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Vulnerability and Precariousness in Sally Rooney's *Normal People* (2018)

Autora

María Carmona Moliner

Directora

Maite Escudero Alías

Facultad de Filosofía y Letras

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It's funny the decisions you make because you like someone, he says, and then your whole life is different. I think we're at that weird age where life can change a lot from small decisions. But you've been a very good influence on me overall, like I definitely am a better person now, I think. Thanks to you.

(Sally Rooney, *Normal People*)

ABSTRACT

This final degree project aims to analyse the representation of vulnerability and precariousness in Sally Rooney's novel *Normal People* (2018) through its protagonists, Connell Waldron and Marianne Sheridan, who suffer from the uncertainty about the future and the lack of identity so characteristic of Irish society in the years following the economic boom that marked the 1990s and its subsequent crises. Based on in-depth reading and study of the formal and thematic aspects of the novel, as well as the historical and literary contextualisation of the author and her work in what is considered 'post-national' literature, the purpose is to analyse how those financial crises have influenced young Irish society and how certain situations of precariousness and vulnerability have contributed to constructing and solidifying the identities of each of the characters in Rooney's novel.

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INTRODUCTION

The Irish literary tradition has always been closely connected to the social, political, economic and cultural changes the country has experienced over the years, a history witnessed and dexterously portrayed by many remarkable Irish authors. At the end of the twentieth century, Ireland experienced two major events: first, the entry into the European Union in 1973, and then, in the 1990s, it enjoyed a rapid growth of the country's economy, which economist Kevin Gardiner called the 'Celtic Tiger' and which lasted until the early years of the twenty-first century (Villar-Argáiz 1). As Pilar Villar-Argáiz explains in her article, both events resulted in a period of transformation in every field and at every stage of Irish life: the transition from a generally agrarian economy to a more sophisticated and international one, the resurgence of feminist movements, which favoured the achievement of equality and freedom for women, the declining power and therefore fading influence of the Catholic Church, and several political accomplishments regarding the North of Ireland, apart from many other noticeable changes (1). However, this rapid economic growth soon ended with the beginning of new financial crises in 2008 and 2012, which affected Ireland and many other European countries and, once again, transformed the country completely, turning it into recession and poverty again (14-5).

As suggested by Fintan O'Toole, the collapse of the economy was immediately followed by the degradation of the power and authority once provided by the Catholic Church and nationalist parties, two crucial elements that have historically defined Irish identity as a nation (24). This shift in the influences and powers of the country, together with the changes that Ireland has undergone since the late twentieth century, meant that Ireland sought a new identity, somewhat shaped by the social inequalities that began to

emerge in the years following the Celtic Tiger and which are reflected in the literature of the time (24).

That search for a new identity is related to what Colm Tóibín coined, and Ralf Haekel has discussed in his study, as 'post-national' Irish literature (23), that is, a type of contemporary literature which departs from the more traditional aspects of Irish literature and which illustrates the economic and social transformation experienced by the country since the last decade of the twentieth century; namely, the economic boom of the Celtic Tiger Years in the 1990s and the collapse of the economy in 2008 (Haekel 19). Therefore, since Irish literature is closely linked to the socio-political and cultural climate of the time, it was to be expected that, due to the great cultural and social impact the country suffered during and after the economic boom, Irish authors adopted the economic situation of the country as one of the main themes for their works, making it a recurrent and contemporary motif and establishing a distinction between Irish fiction written during the Celtic Years and post-Celtic Irish fiction (24-5). Indeed, many contemporary Irish authors address this issue together with that concerning identity, yet the question of national identity is not a contemporary theme in Irish literature; it goes back many years, probably to the emergence of Irish fiction, and is strongly associated with Irish history and politics (22).

These topics have notoriously influenced Irish literature over the years and may be identified in many contemporary Irish novels, such as in Sally Rooney's *Normal People* (2018), a novel that focuses on identity formation in post-Celtic Tiger Ireland, as well as how the post-Celtic Tiger crisis affected Irish society. As will be seen, one of the main concerns of Rooney's fiction lies in the intrinsic difficulty for young people to be independent in such environment (Barros, "Irish Youth" 77). Thus, a new literary canon is being created by combining old topics with new ones, raising the possibility of

a new age in Irish writing, one in which the focus of the literary canon shifts "from Irish history, politics, and national identity" to a more inclusive form of post-national literature (Haekel 25). This may be observed in Rooney's novel, where she incorporates classic Irish images, such as "the rural-urban exodus, the dysfunctional family and migration" (Barros, "Irish Youth" 76), and contemporary issues resulting from the Celtic and post-Celtic Tiger Years, like the disastrous economic situation that led to "the housing crises, the privilege enjoyed by the upper classes and the economic challenges faced by the less wealthy" (77), among other issues that will be further analysed.

Therefore, as professor María Amor Barros del Río ("Irish Youth" 77-78) concludes in her article, despite seeming a romantic novel that narrates the love story between two Irish teenagers, Rooney's work very much deals with and denounces the conflicts and the damaging effects of capitalism and globalization in contemporary Ireland, whose impact may be directly perceived through its protagonists in the form of vulnerability and precarity. Despite the many flourishing changes the country experienced, Ireland's prosperity was soon in decline with the financial crisis of 2008 and its aftermath, as discussed before. Those concerns belonging to the past years — "unemployment, poverty, and the need to emigrate"— vigorously reappeared (Haekel 24) along with a sense of vulnerability and precarity, the latter highly influenced by those issues concerning unemployment, financial needs and migration, as well as other common and current anxieties, as pointed out by María Isabel Romero Ruiz and Pilar Cuder Domínguez in their study on vulnerability (2). Currently, the rise and negative effects of capitalism and globalization also developed in Ireland a sense of scepticism and hopelessness among people, especially young people, who started to worry about the uncertainty of their future (Santiago and Fernández 10). Not coincidentally, such

restlessness has become a key trait in Rooney's fiction, giving way to the discussion of different affects and feelings such as loneliness, depression, vulnerability and precariousness as experienced by young people.

Bearing these ideas in mind, the purpose of this dissertation is to analyse how Sally Rooney's main characters in *Normal People*, Connell and Marianne, exemplify the above-mentioned vulnerability and precariousness characteristic of post-Celtic Tiger Ireland, as well as their search for a new identity that makes them feel like normal young Irish individuals in what seems a rather hopeless society. The question of what does it mean to be a normal youngster in Ireland today becomes more relevant than ever in Rooney's fiction. So, in order to answer this question and pursue an in-depth exploration of the novel itself, attention will be paid to both form and content, highlighting the main themes that appear in the text, as well as specific narratological devices such as the recurrent use of analepses, internal focalization and free indirect speech, all of which will reinforce my interpretation of the text as a fully Irish novel that, though contesting old stereotypes, still portrays its characters as being embedded in an endless cycle of emotional paralysis and stagnation.

With the purpose of studying the treatment of vulnerability and precariousness in *Normal People*, together with the question of identity, the dissertation will be thus divided into two main parts. The first section will be devoted to the textual analysis of the novel, in which I will briefly introduce Sally Rooney as a 'post-national' Irish author, her professional career as a writer and her works, and then focus immediately on the novel, *Normal People*. The second major section will address the issues of vulnerability and precariousness in literature and their representation in the novel itself through its main characters: Connell and Marianne. Finally, I will finish the dissertation

with a conclusion in which I will summarise the main points and ideas discussed throughout the essay.

1. Sally Rooney as a 'Post-National' Author

Sally Rooney is a young Irish author whose writings have recently attracted attention on a global scale. She has been heralded as a 'post-national' Irish author, that is, a term applied to authors whose work transcends national boundaries and addresses universal themes. Rooney's work is frequently lauded for its sharp comments on contemporary youth culture and its distinctive view of Irish identity, as well as for being "a powerful site of neoliberal critique" (Bracken and Harney-Mahajan 1), a common feature within "contemporary women's writing in the recessionary and post-recessionary" times (1). The post-national nature of Rooney's writing, which addresses larger, universal themes rather than just Irish-specific ones, is one of its distinguishing features. For instance, her first novel, *Conversations with Friends* (2017), explores the difficulties of contemporary relationships through its main character, Frances, while intimacy, class, and power dynamics are examined in her second book, *Normal People* (2018). However, Rooney's work is also strongly influenced by the Irish experience, as in her short story *Colour and Light* (2019), where she tackles the experience of growing up in a small Irish town. Her writing is infused with a sense of place and frequently explores themes unique to the Irish environment.

Yet the way Rooney questions conventional ideas of Irish nationality sets her apart as a post-national Irish writer. Her work adopts a more expansive concept of Irishness than one that adheres to a more restrictive definition. Her characters frequently move across borders and seamlessly transition between various cultures and identities. In *Normal People*, for instance, Connell, one of the main characters, is a working-class

Irishman who enrols in Trinity College Dublin and develops a romance with Marianne, his wealthy and sophisticated classmate. Their relationship exposes the complicated interplay between Irish identity and globalism and challenges their preconceptions about class and social standing. Overall, Rooney is an Irish author who writes in a 'post-national' vein, and her work is distinguished by its ability to examine universal issues while posing questions about conventional concepts of Irish identity. Her writing is aimed at a new generation of Irish people —yet, as suggested by Barros del Río ("The Millennial Novel" 177) it could also represent the voice of a new generation in general known as the millennials— who are grappling with the complexities of modern life and are eager to take a broader view of what it means to be Irish in the twenty-first century.

Sally Rooney was born in Castlebar, County Mayo, Ireland, in 1991 and, as already stated, she is considered one of the best-known young authors who belong to a new generation of post-Celtic Tiger Irish fiction. Moreover, as she was born during the Celtic Tiger years, and therefore witnessed all the socio-economic changes Ireland went through, her works have some touches of her own experience. Born and raised in a recessionary climate, it was to be expected that Rooney would join in the creation of so-called 'recessionary texts', that is, as explained by Barros, texts that "illustrate the flourishing years and the devastation of subsequent cuts, bringing to the fore trauma and vulnerability as some of the effects of the post-boom era" (177). That is why her novels, based on her personal experience, particularly *Normal People*, are a perfect example of twenty-first-century Irish authors responding to and mirroring the contrasts of the young people of today and their controversial articulation of identity (Barros, "The Millennial Novel" 177-8).

Sally Rooney's *Normal People* (2018) is a captivating and intimate exploration of young love, class, and power dynamics in present-day Ireland. Set in the small town

of Carricklea and later in the bustling city of Dublin, the novel follows the complex relationship between two high school classmates, Connell Waldron and Marianne Sheridan, two Irish youngsters who struggle to fit in contemporary Irish society while experiencing their coming-of-age process. Despite coming from opposite worlds, they are pulled to one another in a passionate bond that fluctuates with time. Rooney explores the complexities of socio-economic status, the difficulties of communication and intimacy, and the effects of the past on the present via the development of their relationship from their school days through university and beyond. Rooney's work is recognised for its sharp, observant manner and profound study of the complexity of human relationships, making *Normal People* a compelling and thought-provoking read that has garnered widespread critical acclaim and a devoted audience. The novel became a bestseller and won several awards, and in the spring of 2020 was adapted into a successful television series, further solidifying Rooney's position as one of the most promising young authors of her time.

The novel is expertly written, taking advantage of its formal and aesthetic elements to thoroughly examine its topics and characters. Rooney's precise language, realistic dialogue, and complex characterization, and the combination of both form and content (Lonergan 2), make the novel a riveting reading that appeals to readers of all ages. In terms of form, *Normal People* has a very unique structure that reflects the nuanced and developing interaction between its two central characters. The novel is divided into a series of short, numbered chapters that often end suddenly, building suspense and energy. While the chapters lack titles, dates are used to introduce them, making the reader move forward and backwards in time. Connell and Marianne's shifting power dynamics and their evolving sense of self and identity are all highlighted in the chapters, which are also interspersed with frequent shifts between past and

present that give context, deepen the character backstories, and establish the novel as a non-linear story. *Normal People* can be divided into four sections: their final year of high school, their first year of college, a time when they are both in relationships with other people, and, finally, when they are together again after several years apart.

The narrative is told by a heterodiegetic narrator that offers a quite balanced and democratic view of the events, as the main focalisation is internal and switches between Connell and Marianne over the course of several years, from January 2011 to February 2015. Such a change of points of view between the two main characters also coincides with the change of chapters: the chapters alternate Connell's and Marianne's perspectives. This allows the reader to get inside the heads of both characters and understand their inner thoughts and feelings, as well as to see the same incident from their two different points of view. By experiencing the same event from two different perspectives, Rooney demonstrates, as Professor Patrick Lonergan points out, the integrity of each person's unique subjective point of view and the fact that there are no 'normal people' —just distinctive ways of seeing the world that is shaped and determined by our hopes, anxieties, insecurities and wants, among other things (14). Both Connell and Marianne frequently perceive the same event differently, but the truth remains the same for each of them. Rooney gives readers insight into the two characters' thoughts and feelings by switching between their points of view, which also helps to comprehend the intricate dynamics of their relationship.

Rooney uses clear, succinct language with a focus on expressing the characters' emotional states. To convey a sense of immediacy and urgency, she often uses fragments and short sentences. The minimalist writing of the novel, which prioritises dialogue and free indirect style, allows the characters' thoughts and emotions to be the main point of interest and fosters intimacy (Barros, **"**Irish Youth" 74). The intricate and

delicate complexities of human interactions are communicated through language. The characters' interactions are genuine and realistic, with pauses, hesitations, and unfinished words that mimic real-life discussions and depict the complexity and ambiguity of human interaction: "She, uh… She's hard to describe if you don't know her" (Rooney 216). This makes the novel even more genuine and makes it simpler to relate to the characters. It contributes to Connell's and Marianne's portrayal as nuanced, complicated persons with realistic flaws and qualities. Rooney does not hold back when presenting their less appealing qualities, which gives them a more genuine feel. Additionally, Rooney uses the characters' body language and facial expressions to convey their emotions, which gives their interactions a deeper, richer quality. Another aspect of her writing style that should be highlighted is how she employs repetition in dialogue and narration to give the text rhythm and pace and emphasise the story's recurring themes and motifs. For example, the word "money" and the topic of economic difference is mostly expressed and reiterated through Connell using free indirect style to highlight his economic concerns:

> It just felt too much like asking her for money. He and Marianne never talked about money. They had never talked, for example, about the fact that her mother paid his mother money to scrub their floors and hang their laundry, or about the fact that this money circulated indirectly to Connell, who spent it, as often as not, on Marianne. (122)

Furthermore, as the book goes on, we can observe how the style develops into something more refined. In general, as expressed by Barros, an insightful depiction of the mental and emotional terrain is achieved through Rooney's precise and personal prose, which is fractured and plays with time gaps, and, as a result, the slow-moving plot is overshadowed by the characters' growth ("Irish Youth" 74).

Even though much of the essence of *Normal People* may be found in the introspective development of the characters' personalities through a present-tense omniscient narration (76), Rooney also uses different types of discourse and dialogue to explore larger themes, such as class, power, and gender, as in the following excerpt, in which we have access to Marianne's innermost thoughts about Lukas, one of his abusive partners:

> People spend time in his studio often and seem to move a lot of artistic equipment up and down his stairs, but are they fans of his work, grateful for his attention? Or are they exploiting him for the convenient location of his working space while making fun of him behind his back? (Rooney 191)

The conversations between Connell and Marianne frequently reflect their different socio-economic standings, with Connell using more colloquial language and Marianne employing a more formal one. For example, when Marianne is at the nightclub with the committee girls waiting for Connell and his friends to arrive, she texts and asks him when they are going to come. While Marianne's messages are grammatically correct, Connell's are more informal, omitting capital letters and question and punctuation marks:

> Marianne takes her phone from her bag and writes Connell a text message: Lively discussion here on the subject of your absence. Are you planning to come at all? Within thirty seconds he replies: yeah jack just got sick everywhere so we had to put him in a taxi etc. on our way soon though. how are you getting on socialising with people. […] (31)

This dynamic draws attention to their different social classes and how these disparities affect their relationship: particularly when discussing their sexual relationship —and sex in general—, Marianne frequently talks more authoritatively and outspokenly while

Connell is more reserved and apprehensive. A very illustrative example of her blunt and abrupt dialogues regarding sex might be when Connell and Marianne are in the abandoned building and she asks him: "If I wanted you to fuck me here […] would you do it?", to what Connell confesses that Marianne is "always making [him] do such weird things" (35). Moreover, while mentioning above the formality with which Marianne tends to speak, she assures us in this passage that "it was the first time in her life she could say shocking things and use bad language" (35); their company transforms each other's character throughout the course of the novel.

Class, power, and social hierarchy are therefore some of the themes that Sally Rooney explores in *Normal People*, as well as the question of identity, which I will focus on later. Connell and Marianne come from different socio-economic backgrounds, and the power dynamics that exist between them hamper their relationship. The novel uses several symbols to convey its themes and motifs, such as the chain Connell wears around his neck, which he touches when feeling anxious and insecure, and the broken window in Marianne's house, which symbolizes her troubled family dynamics (Lonergan 17). The meaning behind those symbols is not told to the readers directly, but rather in a roundabout way. This is a very common and interesting feature in Rooney's writing: she explains everything by saying as little as possible and it is up to the reader to understand the references; she conveys meaning through omission and assumes that the reader knows what she is talking about (17). For example, we learn about Connell's social and economic status from the clothes he wears or what he drinks at parties, not because Rooney tells us directly. When he arrives at the nightclub, we read that "he's dressed in a white button-down shirt, the same Adidas sneakers he wears everywhere" (Rooney 37). When both Connell and Marianne are studying at Trinity, Connell goes to a party with a pack of Dutch Gold while everyone else is drinking Cointreau (83) and

his sense of style is described as "Argos chic" by Peggy, one of Marianne's friends (146). Rooney never tells or explains to the reader that these associations are characteristically cheap, or typical of someone whose social and/or economic status is inferior. Instead, she believes the reader knows what she is implying, that they know what the societal norms are.

Concerning the above-mentioned thematic aspects of the novel, the question of identity is still a recurrent concern in contemporary Irish fiction —although somewhat different from that of earlier times and influenced by other concerns— and present-day Irish writers have had to "reshape traditional articulations of identity formation in the present recessionary context, eliciting in their works innovative forms of expression" (Barros Irish Youth 74) due to the aforementioned economic success of the 1990s and the following crises of 2008 and 2012. In other words, Irish authors, including Sally Rooney, started to be concerned with issues that do not correspond to the conventional Irish canon and thus began to depart from and/or critically approach some traditional topics and experiment with new ones, still focusing on the articulation of identity formation within a recessionary atmosphere. However, as Haekel asserts in his article, there is still evidence of the traditional Irish canon's significant influence on post-Celtic Tiger fiction, as well as there is of its most relevant topics: "history, politics, and the (dysfunctional) family" (32), all of which may be perceived in Rooney's novel.

Despite *Normal People* being set between Sligo and Dublin, it is quite interesting that there are no references to iconic names of the Irish literature; yet the novel is still very much in dialogue with Irish literary tradition. As Professor Patrick Lonergan explains, one of the popular assumptions about Irish literature is that it is obsessed with the land, the environment, the natural world and so on (3). However, Rooney exhibits very little understanding of the natural world even though Connell and

Marianne reside in a more rural area than Trinity in Dublin, where they attend college. For instance, the only description of the landscape we have in the second chapter when the characters are on the bus is the following: "Out the window: black, cattle, green meadows, white houses with brown roof tiles" (Rooney 11); Rooney says no more about the landscape. The land, the environment and the natural world that surrounds them serve instead as a metaphor for the mental states of the characters: "When the weather is good, the sky feels miles away, and birds wheel through limitless air and light overhead" (97). The birds Connell refers to that appear when the weather is good may be related to the positive relationship status between him and Marianne. Such implication is stated a few lines before: "Things are pretty good between him and Marianne at the moment" (96). Yet as can be seen, Rooney's vocabulary is rather general, without specifying any aspect of the natural world —she does not mention the type of birds Connell refers to.

Carricklea, a fictional town in Sligo that is based on Rooney's hometown of Castlebar in Mayo, serves as the setting for the book. In this way, Rooney is attempting to depict a particular style of regional Irish small-town life. This portrayal of the West of Ireland is intriguing because it contrasts with the idealised representation of the West that was made popular in Irish literature a century ago, such as in some poems by William Butler Yates or even in some works by James Joyce —who has influenced Rooney tremendously, mainly in the use of interior free direct style and the characters' psychic paralysis —, where the west of Ireland is described as a place of natural beauty and as the true source of Irish identity (Lonergan 3). As she is familiar with the Irish literary revival, Rooney has very little to say about the folklore and landscape of the west of Ireland, and the language is not particularly regionally specific (4); she does not say much about how the language varies from one place to the other, from Carricklea to

Dublin. Additionally, and in contrast with Joyce, instead of going West, Connell and Marianne head East, to Dublin, and, when Connell departs at the end of the novel, he heads back West, but not to the literary famous West of Ireland; rather, he heads to New York (15).

Normal People equally draws on more traditional Irish conventions like "the rural-urban exodus, the dysfunctional family and migration" (Barros Irish Youth 76) without ignoring other features that characterise present-day Ireland, particularly "the housing crisis, the presence of social media in daily life, and a global Ireland that the Irish youth easily identifies with" (76), as already noted in the Introduction. Rooney's novels still adhere to some canonical Irish fiction themes, such as the articulation of identity, but they distinctly veer away from other Irish-specific subjects like "nationalism and the Catholic Church" (Barros The Millennial Novel 178). From these issues, the novel manages to show the concerns and anxieties of a generation tremendously affected by all the socio-economic changes experienced in the country. Sally Rooney shows in *Normal People* the transition of this young generation from adolescence to adulthood, and the construction of the individual, fundamentally dependent on the management of events in post-Celtic Tiger Ireland. Through Connell and Marianne, Rooney presents to the reader a current depiction of the difficulties young Irish people have to experience as they mature, along with fears for a hopeless future. For this very reason, the novel could be considered a sort of Bildungsroman, that is, a type of "novel that depicts and explores [how] the protagonist develops morally and psychologically" (Britannica).

As already acknowledged, and focusing on the challenges Irish youth must overcome as a result of the Post-Celtic Tiger Years, Rooney's novel explores contemporary anxieties, such as multiple types of physical violence, conflictions within

the family sphere, a strong sense of alienation, and class privilege, as well as issues concerning the excessive rents, casual sexual encounters, and job uncertainty (Barros, "The Millennial Novel" 178). Therefore, the second part of this analysis will aim attention at all these tensions regarding the topics of vulnerability and precariousness embodied by both Connell and Marianne and how such ideas help to build their identities within their complex process of coming of age.

2. Vulnerability and Precariousness in Sally Rooney's *Normal People* (2018)

Numerous literary genres have extensively examined the themes of vulnerability and precariousness, which have to do with the fragility and unpredictability of human existence. Precariousness is the state of being unsure and unstable, especially in terms of economic and social circumstances, while vulnerability is the state of being exposed to danger or injury, both physically and emotionally, and, as established by Mackenzie et al., and explained by María Isabel Romero and Pilar Cuder, it "is something inherent to the human condition" (7), adding that "we are not only vulnerable to the actions of others, but also dependent on their care and support" (7). These themes are frequently used in literature to examine the intricacies of interpersonal relationships, identity, power connections, and social injustice. Readers can have a deeper understanding of the experiences and problems of those who deal with vulnerability and precariousness daily through the prism of literature.

Vulnerability and precariousness are poignantly depicted in Sally Rooney's *Normal People* (2018) in the lives of its two major characters, Marianne, an affluent and bright classmate who is frequently shunned by her classmates, and Connell, a popular high school athlete. Both characters are shown as weak young Irish people who are attempting to deal with the difficulties of their social and personal life

throughout the course of the novel. Connell, although popular and academically successful, feels uncomfortable and alone as a result of his working-class upbringing, in contrast to Marianne, who comes from a wealthy and violent family and struggles with confidence and a sense of belonging. They struggle in their relationship to strike a balance between their love for one another and their anxiety about living up to society's expectations and their own. The power dynamics between them change as they go from being close friends to loving partners. Rooney's portrayal of vulnerability and precariousness in *Normal People* is nuanced and realistic. She highlights the effects of cultural and familial pressures on people and how these influences can breed feelings of vulnerability and apprehension. Through Connell and Marianne's experiences, readers gain a deeper understanding of the emotional toll that vulnerability and precariousness can have on individuals, and how these themes can shape the course of our lives.

Probably the most prominent example of a precarious situation is the characters' social positions. Due to their standings in their respective circles of friends, Connell and Marianne are both socially vulnerable. Marianne experiences bullying and social exclusion at school, which makes her feel weak and alone. It is stated in the novel that "a lot of people really hate her" (Ronney 2), and people have made up that "she has a mental illness now or something" (3), completely unaware of her background. Connell, on the other hand, suffers from anxiety and vulnerability because he feels compelled to fit in with society's expectations once their relationship shifts when they enrol in Trinity College Dublin, where "Marianne suddenly has a cool boyfriend and Connell is the lonely, unpopular one" (73). Connell has trouble fitting in Dublin while Marianne is accepted by her new social group, despite him being well-liked and popular in high school.

Their economic circumstances are another major example of the characters' precariousness and vulnerability. As Haekel illustrates, "economic decline is visible everywhere in the novel" (30), and readers get a glimpse of the devastating economic situation surrounding Ireland from the very beginning, when Connell takes Marianne to what people known as "the ghost", an abandoned housing estate whose only purpose is to host parties or gatherings of young people who go there to drink (Rooney 33). Yet the characters' economic precariousness significantly differs from one another, Connell being the most affected by it. Connell, who comes from a working-class family and whose mother works as a cleaner in Marianne's house, finds it difficult to pay for his college education. Connell and his family face financial difficulties, and his economic vulnerability has an impact on his decisions and goals. Despite what everyone thinks of him because of his decision of studying English at Trinity, he knows "he'll have to work full-time over the summer and at least part-time during term" to be able to pay for college (49).

On the other hand, although Marianne was raised in a rich family, she lives in a psychologically abusive home. She experiences increasing levels of abuse from both her mother and brother after her father passes away, making her feel unwanted and abandoned. From the very beginning of the novel we can see the abusive behaviour of Alan, her brother, who teases her for not having any friends when he asks Marianne where she is going and then "grabs her by the upper arm and tugs her back from the door. She feels her jaw tighten. His fingers compress her arm through her jacket." (10) Marianne confesses Connell that her father used to beat her and her mother as well when she was young (43). Later on in the novel, Alan's abusive behaviour reaches its peak when he hits Marianne's face with the door after throwing a bottle of beer at her (240-1). Marianne's mother Denise is indifferent to such aggressive behaviour towards

her daughter and sees it as something completely normal and justified, blaming Marianne and her "frigid and unlovable personality" (65). Such psychological —and physical— violence leaves Marianne marked for life and her actions and choices are strongly influenced by her being abused, as will be commented on later.

Their academic and job insecurity, as well as their uncertainty about the future, are related to this economic precariousness. Academic demands and uncertainties are shared by both Marianne and Connell. While Marianne does well academically but suffers from self-worth, Connell has trouble finding his way after high school. Even though Law at NUI Galway is his first option, Connell does not appear to be particularly motivated or interested in Law because, as Lonergan explains, "he is looking for a study that would match his points instead of looking for something that would match his interests and own feelings" (19). This relates very much with societal assumptions and expectations, especially nowadays, when finding a proper job seems more important than studying something that you truly enjoy. When Marianne suggests he should study English at Trinity, Connell admits that he is "not sure about the job prospects" (Rooney 20) and, later on in the novel, he affirms once again that "it's not like English is a real degree you can get a job out of it, it's just a joke", regretting not having applied for Law in Galway (48). Their general sense of vulnerability and uncertainty about their futures is exacerbated by their academic uncertainties.

Additionally, throughout the novel, both Connell and Marianne exhibit emotional vulnerability and precariousness. Despite their intense affection, they have trouble communicating with one another. They battle low self-esteem, insecurities, and rejection anxiety, and they are susceptible to each other's judgements and rejections because of their fears and low self-esteem. Their interactions and decisions are impacted by their emotional vulnerabilities, which causes misunderstandings and uncertainty in

their relationship. Connell and Marianne's failure to communicate their genuine sentiments and intentions to one another is one of the key causes of their misunderstandings. Without having a direct conversation, they frequently assume what the other person is thinking or feeling, which causes misunderstandings and unneeded suffering. Both of them have a propensity to hide their feelings, enabling the other person to speculate or misinterpret their actions. For example, when Connell can no longer afford the rent in Dublin, he thinks about telling Marianne, as he knows she would let him stay at her house. However, by the time he tells her, Connell thinks it is too late to ask her to stay at her place and simply suggests that in the three months he will be away Marianne might want to be with other people (124). Yet Marianne's reply a few chapters later confirms that everything was a problem of miscommunication and therefore a misunderstanding: "You told me you wanted us to see other people, she says. I had no idea you wanted to stay here. I thought you were breaking up with me. […] You didn't say anything about wanting to stay here, she adds. You would have been welcome, obviously. You always were." (151)

There are multiple occasions where one character misinterprets the other's actions; Lorraine even tells her son that maybe he is "misinterpreting what happened" (126). For instance, Connell first hesitates to be seen with her in public, which Marianne initially takes to mean that he is embarrassed by their connection; yet his reasons are a result of his anxiety about criticism from other people. Still, everyone at school seemed to know about their secret relationship and, funnily enough, "no one cared, really" (78). Likewise, Connell feels Marianne has moved on and quits chasing her when she begins dating someone else, completely unaware that she is still in love with him, as when she starts seeing Jamie. Connell thinks that she "had just wanted to see someone else all along" (124), someone with similar economic status, and simply gives up. All of these

misunderstandings and anxieties regarding their relationship could have been avoided if both Connell and Marianne had not been afraid to externalize their feelings.

To this emotional vulnerability must be added the vulnerable and precarious mental health of the characters. Marianne experiences depression and self-harm throughout the story, which makes her vulnerable to her own negative feelings and behaviours. Influenced by the psychological abuse she receives from her mother and her brother, Marianne ends up believing that she is not special and has no friends because she is incapable of being loved by anyone; she thinks she is the problem. After having a heated argument with Jamie in Trieste, Marianne confesses to Connell how she truly feels: "I don't know what's wrong with me, says Marianne. I don't know why I can't be like normal people. […] I don't know why I can't make people love me. I think there was something wrong with me when I was born." (181) Later on, her friend Peggy suggests that she ask for professional help, and Marianne indeed knows that she is "mentally unwell and needs help" (193), but Connell is the only one eventually goes to therapy.

Connell also struggles with anxiety and depression, which worsens his deteriorating sense of identity and esteem, especially when one of his friends commits suicide. He knows his grandmother does not like him, "everything he does is painful to her" and she actually "hates him for being alive" (Rooney 45); and his aunts and uncles do not seem to be very pleased with the idea of studying English at Trinity either (46). Connell continually feels inferior to Marianne in economic terms, and this also contributes to his low self-esteem and insecurities, especially in Dublin. In addition, several people —including his mother— tell him that he does not deserve Marianne on several occasions; he even says so himself: "Marianne Sheridan wouldn't go out with someone like me" (125). His anxiety and depression lead him to drink uncontrollably to

reach “a kind of sedated non-consciousness” and even imagine ways to harm himself when he feels distressed (128). The uncertainty about the future is even more precarious for Connell in this depressed state, who only feels that “his future is hopeless and will only get worse” (201).

Their relationship is frequently unstable as a result of their mental health issues, which leave them vulnerable to each other’s feelings and behaviours and make them do things or make decisions they later regret, such as when Connell sleeps with his former Economics professor (128). Despite the toxicity of their relationship —since they do not seem to want to be together but are also not completely happy when the other is with someone else—, both Connell and Marianne, but mostly Connell, feel somewhat lost without the other. This corresponds to the perception of loss discussed by Judith Butler (22), arguing that, when we lose someone, a part of ourselves is lost as well: “When we lose some of these ties by which we are constituted, we do not know who we are or what to do. On one level, I think I have lost “you” only to discover that “I” have gone missing as well.” This shows the complementary nature of the two characters, how much they need each other to be the best version of themselves, and to display their “normal personality” (Rooney 214).

Finally, it should be noted that the relationship between Connell and Marianne is highly characterized by intimacy and sexual vulnerability. They become more vulnerable with one another, exposing their desires, anxieties, and insecurities. They are more susceptible to the power dynamics and uncertainties that are part of romantic relationships because of their emotional attachment. Besides, their sexual relationship is also characterized by vulnerability. Connell lacks experience and is unsure of himself:

> He doesn’t even know what desire is supposed to feel like. Any time he has had sex in real life, he has found it so stressful as to be largely unpleasant,

> leading him to suspect that there's something wrong with him, that he's unable to be intimate with women, that he's somehow developmentally impaired. (5)

Marianne, on the other hand, has a history of sexual assault, which causes her to feel uneasy and ashamed of who she is. For example, at the beginning of the novel, when they are at a nightclub, a man "moves his hand down from her shoulder and squeezes the flesh of her right breast, in front of everyone" while Eric and his friends are laughing (39). Moreover, her insecurities and low esteem cause her to become involved in toxic and abusive relationships that diminish her and ultimately make her feel worthless. Believing that she truly deserves to be treated this way, Marianne justifies the sexual abuse she receives at the hands of Jamie, one of her partners: "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." (133) It is when Marianne asks Connell to hit her while having sex that Connell, after immediately refusing her petition, realizes how broken she is (237). Marianne also becomes aware of how miserable and devastated she is and feels guilty that she has not been able to fend for herself, especially after her relationship with Lukas, the abusive photographer: "She hates the person she has become, without feeling any power to change anything about herself" (238).

Overall, both Connell and Marianne experience periods of vulnerability and precariousness during their senior year of high school and their college years. However, despite their wanting to be apart and thinking they were no good for each other, they both realize the less lonely and happier they have felt was when they were together, and they know that regardless of Connell going to New York and Marianne staying in Ireland, they are both going to have each other forever. Despite the battles that both characters have had to deal with, Rooney leaves the reader with a happy open ending because "life offers up these moments of joy despite everything" (222).

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this dissertation has been to study how Sally Rooney treats the themes of vulnerability and precariousness in her work, focusing on contemporary issues and anxieties as a result of the Post-Celtic Tiger Years in Ireland, a crisis that she experienced. In her novel *Normal People* (2018), Rooney plays with the themes of vulnerability and precariousness through the characters of Connell Waldron and Marianne Sheridan to address global issues, moving away from the Irish literary canon but without forgetting her roots, thus embracing the label of 'post-national' writer. Several factors contribute to the state of vulnerability and precariousness of each person and, in agreement with Butler, who further developed these terms, "certain human lives are more vulnerable than others" (30). Based on this statement, we could say that Connell is the most vulnerable character and experiences more levels of precariousness in the novel.

Social expectations and economic circumstances are probably the two main aspects that lead both characters to develop a state of mental vulnerability, reflected in the wrong behaviours and actions of both Connell and Marianne. The main reason for this is, as Butler rightly points out, that "we are social; […] we are outside ourselves, constituted in cultural norms that precede and exceed us, given over to a set of cultural norms and a field of power that condition us fundamentally" (45). Connell is the one who is most worried about what other people will say and somehow manages to pass that anxiety on to Marianne, who already carries a burden of psychological and abusive suffering from her family. Marianne reaches the peak of vulnerability when she accepts the sexual abuse she receives at the hands of her partners as self-punishment, internalising all the lies that both her mother and brother have told her over the years and believing that she is truly worthless. On the other hand, Connell, who is mentally

overwhelmed by guilt and suffers from several panic attacks, decides to go to therapy to try to resolve his problems. Yet it will be the broken pieces of each character that will complete and depend on the other.

Using a minimalist and realistic style, Rooney focuses on the characters' emotions to illustrate and normalise the everyday lives of two young Irish people who have to cope with the difficulties and problems of a society affected by an economic and identity crisis. It is mostly through free indirect style and dialogue that we get to know the concerns and personalities of each character. The reader is immersed in the characters' story of self-improvement and their search for a new identity through the analepses and time jumps that characterise the chapters and comes to empathise with them and feel the same emotions as they do. Overall, *Normal People* shows the most normal things in a young person's life: the vulnerabilities and precariousness of growing up.

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