

# “Sharing the Same Soil:” Sally Rooney’s *Normal People* and the Coming-of-Age Romance

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“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.”  
*(Normal People 265)*

“Here, Marianne. You’re not cold, you know. You’re not like that, not at all.”  
*(Normal People 106)*

## *1. Introduction*

In recent years, several edited volumes have been released on literary fiction and genre, and on the centrality of generic narrative forms to past and present developments in the field of Anglophone literary studies (Frow 2005; Dowd and Rulyova 2015; Cooke 2020). A debate has emerged on the subject of the ‘genre turn’ in literary fiction: authors today dare to adopt genres that until recently had fallen into oblivion – horror (McCarthy 2006), science fiction/fantasy (Ishiguro 2005), the historical novel and autopathography (Mantel 2003, 2009, 2012, 20013, 2020). Although this move towards genre has been amply recognized and elaborated upon by

literary critics (Dorson 2017; Lanzendörfer 2016; Rothman 2014), the romance genre has been almost entirely neglected by the recent increase in scholarship on generic forms of literature.

Meanwhile, the field of popular romance studies has been steadily expanding over the course of the last two decades, with important contributions being made to scholarship in the different subgenres – historical, gothic, paranormal, young adult, erotic, etc. – and themes – class, wealth, gender, sexuality, religion, race and ethnicity. However, the scholarship in this field has remained largely unknown to literary critics, while popular romance scholars have also remained at a distance from the field of literary fiction.

Against such stark division of labour, David Schmid argues that “[w]e need a more nuanced understanding of the relation between literary and genre fiction, one that avoids maintaining each half of this binary in isolation, and instead imagines the possibility of hybrid mixture.” (Schmid quoted in Dorson, *McCarthy* 4) While this call has been heeded in the genres of horror, science fiction, or the historical novel, as noted above, much remains to be done when it comes to the romance genre, which is not usually admitted to converse, on equal footing, with the domain of literary fiction.

A rare exception to this trend is *Rethinking the Romance Genre*, a volume edited in 2013 by Emily S. Davis. This inquiry aims at analysing political postcolonial texts that too hastily, to Davis’ mind, have been categorized as ‘sell-outs’ for their mixing of political concerns with generic and popular artistic forms and modes of representation. Davis particularly focuses on genres – the romance, the gothic, and the melodrama – that have been, for a long time, associated with a domain more private than public. Against dichotomous views of the private and the public, Davis contends that “the task of cultural analysis is not to pit the ‘merely personal’ against the ‘profoundly structural,’” (*Rethinking* 225) but to attend to the ways intimacy, sexuality, and the personal sphere contribute to create the current existential episteme.

Following this insight, the present essay seeks to make the two fields (literary fiction – in one of its most distinguished subgenres: the bildungsroman/coming-of-age form – and romance fiction – one of the least respected literary genres comprising the modern/contemporary spectrum of literature) dialogue with one another by analysing the construction of love and romantic relationships in a current and composite narrative which

incorporates elements borrowed from both genres. Marianne and Connell's development into adulthood takes place because of their encounter, and through one another. Therefore, the balance *Normal People* strikes between the two literary forms is so precise that one could not easily tell if the love story is inscribed within the coming-of-age narrative or vice versa.

For this reason, this essay is divided into two parts of comparable relevance. In the first part, *Normal People* will be analysed in light of Pamela Regis' eight essential narrative elements of the romance, at the same time as it will explore the ways in which the text adheres and/or departs from the tropes of the romance genre.

The second part will discuss *Normal People*'s adherence to the narrative and discursive conventions of the bildungsroman. It will be argued that although the novel significantly departs from several of its fundamental canonical tenets – the individual at the centre of the narrative and the accomplished parable of achieved (or failed) personal development – it continues the genre's tradition in the attempt to harmonise the complementary spheres of “mobility” and “interiority” (*The Way* 4), arguably a reworking of the dichotomous terms of the ‘structural’ and the ‘private’, while also directing the psychological development of its characters towards a final socialization that exemplifies, in a contemporary fashion, the acquisition of maturity and adult understanding. In other words, in *Normal People*, “self-development and integration are complementary and convergent trajectories.” (*The Way* 18-19)

As a romance novel, *Normal People* shows Connell and Marianne's construction of their relationship with one another. As a coming-of-age story, the novel places such relationship centre-stage, outlining the dynamic course of it as if it were a ‘dual hero,’ so to speak, an anti-egocentric protagonist endorsing a logic of material and emotional co-dependence and reciprocal support, ultimately directed towards finding a place in the world.

In the third and concluding part of this article, it will be observed that the particular declension *Normal People* makes of the essential elements of the romance novel constitutes a concrete instance, within the context of Anglophone literary studies, of the major social and cultural transition reflected by numerous literary texts, from staging ‘static’ parables of success/failure to recounting dynamic modulations, mirroring (and confirming) Gilles Deleuze's insights on human subjectivities undergoing, in the current era, a momentous shift, from grounded to fluctuating ‘modulations,’ form deep-rooted to nomadic and rhizomic.

## 2. Normal People as a Romance Novel

Pamela Regis's *A Natural History of the Romance Novel* (2003) has played a fundamental role in re-routing scholarly approaches to romance from ideological and psychologising to straight-forwardly academic. As Eric Selinger explains: "by doubling back to pre-feminist, non-Freudian approaches to the romance novel, Regis essentially hit the reset button on the whole enterprise of popular romance studies." (*Rebooting* 3)<sup>1</sup> Her work does not only put together a modern canon of the romance novel, sketching its history and pre-modern literary affiliations, it also individuates eight essential narrative elements to be employed as analytical categories for understanding the romance, several 'events' in the storyline which must occur for a romance novel to be defined as such.

By applying her eight essential elements to Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), Regis illustrates the movement "from a state of unfreedom to one of freedom" (*Natural History* 30) which, she maintains, constitutes the trajectory of every romantic plot:

Eight narrative events take a heroine in a romance novel from encumbered to free.<sup>2</sup> In one or more scenes, romance novels always depict the following: the initial state of society in which heroine and hero must court, the meeting between heroine and hero, the barrier to the union of heroine and hero, the attraction between heroine and hero, the declaration of love between heroine and hero, the point of ritual death, the recognition by heroine and hero of the means to overcome the barrier, and the betrothal. These elements are essential. (*Natural History* 30)<sup>3</sup>

This grid allows for a virtually endless number of variations: the meeting between heroine and hero, for instance, can be recounted in flashbacks, the 'betrothal,' especially in LGBTQ+ romances, is often figurative. As Selinger points out "wary of marriage, some contemporary romance novels deflect the 'betrothal,' or deflate it through humour." (*Rebooting* 2) The barriers, especially in contemporary novels – seldom featuring dragons or evil kings – can be thoroughly internal, that is constituted by the "attitudes, temperament, values, and beliefs held by heroine and hero that prevent the union." (*Natural History* 32) In modern and contemporary romance novels, barriers are usually related to a certain "inability or unwillingness to declare for each other, and the declaration scene marks the end of this barrier." (*Natural History* 34) Similarly, in its current declension, the moment of

recognition does not primarily indicate the recognition of the means to overcome concrete barriers, but the recognition of one's true needs beyond prejudices and insecurities, external pressures and expectations.

### 2.1 *Society Defined/The Meeting*

Regis explains 'society defined' as follows: "Near the beginning of the novel, the society that the heroine and hero will confront in their courtship is defined for the reader. This society is in some way flawed; it may be incomplete, superannuated, or corrupt. It always oppresses the heroine and hero." (*Natural History* 31) As Marianne and Connell go to school together, the reader knows they have already met. The first encounter for the reader, however, takes place at Marianne's mansion, where Connell goes from time to time to pick up Lorraine, his mother, who works there as a housekeeper. Connell and Marianne, therefore, are already very much impacted (and indeed oppressed) by the social context in which they meet and become close to one another.

In the novel, 'society defined' and 'the meeting' happen at the same time, in the same opening sequence. The narrative makes the 'macro' and the 'micro,' the 'structural' and the 'private,' proceed hand in hand from the very beginning, suggesting the importance of social status and environment to personal histories and sentimental experiences. In this regard, the novel is a contemporary representative of a time-honoured tradition of romantic stories and its authors – from Samuel Richardson to Jane Austen – that have always discussed – transversally, but in a recurrent and sustained manner – the economic institutions at the centre of British society (marriage, servitude, financial autonomy, and patrimonial laws), and their impact on private lives.

As Connell and Marianne are very young, however, they do not necessarily recognize or possess the vocabulary necessary to articulate the 'larger issues' at play. A little later in the story, shortly before kissing for the first time, they tease one another:

He told her she should try reading *The Communist Manifesto*, he thought she would like it, and he offered to write down the title for her so she wouldn't forget. I know what *The Communist Manifesto* is called, she said. He shrugged, okay. After a moment he added, smiling: You are trying to act superior, but like, you haven't

read it. She had to laugh then, and he laughed because she did. They couldn't look at each other when they were laughing, they had to look into corners of the room, or at their feet. (*Normal People* 13 – 'NP' hereafter)

The scene endearingly weaves together the mood of awkwardness and attraction between the protagonists with a telling textual reference, adumbrating the larger issues that will play a role in the development of their relationship. Aside from establishing their unequal social statuses, the initial sequence tells us that Connell and Marianne are bright students, that Connell is popular among teachers and peers, and that Marianne, on the contrary, "has no friends, and spends her lunchtimes alone reading novels." (*NP* 2) Society, therefore, is defined as unequal and 'political' from the beginning.<sup>4</sup>

## 2.2 *The Barrier(s)*

*Normal People* presents a combination of external, 'structural' barriers, and 'private,' internal ones. According to Regis:

External barriers include elements of the setting, especially the society in power at the beginning of the work, as well as the heroine and hero's family, the economic situation of either or both halves of the couple, and coincidence. [...] Elements of internal barriers include the attitudes, temperament, and values held by heroine and hero that prevent the union. (*Natural History* 32)

At the beginning of their relationship, as already noted, Connell and Marianne seem to be especially oblivious to the 'macro' barriers that define the context in which they act. The possibility, for instance, that Marianne's mother might not be thrilled at the idea of Connell seeing her daughter has to be suggested to him by Lorraine and comes as a shock. In his world, the scholastic microcosm, Connell is the successful, well-adjusted person; Marianne is an 'odd' character with no apparent prospects or advantages.

For Connell, therefore, the main barrier is the possibility of being judged by his friends, the prospect of having to explain to them his attachment to Marianne. Acceptance from peers is very important to him and later barriers, for Connell, will always be related to one form or another of social anxiety and self-acceptance in relation to perceived expectations.

Marianne, in turn, does not perceive herself as someone worthy of love because of an abusive familial environment we learn about little by little. Men, in her family – her father in the past, and then her brother – have always been aggressive towards Marianne, and her mother does not protect her from their behaviour. Marianne, therefore, lives her life haunted by the thought of not being a person easy to love: “Well, I don’t feel lovable. I think I have an unlovable sort of...I have a coldness about me, I am difficult to like.” (*NP* 101)

All the subsequent barriers on Marianne’s part, such as the string of sadistic boyfriends she will engage with, are a consequence of this primary, inner impediment.

Marianne’s feelings of inadequacy will be confirmed when Connell, after declaring his love for her in private, asks a popular girl at school to the graduation party. This episode, which will determine their first break up, will occasionally return as a truly painful memory in Marianne’s life, as well as in Connell and Marianne’s shared history, one that Marianne will interpret, for a long time, as ‘evidence’ of her supposedly unlovable nature and personality.

### *2.3 The Attraction*

If Marianne’s ironic, defiant, and seemingly autonomous personality makes of her an outcast in high school, it works in her favour in college. When Marianne and Connell meet again at Trinity College in Dublin, everything has changed: Marianne is at the centre of a rather privileged and posturing circle of friends, and working-class, unpretentious Connell struggles to feel at ease in the new environment.

Their attraction to one another, however, has not changed and will soon lead them to resume their relationship. From this moment onwards, while the connection between Connell and Marianne deepens, their space of private, intense communication will constantly be threatened by their respective financial circumstances, their families, and their friends. All these actors will take turns in disrupting and intruding, in making their presence felt. Sometimes, Connell and Marianne will manage to preserve their privacy, other times these interferences will be stronger than their capacity to understand and communicate effectively with one another.

The sexual attraction between the two protagonists is a narrative element romance novels usually dose, playing with the reader’s

expectations. Sexual relations can happen early in the story – before the protagonists fall in love with one another – or at the end of it, but their occurrence usually signifies a turning point in the relationship. Connell and Marianne engage in sexual relations almost immediately and without investing this event of any particular significance with regards to their relationship. The ‘naturalness’ of their bond is apparent throughout, from the opening scene, over the course of which a strong and ‘exclusive’ path of communication seems to establish itself:

When he [Connell] speaks to Marianne he has a sense of total privacy between them. He could tell her anything about himself, even weird things, and she would never repeat them, he knows that. Being alone with her is like opening a door away from normal life and then closing it behind him. He’s not frightened of her, actually she’s a pretty relaxed person, 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. (NP 6-7)

The attraction between the protagonists never ceases to exist, it is an overriding force that will always pull them close. Initially, it is surprising and destabilizing: “He found himself fantasizing about her in class that afternoon, at the back of Maths, or when they were supposed to be playing rounders. He would think of her small wet mouth and suddenly run out of breath, and have to struggle to fill his lungs.” (NP 23) Later, it will establish itself as a familiar presence in their lives, as Marianne and Connell will always be better at communicating their love for one another physically rather than verbally, finding comfort, acceptance, and reassurance in one another’s presence.

#### 2.4 *The Declaration*

In *Normal People*, a first, tentative ‘declaration’ takes place, once again, in the opening scene, where Rooney places two lines of a circumspect reciprocal pronouncement – Connell: “I never said I hated you.” (NP 6) Marianne: “Well, I like you.” (NP 7) However, the ‘proper’ declaration takes place later in the narrative:

Connell is silent again. He leans down and kisses her on the forehead. I would never hurt you, okay? He says. Never. She nods and says nothing. You make me really happy, he says. His hand moves over her hair and he adds: I love you. I’m not just

saying that, I really do. Her eyes fill up with tears again and she closes them. Even in memory she will find this moment unbearably intense, and she is aware of this now, while it's happening. She has never believed herself fit to be loved by any person. But now she has a new life, of which this is the first moment, and even after many years have passed she will still think: Yes, that was it, the beginning of my life. (NP 44)

In romance novels, the declaration is often associated to the resolution of conflict; in *Normal People*, to the contrary, marks the beginning of a 'modulation' over the course of which Marianne and Connell will split and return to one another multiple times.

It seems a characteristic of Rooney's narration to insert, early and simultaneously in the story, several important elements (society defined, the meeting, the attraction, the declaration...), perhaps to establish a difficult and chaotic 'field' (a 'shared soil') Marianne and Connell will learn to navigate with one another's help.

This seeming randomness suggests a point of view on existence as a space resembling, perhaps, a house, more than a road: a space for chaotically coexisting events rather than a linear segment of ordered experiences. Canadian author Alice Munro famously stated that "a story is not like a road to follow...is more like a house. You go inside and stay there for a while, wandering back and forth and settling where you like and discovering how the room and corridors relate to each other, how the world outside is altered by being viewed from these windows..." (*Selected Stories* XVI- XVII)

From a discursive point of view, Rooney seems to suggest that events in life occur simultaneously, self-development is connected to encounters, and such occurrences are often first dealt with and later elaborated upon and better understood. *Normal People* progresses linearly in time, but with continuous analepses and prolepses. The reader, therefore, often tries to process new information that will be better 'ordered' at a later stage, when the narration will fill the blanks.<sup>5</sup>

From a figurative perspective, Connell and Marianne may be seen as a structure, private but open, which they will gradually learn to inhabit and protect from unwanted intrusions. Throughout the narrative, the couple resembles a building exposed to good and bad weather, just like the one they visit at the beginning of their relationship, when, as teenagers, vaguely intuit that all things have 'something to do with capitalism.' (NP 34)

## 2.5 Point(s) of Ritual Death

In his *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957), Northrop Frye coins the phrase ‘point of ritual death’ to indicate the moment when comic narratives reach “a potentially tragic crisis near the end.” (Quoted in Regis, *Natural History* 35) Regis clarifies that this point “marks the moment in the narrative when the union between heroine and hero, the hoped-for resolution, seems absolutely impossible, when it seems that the barrier will remain, more substantial than ever.” (*Natural History* 35)

Once Connell and Marianne are caught up in a modulation of high and lows, a point of ritual death occurs every time they split. If their first separation in school occurs because of the graduation-party episode, their first separation in college occurs when Connell is too embarrassed to ask Marianne if he can stay at her house for some time while he figures a way to pay rent. Marianne takes Connell’s unease and nervousness as signs of wanting to end the relationship. They separate and start seeing other partners.

Jamie, Marianne’s new boyfriend, is an enabler for Marianne’s self-harming behaviour and thoughts. At Marianne’s own request, he is violent to her during sex and disregards her in front of her friends. Marianne, in turn, does not love nor respect Jamie, but stays in the relationship because she thinks she deserves to be mistreated. Helen, Connell’s new girlfriend, makes of Connell a socially accepted ‘good guy,’ a prospect that, calming his anxiety, appears as particularly desirable to him.

In other words, Jamie and Helen give Marianne and Connell what they think they need, thereby confirming their respective negative opinions of themselves: Marianne is unlovable, and Connell needs to be kept grounded into healthy sociality, otherwise he might be left with the terrifying prospect of having to face aspects of himself that are not immediately legible to him.

After splitting up with Jamie, Marianne leaves for Sweden for a school term. There, she meets Lukas, a photographer with whom she engages in games of sexual submission. Lukas is even colder than Jamie, a sadistic artist who, in Marianne’s description of him, “has managed to nurture a fine artistic sensitivity without developing any real sense of right and wrong.” (*NP* 190)

## 2.6 The Recognition

Over the course of a photographic session at Lukas' studio, Marianne goes through a series of self-realizations. She understands that what she sometimes desires and what she wants are not necessarily the same thing. For instance, she uses her encounters with Lukas to experience "a depression so deep it is tranquillising" (NP 190) and detach herself so thoroughly from her body as to perceive it as "if it were a piece of litter." (NP 191) Marianne observes that men's desire for domination "can look so much like attraction, even love." (NP 192) Moreover, she grasps that, not unlike her boyfriends, her friends have not been nice to her, making of friendship a vacuous competition for self-affirmation. Marianne put up with them because she had never experienced social acceptance before.

Lastly, she realises Connell's sincere and enduring feelings for her, a wave of warmth and admiration she feels each time she reads one of his long and articulate e-mails to her.

At the end of this long sequence, Marianne finds the courage to run away from Lukas, respecting the romance novel convention according to which "the heroine must escape her 'death'" (*Natural History* 35) to re-unite with the hero. Quoting once again from Frye and in reference to the myth of Persephone, Regis argues that the rescue of the heroine from the underworld, which Marianne quite significantly self-performs, is sometimes "vestigial, not an element of the plot but a mere change of tone." (Frye quoted in Regis *Natural History* 35) In other words: "the heroine does not die. She is freed from [death's] presence, and this freedom is the mythic counterpart that results from the lifting of the barrier. The reader's response, again, is joy. The reader rejoices in this escape, however symbolic, however merely hinted at." (*Natural History* 35)

As Regis explains, in a narrative characterised by internal barriers, the recognition consists of the heroine "understanding her own psyche better." (*Natural History* 37) Regis clarifies that "both what is recognized and when it is recognized vary enormously. In an upbeat, rapidly paced book, the recognition scene may be in the last few pages and lead directly to the ending. In a bitter-sweet, slower-paced book the recognition scene may be quite early, and the barrier, which eventually falls, does not do so quickly." (*Natural History* 37) In this narrative, the point of ritual death and the recognition partially blend. Far away from one another, both Connell and Marianne make a series of discoveries concerning themselves, one another, as well as their surroundings.

At approximately the same time as Marianne's session at Lukas', Connell has a first meeting with a therapist. This is a parallel sequence over the course of which Connell lets the reader 'see' his pain for the first time. The recent suicide of Rob, a friend from school, triggers for Connell a series of unresolved issues, making him despair of ever feeling at ease in the world. During this long and excruciating admission of pain, Connell indicates to the therapist, as the only positive aspects in his life, his love for literature and his closeness to Marianne.

At Rob's funeral, Connell meets Marianne who returns home from Sweden to attend it. When they see each other, indeed they 'recognize' one another, immediately re-establishing that private space of communication that always encircles them, leaving everyone else out:

Marianne, he said.

He said this aloud without thinking about it. She looked up and saw him then. Her face was like a small white flower. She put her arms around his neck, and he held her tightly. He could smell the inside of her house on her clothes. The last time he'd seen her, everything had been normal [...] Marianne touched the back of Connell's head with her hand. Everyone stood there watching them, he felt that. When they knew it couldn't go on any longer, they let go of one another. (NP 209-10)

Helen's concerned reaction to this moment of mutual understanding will lead to her break-up from Connell. Marianne and Connell return to their friendship, rediscovering soon their attraction for one another.

## 2.7 *The Betrothal*

As Marianne and Connell 'touch' a point of ritual death every time they split, they experience a 'recognition' every time they return to one another. When they do, this often goes together with Connell's 'public' acknowledgment of his attachment to Marianne, which signifies, in turn, increased self-acceptance.

Connell rarely touches Marianne in front of their friends. The first time he does so is during a pool-party in college: "he put his arm around her waist. He had never, ever touched her in front of anyone else before. Their friends had never seen them together like this, no one had." (NP 115) Then

it happens again at Rob's funeral, when Connell, at a party organized by their friends from high school, appears not only finally at ease, but proud of displaying his connection to Marianne:

At midnight when they all cheered Happy New Year, Connell took Marianne into his arms and kissed her. She could feel, like a physical pressure on her skin, that the others were watching them. Maybe people hadn't really believed it until then, or else a morbid fascination still lingered over something that had once been scandalous. Maybe they were just curious to observe the chemistry between two people who, over the course of several years, apparently could not leave one another alone. Marianne had to admit that she, also, probably would have glanced. (*NP* 261-2)

This sequence, followed by a last declaration of love from Connell to Marianne, would be more than sufficient to characterize a 'betrothal' according to current standards of romantic storytelling. At this point, the narrative presents the reader with a 'better' society: Connell rescues Marianne from her abusive brother, they both fully understand the importance of one another's presence for their respective mental health and well-being. Moreover, Connell understands more fully his power over Marianne, the fact that he can hurt her, and Marianne acknowledges she has been occasionally insensitive towards Connell's financial difficulties.<sup>6</sup> They smooth over the rough edges of their familial relations (Connell), or accept that they will never be resolved (Marianne), they move their first steps into 'the real world' by finding employment (Marianne) and timidly begin to publish their work (Connell).

However, the modulation will continue. Once they understand how important they are and have been for one another, they can even afford to (momentarily?) separate, act like the adults they have become by letting one another have their chance at accomplishing their dreams. In the very last sequence of the novel, Connell gets offered a place for postgraduate studies in New York. He does not want to leave Marianne behind, but she sees that they must let go of their present happiness to make space for the future:

He probably won't come back, she thinks. Or he will, differently. What they have now they can never have back again. But for her the pain of loneliness will be nothing to the pain that she used to feel, of being unworthy. He brought her goodness like a gift and now it belongs to her. Meanwhile his life opens up 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. (*NP* 265-266)

Since high school, Marianne and Connell have learnt love, self-acceptance, and selflessness, encountering loneliness, grief, and abuse along the way. Their development into adulthood makes them better partners to one another. Even the title of the novel is an oblique celebration of a newly acquired maturity. At the end of the story, we see Marianne walking around campus, and we are told that she is “neither admired nor reviled anymore. People have forgotten about her. She’s a normal person now. She walks by and no one looks up.” (NP 254) ‘Normal’ means that “the conflict between individuality and socialization, autonomy and normality...” (The Way 16) has been reduced. Marianne has finally adjusted; she has found her own space in the world to occupy.

### 3. *Normal People* as Bildungsroman

As *Normal People* features a striking synthesis of romantic narrative motives with tropes of bildungsroman, this critical essay aims at bringing both domains to the fore. Franco Moretti famously connects the two genres in his seminal discussion of the canonical phase of the Bildungsroman, analysing *Wilhelm Meister* alongside *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) – and *Jane Eyre* (1847) as an instance of the later development of the genre. In this segment of the article, we will see that *Normal People*, just as its illustrious predecessors, conforms to the narrative structure of the romance novel at the same time as it embodies an essentially contemporary outlook on personal growth and self-development, in this instance conceiving of such processes as open-ended, unstructured, and non-normative.<sup>7</sup>

In other words, in the previous section this essay followed the construction of the sentimental relationship between the two protagonists. In the second part, it will be seen how the text, by assigning the role of protagonist to such relationship, its development through time and adjustment to the world, and by denying a definitive ending to it, reveals a deep and interactive engagement with narrative and discursive motives of the Bildungsroman from a characteristically contemporary perspective.

In *The Bildungsroman: Form and Transformations* (2020), John Frow, Melissa Hardie, and Vanessa Smith, list the traditional defining elements of the genre, significantly putting in mutual relation the literary form of the bildungsroman with the romance:

a young man from the provinces seeks his fortune in the city, and undergoes a process of education in the ways of the world such that he eventually becomes reconciled with it. Yet even in this reductive formulation key variants exist: a young woman undergoes a process of worldly or sentimental education and becomes reconciled to her destiny, sometimes in the form of marriage; or a young man or woman undergoes a process of aesthetic or worldly or sentimental education (sometimes all three together) and achieves success as a writer or an artist [...]. There is also a tragic variant, in which the novel ends with the hero's failure or death. These variations point to the way in which a supposition of the Bildungsroman's centrality for the European novel in particular is subject not just to formal dictates but also to transformations that come in themselves to trouble the normativity of this idealised form and promote instead the instability of the key terms and concepts it wishes to centre: masculine gender, youthful malleability, cosmopolitan life as 'worlding' and education delivered as an adumbration of possibility, experience, or desire. (*The Bildungsroman* 3)<sup>8</sup>

As discussed in the previous section, Marianne and Connell get increasingly adjusted to the world and society. Connell, with the help of Marianne, learns to navigate the passage from 'the province' to 'the city' as the acceptance of a new identity.<sup>9</sup> He finds this sort of emancipation particularly difficult, and his sense of estrangement is reinforced when he takes part in cultural events that instead of celebrating writing as a personal but inclusive experience, appropriate it as a practice of social distinction.

Therefore, *Normal People* still responds to or elaborates upon some of the traditional tropes characterizing the genre – the protagonist from the provinces, education as personal salvation, the worldly power of the city. Of course, the text revisits these tropes from a contemporary perspective, not only by showing how unstable and deceitful these institutions have become in the current era, but also by effectively portraying the "longing for a place of security and stability that can insulate characters from, if not fix, their alienation" (Sudjic, *Darkly Funny* n.p.) which is characteristic of contemporary novels.<sup>10</sup>

The historical form of the Bildungsroman set some specific ground rules, as it were, for future narrative of personal development and upbringing that contemporary authors are currently trying to subvert and question, or 'de-centre,' as Frow et al. put it above.<sup>11</sup> From this perspective, one may see *Normal People* as still engaged in dialogue with the historical form of the Bildungsroman, or better said, with some of the discursive

tenets which have been isolated and articulated by its authors and are still active in the current episteme.

Differently put, the historic Bildungsroman articulates a worldview that, nowadays, may be rarely actively promoted, but that has permeated the current arrangement of ideas and values, reflecting itself in works of fiction. I wish to contend that *Normal People* aims at destabilizing two such tropes particularly: the centrality and solitude of the individual against a background of ‘secondary’ characters and events, and the positive (or negative) accomplishment of existence as purposeful, teleological parable. The rest of this section discusses the strategies *Normal People* puts in place to subvert these very notions.

### 3.1 Self-sufficient/Co-dependent Development

In “Variants of the Romantic ‘Bildungsroman,’ (2008) Manfred Engel outlines a concise but accurate history of the genre, its genesis and main phases. The Bildungsroman, Engel explains, originates in Germany at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, it has in the *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* (*Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship Years*, 1795/96) its archetypal text, and it is given its definition a century later by German historian Wilhelm Dilthey. Its development is usually organized, by historians of the genre, in three main phases: the end of the Enlightenment, Romanticism, and Realism.<sup>12</sup>

Engel further explains that all narratives of *bildung* written over the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century ‘respond’, one way or another, to *Wilhelm Meister*, and that their common trait is an elaboration of the conflict between individual ideals and a society perceived as prosaic and commercialised. Such narratives envision the notion of *bildung* as “a process of organic, or quasi-organic development” (Engel 2008: 264) which is often “modelled on the triadic scheme of paradise / fall / redemption, or — in the terminology of German idealist natural philosophy — of unity / division / unity regained at a higher level.” (*Variants* 277)<sup>13</sup>

Moreover, Engel observes that, as the specific origin and historical phases of the genre are largely overlooked by scholars, the term ‘*bildung*’ has lost much of its analytical precision, becoming an all-encompassing definitional term for diverse narratives of upbringing and personal development. In other words, the term, from designating specific narratives, has become the name of a “theoretical topos.” (Hershinow, *Born Yesterday* 16)

To argue the point of the specificity of the genre beyond its current, 'relaxed' uses, Engel lists a series of fundamental characteristics of the historic form, such as its focus on adolescence, for instance, on the formation of an individual character ("The 'Bildungroman' is a novel of character, i.e. as a rule it has one, and only one, central figure" *Variants* 265), on social structures as potentially threatening the harmonious development of the individual – the latter trait embodying a particularly historically located perspective.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, the genre stages an "interaction, *a dialectic interplay between character and environment, individualisation and socialisation,*" (*Variants* 266 – Italics in the original) and its protagonists ideally achieve integration into society.

*Normal People* is committed to find alternatives to the triadic schema mentioned above as well as existence perceived as individual pursuit. By placing two characters as protagonists of its narrative development, the novel makes a distinctive move against the latter notion. Even more so, because instead of making of the hero a heroine, Rooney places the development of a relationship (not of a person) at the core of her narrative, therefore adhering to John Cawelti's characterization of the romance's defining characteristic, which is "not that it stars a female but that its organizing action is the development of a love relationship, usually between a man and a woman." (*Adventure* 41)

By showing the interconnectedness of human lives from the choice of its protagonist – a couple – *Normal People* clearly challenges the trope of the centrality, autonomy, and fundamental self-sufficiency of a fictional figure reaching maturity on his/her own; the individual as the sole protagonist of an existence, coming to terms with the world with the help (and/or despite the hostility) of 'secondary' characters revolving around him/her.<sup>15</sup> In her previous published novel, *Conversations with Friends* (2017), Rooney attempts at making a similar point, which she then illustrates over the course of an interview for literary magazine *The Tangerine*:

[*Conversations with Friends*] isn't so much about individual people as it is about relationships, and the interplay of Frances' [the protagonist] dynamics with each of the other three people in the foursome, rather than Frances as a psychological entity. What might disappoint readers about the book is that they might want a conventional hero's journey where Frances undergoes certain experiences, learns something, then comes out a different person. That's not really what the book is

trying to do, I don't think. It's more about developing meaningful inter-relationships within a group, or within a community, or a family, or a friendship. (Rooney quoted in Nolan, *Interview* n.p.)

The effort of not making of Frances a heroine 'of the triadic schema,' someone who becomes, through others, a better person, as Rooney puts it, or someone who incorporates fortunate (or less fortunate) encounters with others as to become a better version (synthesis) of herself, is apparent throughout the narrative. See, for instance, the following sequence, in which Frances goes through a moment of deep realization in which she sees herself as almost 'generated' by other people. Feeling a strong physical pain, Frances enters a church in search of momentary relief, and, minutes before fainting, she reflects:

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. Someone laid the tiles on the floor, someone fitted the windows. Each brick was placed by human hands, each hinge fitted on each door, every road surface outside, every bulb in every streetlight. And even things built by machines were really built by human beings, who built the machines initially. And human beings themselves, made by other humans, struggling to create happy children and families. Me, all the clothing I wear, all the language I know. Who put me here in this church, thinking these thoughts? Other people, some I know very well and others I have never met. (*Conversations* 294)

*Normal People* takes a step forward in this direction, as it explains less, but 'shows' much more people's impact on and importance to other people's development through Marianne and Connell, who constantly enact (and never discuss) their reciprocal determination and co-dependency. In a sense, the narrative objectifies the principle, pivotal to the entire tradition of romance novels, according to which self-realization can only occur through the encounter with an Other, in which "I incorporate [...] other-mindedness as part of myself." (Lear, *Love and its Place* 194)

This 'incorporation' however, is not (only) self-serving or instrumental, not exclusively aimed at a better synthesis of the self. It is an open-ended practice that leads to a partial loosening of one's boundaries and the possibility of reciprocal support.<sup>16</sup>

### 3.2 The Deleuzian Modulation

In the canonical bildungsroman, happiness is “the opposite of freedom,” intended as “the end of becoming.” (*The Way* 23) This is a notion, indeed relevant to these pages, that the Bildungsroman and romance narratives share, and often conventionally express in a final marriage between hero and heroine (the betrothal). Such an act, Moretti maintains, symbolizes an act of consent, a figurative harmonious ‘blending’ of the protagonist’s values and aspirations with the larger social order in place: “the happiness of the classical bildungsroman is the subjective symptom of an objectively completed socialization.” (*The Way* 24)

Moretti goes on to say that this “definitive stabilization” (*The Way* 27) is only possible in a pre-capitalist world, a world that values borders, the naturalness and beauty of belonging to one place, the importance of the journey as a circumscribed experience with otherness enabling the achievement of a higher existential synthesis.

Through his discussion of the canonical stage and later development of the European Bildungsroman, Moretti shows the disintegration of this social and cultural context over the course of the nineteenth century. Later studies of the genre have focused on Modernism and Postmodernism to bring to the fore the impossibility of a definitive merging of individual aspirations with an environment often perceived as hostile, contradictory, and precarious.

*Normal People*’s ending, therefore, will not be conclusive, and if there is a final ‘betrothal,’ this has to take place within the continuous becoming of a wider existential modulation that renders all human interaction, in typically contemporary fashion, provisional and fragile.

In “Postscript on the Societies of Control,” (1990) Gilles Deleuze sketches the contours of current and future existences as having to cope with multiplied options and possibilities. He observes that the beginning of the twentieth century sees the maximum development of the societies of disciplines, and the forms of social control that these embody. In the disciplinary societies, extensively and influentially studied by Michel Foucault in works such as *Madness and Civilization* (1961) and *Discipline and Punish* (1975), individuals, throughout their lifetimes, experience a series of regulated institutions (the family, the school, the factory, the hospital, the prison...) in which their subjectivities are shaped according to standards and norms which are ubiquitous and functional to society.

In other words, disciplinary societies act on individual bodies to exert a form of power that is at once very subtle and extremely pervasive. We might perceive ourselves as 'free' individuals, but our self-perception has been shaped by and within environments that function according to rules we have interiorized to the point that we do not perceive any longer their coercing and authoritarian drive.

In his short text, Deleuze detects an important transition in power dynamics he sees occurring at the end of the last century. If the institutions that make us who we are, and the forms of power they implement, used to be static moulds, now they are becoming dynamic modulations, and our subjectivities are shifting in the process. The institutions of enclosure of the society of disciplines are making space for much more fluid organizations that Deleuze names 'institutions of control:' "enclosure are molds, distinct castings, but controls are a modulation, like a self-deforming cast that will continuously change from one moment to the other, or like a sieve whose mesh will transmute from point to point." (*Postscript 4*)

Naturally, this change has consequences for love relationships as well: if in the past individuals were expected, by marrying another, to make a lifetime commitment, today individuals see their possibilities significantly multiplied as they 'navigate' romantic relationships.

Within the last forty years, and since the 21st century especially, there have been works of fiction, in Anglophone literature, at the forefront of elaborating this crucial transition from a modern but 'older' social order to a more fluid and current one, in which subjectivity and love are construed and narrated as rhizomic and always in flux.

If A.S. Byatt's *Possession: A Romance* (1990), for instance, 'multiplies' the existential possibilities of its protagonists by making them live in the past as well as in the present, Kazuo Ishiguro's main character(s) in *Never Let Me Go* (2009) are human clones regularly made to sacrifice a part of themselves, embodying the impossibility to commit to long-term existential projects. Colm Tóibín's *Brooklyn* (2009) elaborates on the impossibility of being 'here' and 'there' at the same time, David Nicholls' *One Day* (2009) reminds us of the irremediable loss that may come from perceiving our existential possibilities as endless.

Lastly, Sally Rooney's *Normal People*, as this essay has illustrated, offers a moving depiction of the specific burden that comes with having one's possibilities for love (and disappointment) multiplied in the current era. In *Normal People*, self-knowledge and love are not 'achievements'

to be conquered once and for all, that can be ‘stored away’ and be relied upon throughout a lifetime; they will be lost and discovered time and again, for as soon as Marianne and Connell find happiness with and through one another, the modulation catches up with them, and Connell’s life “opens up before him in all directions at once.” (NP 266)

#### 4. Concluding Remarks

Although some of the most critically acclaimed Anglophone works of fiction of the current century feature romantic storylines that reflect major collective and individual changes in the way we perceive our subjectivity, these have never been isolated and analysed as such. If we explore them deploying the analytical tools developed by romance scholarship, we will see numerous and important textual instances of that interplay between the ‘structural’ and the ‘personal’ previously discussed in the introduction of this essay.

By analysing *Normal People* with the help of romance scholarship, this essay has shown the text as a hybrid and multi-layered creation which uniquely encapsulates elements of the romance and the coming-of-age story. Making a case for the interconnectedness between self-knowledge and individual adjustment to society on the one hand, and the capacity to love another on the other, the novel blends two literary forms whose past and current affiliations should be further explored.

Vis-à-vis the bildungsroman, to which the present publication is dedicated, *Normal People* makes an argument in favour of emotional co-dependence and the human necessity to love and be loved against claims for intellectual as well as emotional self-sufficiency, thereby overcoming the triadic conception upon which the genre was historically built.

As a ‘disruptive inheritor’ of such a distinguished literary form, the novel does not make its protagonists proceed along a road punctuated with important encounters. Following the necessity to find ways of conceiving of and narrating otherness that do not reduce it to a stepping-stone towards self-realization, the novel places its protagonists inside a house exposed at all sides to external interferences (two plants sharing the same soil), making visible the contemporaneous and inescapable nature of the connection of their lives with those of everyone else, as well as with a virtually endless series of other events, ‘private’ as well as ‘structural.’



- 1 Selinger further explains that Regis “not only set aside the vexed, unhelpful metaphor of ‘addiction’ to romance; she gave herself license to shrug off the hierarchy that segregates high-art and popular versions of the courtship-and-betrothal narrative,” (*Rebooting* 2) thoroughly refreshing the standard academic approach to the genre.
- 2 The heroine’s freedom to choose one partner’s freely from social and familial constraints: “this freedom is limited – ‘pragmatic as [Northrop] Frye would have it. For a heroine, especially, it is not absolute. It is freedom, nonetheless.” (*Natural History* 30)
- 3 “The ‘point of ritual death’ is that moment in a romance novel when the union between heroine and hero seems completely impossible. It is marked by death or its simulacrum (for example fainting or illness); by the risk of death; or by any number of images or events that suggest death, however metaphorically (for example, darkness, sadness, despair, or winter).” (*Natural History* 14)
- 4 The latter adjective is given a rather loose sense; it is ‘political’ any context saturated with power relations, and high school certainly constitutes one of such contexts.
- 5 This is a notion present in the author’s literary imagination. After all, Rooney’s previous novel, *Conversations with Friends*, ends with the following consideration: “You live through certain things before you understand them. You can’t always take the analytical position.” (*Conversations* 321) As I will argue in the following segment of this essay, *Normal People* makes a concrete effort at illustrating life as unmediated experience – events one must cope with before understanding them – rather than a sequence of occurrences one can control through analytical approach.
- 6 This happens over the course of a trip to Trieste, Italy. Marianne and Connell discuss, for the first time, their feelings towards their unequal statuses and financial situations.
- 7 Always following Moretti’s categorizations, the previous part of the essay, with its structural analysis, is mainly concerned with the aspects of the text that pertain to the *fabula*, “essential, logic, wholly self-contained,” a “less visible, but far more solid” (*The Way* 17) element of the text. This second

part focuses on the *sjuzhet*, the “values and experiences that gratify our sense of individuality” (*The Way* 17) and that traditionally pertain to the bildungsroman.

- 8 This essay will not enter philological debates concerning the past or present affiliations of the genre. It will only be briefly observed, however, in relation to the passage quoted, that is historically inaccurate to make of the marriage plot/romance novel a ‘variant’ of the Bildungsroman. If we take the foundational texts of their respective traditions as indicative of a minimum measure of historical accuracy, we see that Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela; or, of Virtue Rewarded* (1740) is half a century older than *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* (Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship Years, 1795/96).
- 9 While still in high-school, Marianne ‘makes’ Connell realize his love for literature. Consequently, Connell chooses to study English in college, but he will remain conflicted about this for a long time. Connell needs time to conciliate his deeper passions and desires within him, which include his attachment to Marianne.
- 10 Author Olivia Sudjic discusses the ‘millennial novel’. The passage continues as follows: “It is one thing to hate the world and want to change it, as many books that ‘defined’ previous generations did, but if you hate yourself, nowhere feels like home for very long; relief is found in certain physical places, memories, a person, a routine or mind-numbing substance. The need for these in millennial novels is always, at least in part, a response to the death throes of a ruthless economic system that makes us feel like outsiders to ourselves, a system propped up by ecocide, racism, sexism, the class system and heteronormativity. The longing is alleviated only by revulsion.” (*Darkly Funny* n.p.)
- 11 Recently, there have been numerous attempts at bringing to the fore ‘alternative narratives of bildung,’ stories that undermine the Euro-centric nature of the constructs listed by Frow et al. See, for instances, Stella Bolaki’s *Unsettling the Bildungsroman* (2011), and Michael Perfect’s “The Multicultural Bildungsroman: Stereotypes in Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane*.” (2008)
- 12 See Engel’s competent illustration of the different historical phases of the genre articulated around the successive versions of Johann Wolfgang Goethe’s novel, from the *Wilhelm Meisters theatralische Sendung* (Wilhelm Meister’s Theatrical Calling), to the *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*.
- 13 This theoretical matrix, Engel explains, characterizes not only the most representative German novels of the genre, but also some of the most illustrious instances of their Anglophone Romantic ‘equivalents’, verses penned by authors such as William Wordsworth, John Keats, Percy B. Shelley, Samuel T. Coleridge, and William Blake. Engel glosses by

observing that “most of these verse narrations create [...] a new myth for the triadic pattern of unity, fall, unity regained.” (*Variants* 278) This influential pattern – philosophical and discursive, as well as artistic – travels beyond the Germanic and Anglophone contexts with texts such as *Aurélia ou le Rêve et la Vie* (1855) by Gérard de Nerval, and *Sartor Resartus* (1833/34) by Thomas Carlyle, a narrative that assumed much importance among the American Transcendentalists.

- 14 Novels of development do not exist before the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Before that time, Engel argues, fictional characters’ changes are “abrupt and have no psychological motivation.” (*Variants* 265)
- 15 Rooney’s narratives discuss existences as reciprocally determined, materially as well as affectively. In a recent interview, she elucidated this point: “I definitely do have a strong reaction against the predominant discourse of independence. [...] The way that I started thinking about gender politics was organized around female independence, so the idea that women should be independent from men, but also from one another and from social structures, and that empowerment was about personal agency and decision-making. And I guess I just increasingly became critical of that attitude. I now feel like there is absolutely nothing independent about the way that we live our lives [...]. I’m not interested in pursuing the idea that we should have, or could have, independence from other people, either in our intimate lives or in a situation within a network of economic exchange.” (Cullingham, *Not So Interested* 10)
- 16 See the article “The Small Rebellions of Sally Rooney’s *Normal People*” (2019) by Annalisa Quinn, in which Marianne and Connell’s ‘system’ or reciprocal support is read as form of rebellion against a capitalistic society that extends its promotion of individualistic values and selfishness to the context of interpersonal relationships.



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