the cause of compatibility with Helen, which implies that what appeals to him in the relationship is the social acceptance it provides. Similarly, in the description of Helen as a person and Connell's partner, her social characteristics are highlighted, rather than her personality. Her thriving on being social with her circle of friends and having been popular in high school are some examples. Their compatibility is not based on their character or their perspective on life, but on how Connell sees himself as a person during the relationship. Being in a relationship with the kind of person he idealizes, makes him feel comfortable in his identity and helps escape from the parts of himself he doesn't find fitting or dislikes. This comfort and feeling of normalcy are what make this relationship different from what he had with Marianne, in which he was his own self to such an extent that it was unsettling in retrospect.

The chapter March 2014 is significant for the way it provides insight on the anxiety and depression Connell experiences. The chapter describes a process of the slow deterioration of mental health, after Connell learns about the suicide of his high school friend Rob. In this process, the effect of grief on the way a person thinks and perceives life is also highlighted. Connell feels guilty about not responding to a message from Rob years ago, which results in him blaming himself and becomes the trigger for his mental state to worsen. As time goes on, this increase in his anxiety starts to affect his day-to-day life. His life becomes more monotone and constricted into a mundane routine that in the end mentally suffocates him. "There was the en suite, behind him, and there was the bed, in front of him, both well within view, but somehow it was impossible to move either forward or backwards, only downwards, onto the floor, until his body was arranged motionless on the carpet." (Rooney, 201) The physical effects of depression and the state of being drained of all energy are portrayed very realistically.

The depression is also linked with the way Connell sees life in this period and the way he thinks. Everything he does seems to take up extreme amounts of energy to the point that he cannot function as a human being.

The theme of emptiness also manifests itself, in the depressive episodes Connell goes through and at times where anxiety takes over him. Aside from the physical side effects, the emotional side is also discussed thoroughly. “He was like a freezer item that had thawed too quickly on the outside and was melting everywhere, while the inside was frozen solid.” (Rooney, 214) The feeling of being empty and distanced from life, almost a derealization, is highlighted. He compares himself to a freezer where internally, he feels a kind of “nothingness” while in contrast experiencing emotional outbursts and intense fits.

The chapter is also important for the way it links to Connell’s past experiences, through therapy. In his conversation with the therapist, his issue with forming personal connections is highlighted as a “familiar” problem, which sheds light on his social worries and past experiences in high school.

III. MARIANNE: Abuse and its Reflection in Character

Looking at the character Marianne, it can be observed that most of her deep-rooted issues come from the abuse she experienced through her family. In the earlier chapters, this is revealed to the reader through a conversation she has with Connell. She talks about how his father used to beat her mother, before he died, which shows that she was a witness to heavy subjects from a young age. It is also seen that this cycle then proceeded with her older brother Alan abusing Marianne psychologically, and at times physically. The abuse that is endured is normalized, as this power imbalance between the men and women is almost an ingrained system in the family. In situations where

Marianne is the victim, the treatment she receives from her brother is either overlooked or joined in by her mother.

The reflection of the dynamic in her family, and the trauma she experienced can be seen in certain characteristics of her inner and outer self. Learning to live her life trying to be passive and invisible, reflects on her mannerisms, causing her to be perceived as “cold” or “arrogant” by others in social situations. Similarly, in situations where she faces abuse, such as with romantic partners, her reactions are considered abnormal, unsettling and “deranged”. The themes of loneliness and hopelessness play an important role in conveying these effects. Starting from a young age, as a way of defense, she tries to detach and remove herself from the family to avoid traumatic situations. These instincts of self-preservation are what cause Marianne to experience such deep loneliness from a very young age. “As a child Marianne resisted, but now she simply detaches as if it isn’t of any interest to her which in a way isn’t. Denise considers this, symptom of her daughter’s frigid and unlovable personality.” (Rooney, 65) Her tries of distancing from situations tend to be useless, and she is manipulated into thinking she is at fault. Her way of coping with detachment, and her resistance and unwillingness to react makes her mother think of her as an “unlovable” person who “lacks warmth”.

The concept of abuse being inescapable, repeats itself with the theme of hopelessness. “Sometimes I think I must deserve it. Otherwise I don’t know why it would happen. But if he’s in a bad mood he’ll just follow me around the house. There’s nothing I can do.” (Rooney, 182) As the treatment itself is not reasonable, the only sensible conclusion she arrives on is blaming herself and accepting every dehumanizing commentary. This results in her internalizing and normalizing these experiences as a part of her life and identity. “However, as she defines herself through her wounds, she

does not openly do anything to heal them because this would mean ending her identity.” (Sarıkaya-Şen, 88)ⁱⁱ Therefore, her need to create an imbalance where the other person has an immense power over her, in order to feel “normal”, can be observed in several relationships. “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, 182)

Marianne’s sense of self-worth causes the repeating “choices of increasingly toxic boyfriends, a demonstration of both her continued failure to develop valuable procedural knowledge as well as the persistent reinforcement of received knowledge from her nuclear family.” (Donohue, 55)ⁱⁱⁱ Instead of her lack of self-worth existing in her mind, with her partners’ dehumanizing treatment, her thoughts materialize and reflect back to her. During, conveying these concepts, the themes of dissociation and derealization are thoroughly discussed. These themes are first hinted in high school where Marianne feels like she is failing to fit into the norms of normalcy in social situations. The first reference is made in the early chapters where she experiences a distance from her “real life”. “Marianne had the sense that her real life was happening somewhere far away, happening without her, and she didn’t know if she would find out where it was and become a part of it.” (Rooney, 11). The disconnection from her “real life”, presents itself various times, taking different forms.

The detachment especially arises during Marianne’s damaging relationships. Certain actions trigger her need to distance from life, so as not to experience the trauma to the full extent. In moments of abuse, because her body still needs to experience the situation, to escape in some way, her mind and emotions become empty and detach from her senses. Even though her lack of self-worth is acknowledged by her, simply cutting of the relationship or trying to improve the situation doesn’t work. Being treated

as a “broken” person has been normalized to such an extent that it feels like a part of her identity.

A clear example of these moments of distance is after falling out with people in college and living to Sweden for a year. She feels a detachment so complete from her life that she no longer feels like a person. “For weeks now she has had this feeling, this feeling of moving around in a protective film, floating like mercury. The outside world touches against her outside skin, but not the other parts of herself, inside.” (Rooney, 189) She is distanced from human interactions almost completely and has a certain hollow and systemized routine, where every action is repeated every day. Her depression is “so deep” that it takes a “tranquilizing” form, coming from the familiarity of this feeling and the feeling of being powerless. The feelings of nothingness and emptiness become a fundamental part of herself in this period.

IV. THE RELATIONSHIP

The novel unfolds around the relationship between Connell and Marianne. The two characters form a deep connection in unlikely circumstances that exceeds every other aspect in their life. With this connection they are able to exist as their true selves and a sense of mutual understanding is formed. Sally Rooney “presents readers with the opportunity to explore the inner worlds of her characters and better understand their concerns and insecurities” (Timalsina)^{iv}, which creates the chance to observe how the events they go through individually, reflect on the relationship dynamic. The characters fall out and rekindle at times, but their lives always stay intertwined. The theme of miscommunication is highlighted at certain parts through the novel.

With Marianne, the first glimpses of parts Connell conceal can be observed. This relationship allows him to act in ways he normally wouldn’t and his real self to exist. “but he fears being around her, because of the confusing way he finds himself

behaving, the things he says that he would never ordinarily say.” (Rooney, 7) Internally he opens-up to more emotions and becomes aware of certain parts of his identity he hadn’t in the past. He gets to escape from the fear of shattering his outer perception and becomes free of the fear of rejection and therefore, certain life events are shaped, such as his choice of college education. With this new awareness of his real self, a conflict in identity is formed. As Connell is an individual that struggles with self-perception, he feels a confusion in who he is and whom he will be in the future. “Lately he is consumed by a sense that he is in fact two different people, and soon he will have to choose which person to be on a full-time basis and leave the other person behind.” (Rooney, 26) The discovery of parts of himself he didn’t allow to be touched, causes Connell to be torn between his two different selves.

These new discoveries and the feeling of being bare to every part of himself seems unsettling when looked in retrospect. This can be seen in the comparison he makes between his relationships with Helen and Marianne. “Marianne had a wildness that got into him for a while and made him feel that he was like her, that they had the same unnamable spiritual injury, and that neither of them could ever fit into the world. But he was never damaged like she was. She just made him feel that way.” (Rooney, 169) While comparing the two partners in his head, Connell projects his own insecurities onto the relationship with Marianne and supports his thoughts with a sense of superiority, now that he is in a relationship where he feels “normal” in. The relationship with Helen allows him to conceal parts he doesn’t find fitting which provides a sense of safety. While, with Marianne his real self is only intensified, which proposes conflicts in his identity and the feeling of not fitting in. Being his own self to such an extent, feels uncomfortable and wrong in retrospect, as it doesn’t provide the sense of “normalcy” and “belonging” he craves. “Her gaze unsettles him like it used

to, like looking into a mirror, seeing something that has no secrets from you.” (Rooney, 81) Marianne’s gaze is described as a mirror, which shows that Connell sees and feels like his own self around her, as well as him seeing Marianne for who she really is. Not being able to hide or conceal part of his nature evokes a feeling of being defenseless.

For Marianne, this relationship differs from the others, through the dynamic. She naturally feels under the power of Connell, which she forced herself into in other relationships. The submission is not very mentally or physically damaging, as it is not taken advantage of. On the other hand, it is certainly undeniable that it is not a relationship dynamic that should be idealized. She feels willing to give out every part of herself to him, so the power dynamic seems natural to her. As a result, she allows the relationship to fully be on Connell’s terms. An example to this situation is where Connell hides and keeps the relationship secret in school. She is not bothered or disturbed by the shame and secrecy. Even when Connell humiliates her by ignoring her in public and taking someone else to the prom, she is not surprised, but accepts it normally. “He had never tried to delude her into thinking she was socially acceptable; she had deluded herself. He had just been using her as a kind of private experiment, and her willingness to be used had probably shocked him.” (Rooney, 63) She finds this abandonment and mistreatment normal, because of how deeply she accepts her “unfitting” and “unacceptable” nature, assigned to her by her family and peers.

Her lack of self-worth and damaging perception in identity reflects itself on the relationship in other ways as well. In Connell’s comment on why the relationship failed in the past, Marianne’s readiness to give every part of her being for the other person and her lack of resistance is stated. “There’s something frightening about her, some huge emptiness in the pit of her being. It’s like waiting for a lift to arrive and when the doors open nothing is there, just the terrible dark emptiness of the elevator shaft, on and

on forever.” (Rooney, 247) This power imbalance in the relationship is something connected to Marianne’s nature, which is distinctively felt by both sides. This comment also highlights Marianne’s “emptiness” in self-perception and how it manifests itself in the relationship.

“Connell has limited access to deeper feelings and is inhibited from expressing what he really wants by shame and social anxiety. Marianne because of her own feelings of unworthiness tends to accede to Connell’s misarticulated needs.” (Eppel)^v In result of the issues both characters go through individually, the theme of miscommunication is very prominent. Sally Rooney’s signature choice of not using any quotation marks is usually associated with this. It is assumed to be hinting at the characters inability to communicate at times, due to the conflicts they have within themselves. Another implication of this writing choice is that it hints at the characters’ deep connection and ability to understand one another deeply.

Due to miscommunication, the characters fall out and reconnect at times. Throughout the novel Marianne and Connell’s relationship changes shapes and forms with secrecy, friendship and a romantic relationship. However, their presence in each other’s lives is always familiar and their dynamic remains unchanged and special. The mutual understanding and their ability to perceive each other to the deepest part of their real selves, causes the relationship to differ from other ones distinctively. Both Marianne and Connell know each other much differently than others do, in a way that they have their own silent communication. “If he silently decides not to say something when they’re talking, Marianne will ask ‘what?’ within one or two seconds. This ‘what?’ question seems to him to contain so much” (Rooney, 25) A sense of understanding that comes naturally to both sides allows them to see one another with no filters, which makes this connection different.

With this connection each person's life is transformed. Even though their individual issues and conflicts manifest themselves in the relationship, the characters exhibit an inability to fully stay apart, and their lives intertwine with one another throughout the years. The relationship becomes something that exist as a part of each individual's self.

The ending follows Marianne thinking upon the transformation the relationship caused and the way it allowed both people to grow and be free of the weight of their problems. It can be observed that Marianne finally breaks the cycle of domination and starts to exist in her "real life", while Connell escapes the fear of external judgment. How both sides perceive themselves is changed for the better and through the relationship they have pushed each other to develop and take right paths in life. The quote as they are once again departing portrays these changes: "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." (Rooney, 266)

V. CONCLUSION

This essay mainly focused on how life events affect identity and self-perception, through the characters Marianne and Connell. In this exploration, "Normal People" is deconstructed under the idea of how each individual's issues reflect on their self and the connections they make. The characters evolve throughout the years, and their personalities can be analyzed through the relationship they have with each other. Both individuals facing their own challenges with life and identity provides a window to interpret their experiences through certain repeating themes such as loneliness, emptiness and self-perception.

An inability to fit into normalcy is heavily present in both characters throughout their lives. For Marianne this analysis focuses on her struggles with a repeating cycle

of abuse and its reflection on her self-perception. On the other hand, Connell's experiences with anxiety, identity and self-acceptance are highlighted. Their relationship is the main component where communication, as well as the lack of it, and a mutual understanding shape each person's life. "Normal People" tells a story of change with the two lives that intertwine with one another, from both perspectives. Through Sally Rooney's choices in writing and her display of inner self, identities and relationships are reflected.

VI. REFERENCES

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