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Sally Rooney as the voice of her generation: Conversations
with Friends and other novels

Bakalářská práce

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Olomouc 2023

Declaration

I hereby declare that I have written this diploma thesis by myself and that I have not used any sources other than those listed in the Works cited section. I further declare that this thesis was not used to obtain another academic title.

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Signature

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Anotace v češtině

Tématem této práce jsou díla irské autorky Sally Rooney, zejména román Rozhovory s přáteli. Cílem práce je v teoretické části vysvětlit jevy, které Sally Rooney zasazuje do svých románů. V druhé části práce jsou použity příklady přímo z děl Sally Rooney. Tato praktická část rozebírá vlastní názor autorky a novinářů a kombinuje je s příklady z románů.

Klíčová slova: Sally Rooney, mezilidské vztahy, duševní zdraví, třídní rozdíly, marxismus, Irsko

Anotace v angličtině

The subject of this thesis is the works of Irish author Sally Rooney, in particular the novel Conversations with Friends. The aim of the theoretical part of the thesis is to explain the phenomena that Sally Rooney incorporates in her novels. In the second part of the thesis, examples are used directly from Sally Rooney's works. This practical part discusses the author's own opinion and the journalists' opinion and combines them with examples from the novels.

Key words: Sally Rooney, interpersonal relationships, mental health, class differences, Marxism, Ireland

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1 Introduction

In this work, I would like to analyse how the Irish author Sally Rooney earned to be called the voice of her generation. I would like to explore this by focusing on the Irish identity but also on the aspect of Rooney as a young woman and how that influenced her novels. The thesis is divided into two parts. In the first part, I am going to focus on the theory. I am going to introduce and describe the main influential themes in Rooney's writing: the Marxist philosophy, Ireland's society and class differences and the Precariat. Then I am going to analyse Sally Rooney's identity as a writer. In the second part, I am going to connect the themes from the theoretical part with the novels themselves. In this practical part, I am going to focus on Rooney's first novel *Conversations with Friends* and add examples from her other novels *Normal People* and *Beautiful World Where Are You* to illustrate these phenomena. In Chapter 2 *The Marxist Philosophy*, I aim to explain what leads the people of Ireland to go back to ideologies like Marxism and in what way it is seen in Irish society. In Chapter 3 *Ireland: The Society and Class Differences*, I am going to focus on the Irish accommodation crisis and the class division of the Irish society. In Chapter 4 *The Precariat*, I am going to explain what precarity is and how it is reflected in Ireland and its society. In Chapter 5 *Sally Rooney as a writer*, I am going to point out the typical themes and writing style of this author which has contributed to the discussions about Sally Rooney as a voice of her generation.

2 The Marxist Philosophy

Just as in the past when people were discontent with the political situation, they struggled financially and the society went through numerous crises, they turned to an alternative ideology of how to lead a country, in this case, I am talking about Marxism and socialism. Nowadays people are beginning to struggle as well. We faced a Coronavirus crisis that led to a financial crisis. We are also in a period of massive migration and overpopulation. All this ends in protests and eventually, a desire to change the ways and forms of political ideologies and systems. In Ireland specifically, we are talking about a great financial gap between social classes and an accommodation crisis that was brought upon Ireland by immigrants and an increasing number of students. These people are disadvantaged in terms of finances and can't afford to buy flats and houses due to low income and the financial situation after Covid-19 struck.

In the Czech Republic, the mere thought of a shift from capitalism to socialism or communism is unthinkable. Our country is deeply and significantly marked by these ideologies, by a state built on socialistic values that sprung from Marx and his theories. Hate towards socialism and communism, hence even Marxism, is rooted in our history. The hurt went so deep that even the young generation of the 21st century is fundamentally against these organizations of society, that even those born after the Velvet Revolution who haven't lived in the period of communism won't ever allow a shift of political regime.

But the conception of Marxism in the rest of the world is not as radical as in the former socialist countries. People disappointed in their capitalist governments tend to search for other political systems that would save them from their misery. And because at its core, Marxism is the opposite of capitalism, it is a theory that says that the exact differences and gaps between social classes that capitalism creates will result in a communist revolution. In Ireland, people are not blinded or scarred by a long history of socialistic or communist tyrannic rule. Contemporary capitalism in Ireland started around the year 1950. In the 1990s the Irish economy flourished; the quick economic growth is referred to as the "Celtic Tiger". But in 2008 came a financial crisis resulting in Ireland being the most indebted country in the European Union at the time. The Irish capitalist system fails to suffice to this day because most sectors are controlled by private owners who work for profit. That increases the prices and

also the demand, eventually leading to and emphasizing the uneven distribution of wealth.

Irish society is notably divided by the amount of luxury one gets to enjoy, which depends on an unbalanced relationship between work positions and the amount of money each work position, or rather each employment contract offers. I will elaborate on this in the next chapter in the part studying Class differences in Ireland.

As I mentioned, when in crisis people tend to search for alternate systems to improve their poor life situation. Marxism refuses the capitalist social division, glorifies work with equal opportunities and aims towards the disintegration of social conflict. “At a certain stage of development, the material productive forces of society come into conflict with the existing relations of production or - this merely expresses the same thing in legal terms - with the property relations within the framework of which they have operated hitherto. From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters. Then begins an era of social revolution.”¹ A social revolution seems to be on the horizon in Ireland, fired by widespread dissatisfaction that pushed people to rediscover the positives of the Marxist philosophy and therefore even of life based on communist ideals. Mentions of this also appear in Sally Rooney’s first novel *Conversations with Friends*, reflected in the character of Frances. This will be further discussed in a separate chapter.

¹ Marx, Karl. “A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy - Marxists.” marxists.org, 1999.

3 Ireland: The Society and Class Differences

3.1 Accommodation Crisis in Ireland

In modern Ireland, the problem of housing has led to an accommodation crisis that has developed in the past few years. There are not enough properties owned by the state for sale. Even though the Irish government has promised to increase housing construction and as of now houses and apartments are being built, the number the government has presented in the *Housing for All* initiative, which is a housing plan introduced in 2021 by the Department of Housing and projected to end in 2030, would now not be sufficient because of the wave of immigrants that has flooded Ireland recently. The property, which didn't belong to the state, was sold to private companies. These companies seek to maximise the profit from their offers and so the prices are unacceptably high, especially for young people with families and students. The situation escalates in the rental sphere as well. The prices are high but that isn't the only problem. The Irish public has found itself facing a new sort of fraud. The number of university students in Ireland has grown. But there is not enough accommodation for them. They are desperate to find a place to live before the start of a new semester. But the issue is, nobody wants to rent to students. Young people are applying to the few offers that are available but are not hearing back. Some private rental companies are trying to take advantage of this fact. Fake offers have surfaced online attempting to deceive students to pay deposits without viewing the apartment in person. Because of the rent crisis, students are more likely to take such risks. These increasingly frequent crimes are investigated by the Garda, Irish police (Sky News 2022, The Irish Times 2023). At Trinity College in particular, which is the university where Rooney studied and which her characters are attending, students have the possibility to live in on-campus residential rooms. The prices start at 181€ per week which isn't exactly cheap and on top of that there are waiting lists. There are also college apartments in Trinity Hall, with prices starting at 176€ per week, and at Kavanagh Court for 285€ per week. According to the Trinity College website "Each year the demand for accommodation greatly exceeds the number of places available." And the process of succeeding with your application is long and complex. After the application period ends, a random selection is done. Chosen applicants first get a provisional place. Each applicant's supporting statements will help with the room assignment (Trinity College Dublin, 2023)

3.2 Class differences in Ireland

When it comes to the financial status and therefore also the social position of the Irish citizens, work positions and their conditions play a significant role. Employment relation varies in relative job security, hourly payment, and a chance of wage growth. According to a study by Peter Mühlau, Assistant Professor at the Department of Sociology at Trinity College, *Middle Class Squeeze? Social Class and Perceived Financial Hardship in Ireland, 2002-2012*, the income of salaried employees is more stable than that of those on a labour contract. During an economic crisis, employers dismiss labour contract workers rather than salaried employees. Under a labour contract, fewer working hour means less income. Whereas under a service relationship (salary) the income is stable, secured. Because of this system, the gap between the financial possibilities of the Irish people widens and so do the social class differences. Mühlau refers to employees with service work relationships as “middle-class employees”. He claims that the group with even poorer conditions is one of the freelancers and small employers (Mühlau, 2014).

The amount of income you are able to earn equals the prospect of housing you are able to acquire, commodities you are allowed to enjoy, the food you are able to buy and so on. Rooney uses this topic and incorporates it into her novels. In this thesis in a separate chapter, I am going to look more closely into the social class dynamic between characters of *Conversations with Friends*. Specifically, the relationships of a freelance worker (a writer), a rich actor and two nonworking students, one from a relatively well financially secure family, the other financially dependent on her father (presumably a middle-class employee).

The hardships mentioned in this subchapter incite a phenomenon referred to as precarity.

4 The Precariat

The term precarity refers to a manner of living where irregular or insecure income negatively influences people's material security and mental well-being. The class of people that are forced to adopt this lifestyle is called the precariat.

The global society is divided into class groups based on their income and even the percentage of average income descent. On the top of this social ladder is plutocracy and an elite, the few immensely wealthy individuals with influence and political power. Their income comes from renting or ill-gotten gains. By their characteristics, they represent the ideal of neoliberalism. Below plutocracy and elite is the salariat class group. It includes individuals that have long-term employment, high salaries and enjoy employee rewards and benefits. Next in line are the proficians, those without employment security and regularity, usually self-employed, making big amounts of money from one-time contracts which often leads them to the verge of burn-out. Below the proficians is the old proletariat, those that thrive in welfare states and base their lives on full-time labour. It lost its political influence of the past and is considered a shrinking class group. In the position below the proletariat, the precariat is in the process of establishing itself as a standalone social group. It is characterized by irregular, unstable and insecure income, self-employment, part-time labour, agency labour (hired employees, under employment agencies) and crowdworking. The people living in the precariat have to rely on usually insecure wages, being paid by the hour. Unlike the proletariat of the 20th century, they do not have social insurance to cover their income losses and therefore are forced to live in instability. A common phenomenon in the precariat is class consciousness, a shared frustration and fear. These people do not feel any commitment to either labour or capital. Another curiosity is that overqualification is common. People tend to have higher education than is needed for the work they are performing or could potentially perform. This mostly concerns the younger generation of the precariat. Nevertheless, it creates a collective annoyance, anger, no sense of future and a loss of trust in governments and in a progressive society. Subsequently, a rejection of mainstream political systems, resentment of social democrats and rejection of labourism as well as neoliberalism becomes prominent.

Based on the aforementioned aspects, the precariat can be divided into three sub-classes or varieties. The first one includes uneducated people, those that strayed

from their families and working-class communities. They are characterized by being vulnerable to populism and by blaming their frustration and the current unfavourable situation on the past that was lost subsequently they disapprove of the social democrats who have failed them. The second sub-class or variety is that of migrants and minorities. They share a feeling of not having a home, a feeling of not belonging and resentment of the social democrats who mistreat them. They are mostly politically inactive. The third variety consists of the educated who share a sense of no future, a sense of no opportunities and a disregard for social democrats whom they deem untrustworthy. (Standing, 2015)

The continuous evolvement of the precariat class is perceived as a crisis of democracy. This crisis is often attributed to neoliberalism and its focus on free-market capitalism. What also contributed to a mass crisis of employment and financial security was Brexit, the presidency of Donal Trump and the Covid-19 epidemic.

5 Sally Rooney as a writer

Some literary critics call the novels of the Irish writer Sally Rooney autofictions. In her first two novels, which she wrote in her early twenties, she describes the life struggles of 21-year-olds. Now that Sally Rooney is in her 30s, in her latest novel *Beautiful World Where Are You*, the characters are roughly the same age, nearing their 30s. One of her female characters writes an email saying: “I can’t believe I have to tolerate these things – having articles written about me, and seeing my photograph on the internet, and reading comments about myself, I keep encountering this person, who is myself, and I hate her with all my energy.” Most visibly in her third novel, she projects herself along with her opinions by putting them in the mouths of her characters. She builds up love stories on background ideals and subjects like social mobility, class differences, the burden of privilege, toxic relationships, love relations between people and their new conceptions, and existential crises. The uncertainty that is life. In her literary universe, people from very distinct worlds meet and their life stories develop dramatically from that point on. Her novels are a glimpse into everyday reality, written through an insight of a perceptive person. She squeezes in practically all the issues nowadays discussed by millennials, gen Y and Z.

Rooney keeps the environment close to home by discussing problems specific to her country, Ireland. She mentions not only the Irish accommodation crisis and class differences, the specifics of one part of the world, but also mental health, racism, the immigration crisis and life in toxic relationships. She makes her novels relatable to all kinds of audiences, emphasising the very most important problems that the world faces right now. By doing that and more she earned to be described by critics as the voice of her generation.

Her parents are socialists and Rooney was brought up in a left-wing household with socialist principles. In an interview², she said her mother raised them (her and her sister and brother) by the principle *from each according to their ability to each according to their need*. When she was little, she thought it to be a line from Bible. She learnt that it was Karl Marx who used this line. Marxist ethics were rooted in her

² Fischer, Molly. “A Normal Person Conversation with Sally Rooney: The Cut on Tuesdays.” Gimlet, 15 Apr. 2019.

upbringing. Before, she felt like it was just the right way to settle moral disputes. Rooney read Marx only after she entered college. In her opinion, her relationship with Marxism was similar to religion. You can believe something is true without studying or analysing the history or philosophy of that particular notion. For Rooney it was Marxism.

She feels different about her writing now than before she published her first book. She told an interviewer that when she is about to write something new, she sits down at her laptop thinking: “I’m Sally Rooney now sitting down at my laptop and I’m going to write one of those Sally Rooney books like the last two and it’s just such an absolutely bizarre feeling because obviously in the process of writing those books, I had no identity as a writer.” She feels the pressure of critics and public appeal. She has an impulse to write something but doesn’t because she feels that it would be met with criticism. She says she is trying to unbind herself from the chains of fear of unpopularity and write whatever she wants no matter what the response may be.

Sally Rooney became famous for her novels about young people. Therefore, logically keeping the theme unchanged should lead to success. But she feels that the magic in her writing is based on staying true to herself and her life experiences. She doesn’t want to write a twenty-five-year-old character when she herself is in her thirties. “I feel like that person needs to grow like there’s not enough life in that person yet to keep on reaching back to for more and more material.” Her writing style reflects her own path in life, and it is precisely because of that that she is able to describe and capture the essence of each of her characters and their struggles and joys. Like the interviewer for *The Cut* Molly Fischer said: “Sally’s gotten famous writing about being young. But that’s because all she’s had time to do so far... is be young.”

Reflecting on one of the most prominent features of her novels, interpersonal relationships, Rooney says she is very interested in gender and sexuality from a feminist perspective. In her books, she tries to explore the contradictions in male-female relationships. In the process of writing her first novel *Conversations with Friends*, she started to look at relationships philosophically and ethically. She began to read about feminist ethics and care ethics. It influenced her writing and she decided to make interpersonal relationships the core of her book, she abandoned the typical structure of one main protagonist, “the individual decision maker at the centre of ethics”. Rooney describes her writer identity by stressing that her ideas have taken the form of a dynamic between two or more characters. Her writing flow originates from

creating an interpersonal dynamic, whether it be lovers, friends or a family dynamic. „That's when I want to actually start writing because there's something narrative about a dynamic between two or three or four people,” Rooney says in The Cut interview. The interviewer Molly Fischer introduced her by saying: “Sally is good at capturing young-person things like online flirtation, but she’s also good at capturing the eternal experience of being young: of feeling like your life is pure potential, and you’re out in the world for the first time, waiting to see what the world says.” She then praises Rooney’s ability to write about “navel-gazing post-adolescents in love” even without cliches and boring passages. This talent of hers, transferring human psychology, emotions and relationships to a book and making it believable and relatable, is what attracts a global audience.

6 Young people: self-doubt, mental health

I would like to start this section by analysing the aspect of self-doubt and mental health in the characters from Sally Rooney's first novel, *Conversations with Friends*, Frances and Nick.

In the twenty-first century, the issues of mental health are on the way to be treated accordingly to their importance. In the past, when people had psychological problems or anxiety, society looked at them judgingly, not taking the struggles seriously. In the last decades, this prejudice is slowly disappearing. Celebrities promote healthy lifestyles acknowledging mental health and the need to nourish it to avoid anxiety and such illnesses. But, even though with technologies, social media and societal progress new types of problems arise, mostly in psychological terms, it is still met with disregard. By incorporating these problems in her novels, Sally Rooney underlines the importance of acting on such issues and the significance of the fact that it can happen every day, to anyone, that it is nothing unusual. She raises awareness about eating disorders, self-harm, anxiety, or depression. The popularity of her books made it possible to be shared among her readers and worldwide, through the international interest in her work, through her interviews or literary reviews and criticism.

It is young people living in the 21st century who amongst other age groups suffer the most from self-doubt. That is another issue that came from the globalization of social media and the standards today's society sets. It seems to affect females more. That doesn't mean that men don't suffer from self-doubt and subsequent aftereffects. But it is spread significantly among young women. More and more frequently it transpires in eating disorders or self-harm, which is connected to mental health. In her novels, Sally Rooney creates not only female characters who develop bad eating habits and self-destructive behaviour like Frances and Marianne but also fragile men who suffer from inferiority complex or feelings of worthlessness, eventually ending up in psychiatric hospitals like Nick and Connell.

The fact that things like these appear in Rooney's books makes them relatable to a wide audience. It is more than probable that someone suffering similarly reads a Sally Rooney novel and thinks: "I am not alone." That is to me the magic in Sally Rooney's writing.

7 Conversations with Friends: Frances

7.1.1 Self-doubt

Even though Frances is a talented writer, she struggles to express her emotions. Out of her parents, she is closer to her mother. Her father lives separately. He is a drunk who isn't there for Frances, the only thing he does for her is send her money, which he stops doing at one point, leaving his daughter out of cash completely. It feels like Frances doubts her father has ever truly loved her, now only doing the one job he is obliged to do, pay the alimony. Frances is extremely locked into herself, not letting even the ones closest to her read her emotions. She seldom asks for help and feels like she must do everything by herself. She doesn't share her worries with anyone unless it becomes absolutely necessary. When she had health problems, the only reason she confided in her mother was that she was losing too much menstrual blood and needed to get to the hospital, which at that state, she wouldn't be able to do on her own. When she was there, they told her that it might be a miscarriage. She was fighting the urge to call Nick, her lover, but she was too afraid she would bother him, too afraid she would find out he doesn't really care for her and that he would be mad at her. When she finally finds the courage to call, he answers the call telling her she should not be calling him, sounding like he is at a party, and even asking her if she is drunk. That hit Frances like a punch, she hung up. She was in a very bad place and the one person that presumably got her there and should care about her blew her off. That only increased the feeling of worthlessness embedded deep in her mind. The whole relationship with Nick is both toxic and joyful at the same time. She lost a lot of herself in their love affair.

Frances constantly compares herself to Bobbi and to Melissa, degrading herself, in her own thoughts and out loud. When she looks at herself in the mirror, she sees only flaws. When she is in a bar bathroom and sees her reflection, she mentions that even the simple act of looking at herself makes her nervous. At that moment, she describes herself as plain, so extremely thin as to look interesting. Based on this perception of her appearance, she dresses to underline the fact that she is skinny. A lot of dark colours and big necklines are the base of her wardrobe to achieve that effect.³ Still in that bathroom, the light shining at her, she notices she looks sick and faint. She

³ Rooney, *Conversations with Friends*, 35.

examines what she sees in the mirror so intensely, picking at every little detail that she thinks is wrong with her until: “Eventually the features of my face seemed to come apart from one another or at least lose their ordinary relationships to each other, like a word you read so many times it makes no sense any more. I wondered if I was having an anxiety attack.”⁴ She has the ability to overthink so much she inflects anxiety on herself.

In contrast to Bobbi, she is always sitting silently in the corner, not able to be the centre of attention, and not having the same kind of confidence. She wishes she was like Bobbi. Frances idealizes Bobbi and describes her as if she was a goddess walking on Earth. From Frances’ point of view, we learn that Bobbi has slender wrists, long and elegant hands, a better posture than Frances and a memorably beautiful face. At one point in the book, Frances mentions that sometimes when she is doing some uninteresting activity, she imagines she looks like Bobbi. She gets so lost in the thought that when she catches her reflection she feels “a strange, depersonalising shock”⁵. She feels like Bobbi dominates the space, to her she is the star, the main character without even trying, with no effort whatsoever. That can be demonstrated in the story Frances tells about her and Bobbi’s first meetings. She remembers Bobbi in a summer dress, her hair apparently not brushed. She labels her as radiantly attractive. To Frances, it felt like everybody was entitled to love Bobbi, or at least to notice her.⁶

The element of self-doubt can also be seen in how much Frances depends on Bobbi and her opinions. “I asked Bobbi questions like: do I have long legs? Or short?”⁷ She mentions it pleases her when Bobbi talks about her. That it feels like seeing herself in the mirror for the first time.

Furthermore, Frances envies Melissa and her confidence. Even though Melissa is the wife of Frances’ lover, she doesn’t really harbour any resentment towards her. Quite the opposite, she admires her power, her wealth, her popularity, and the fact that she is a writer. To some extent, it feels like Frances puts her on a pedestal, in almost a feminist admiration, like she is privileged to know her or even to be in the same room with her, the accomplished female writer Melissa. She describes her as having an expressive, conspirational smile. “I knew I would enviously practice this smile later

⁴ Rooney, *Conversation with Friends*, 36.

⁵ Rooney, *Conversations with Friends*, 14.

⁶ Rooney, *Conversation with Friends*, 7.

⁷ Rooney, *Conversations with Friends*, 8.

in a mirror.”⁸ Frances expressed she felt like Melissa didn’t really care about her alone, Bobbi was the leading element. When Frances and Bobbi visited Melissa and Nick in their house for the first time, they sat at a table discussing the writing process of Frances’ and Bobbi’s art. Frances and Bobbi are a duo, they perform their own poetry on stage. When Melissa learned that it was actually Frances that wrote the pieces, Bobbi being just the performer, Frances had the impression that Melissa lost her initial interest.⁹ Frances feels unimportant. She doesn’t feel or rather wants not to feel, the need to be heard. During that first visit, it was Bobbi and Melissa who dominated the conversation. Frances mentions she slowly stopped listening like she wasn’t interested anymore in what they had to say. She says it was like it didn’t involve her. This whole passage in the book felt like Frances is split from her physical body, her spiritual-self floating above the table exploring the other three people in the room and even herself, sitting there.

Throughout the whole novel, when she is in a group of people, she often feels uninvolved, she believes herself to be uninteresting, with no valuable opinion or knowledge to share. “I could have tried harder to engage myself, but I probably resented having to make an effort to be noticed.”¹⁰ She feels she doesn’t belong anywhere. She is unequal to older people like Melissa, Nick and their friends, detached from her own peers. She is positioned in the middle. Sally Rooney discusses Frances’ isolation in an interview for *The Irish Times* (specifically in the financial social class context which will be elaborated on in further chapters): “She can never really relax around people who are of this privileged background that she's not from, but there's also an extent to which she can't even relax around people who are from her own background, because she feels that maybe she has notions of something.”¹¹

Frances’ portrayal of herself in a negative light predominates the book. She viewed herself based on her achievements, mostly by modern standards that are unattainable. She judges herself by measuring other people’s success and riches. She is very smart but at the same time naïve, thinking that at her age she should be doing

⁸ Rooney, *Conversations with Friends*, 11.

⁹ Rooney, *Conversations with Friends*, 13.

¹⁰ Rooney, *Conversations with Friends*, 13.

¹¹ Nolan, Michael. “Sally Rooney: ‘a Large Part of My Style Has Definitely Developed through Writing Emails.’” *The Irish Times*, 13 Nov. 2017.

something significant with her life, she should own a property, have a job: “At twenty-one, I had no achievements or possessions that proved I was a serious person.”¹²

The constant overwhelming feelings of loneliness lead to Frances building up protecting walls, not letting anyone in even though she has people that care for her, she disregards it, perhaps unintentionally. That results in creating an infinite circle locking her in the middle. She expresses this conviction of friendlessness when she talks about her desires, like the desire to have a boyfriend in high school: “I told no one, I had no one to tell.”¹³

Frances cares a lot about what other people think of her, especially those close to her. She feels insecure even around her friends. She feels awkward talking to Nick. The only person she was this close to before was Bobbi. She doesn't know how to act; it is all new to her. One time Nick went to see her and Bobbi's performance. After, he invites Frances to go see him act in a play he was currently doing. After the play, Frances sits at home and thoroughly thinks through what she is going to text Nick to praise him. She thinks to herself “Things matter to me more than they do to normal people.”¹⁴ She wants to loosen up: “I need to be fun and likeable, I thought.”¹⁵ She lives with the idea that being herself does not suffice and that her body and personality are not worth loving. And so, she tries to do what she thinks others would do, or like her to do. When she and the group are outside the bar, smoking, she takes a cigarette too even though she explicitly thinks to herself she does not want one.¹⁶ She has the need to seem equal to them, wants to be popular, goes with the flow, and wants so desperately to fit in, be cool. All that is mostly when Nick is around. She says she likes going to events where Melissa and Nick would be because she likes other people observing their warmth towards her. In moments of hurt, she turns to degrading herself even in her writing. After one fight with Bobbi, she writes poetry where she depicts her body as “an item of garbage, an empty wrapper or a half-eaten and discarded piece of fruit”¹⁷ which does not actually make her feel better.

¹² Rooney, *Conversations with Friends*, 21.

¹³ Rooney, *Conversations with Friends*, 35.

¹⁴ Rooney, *Conversations with Friends*, 30.

¹⁵ Rooney, *Conversations with Friends*, 30.

¹⁶ Rooney, *Conversations with Friends*, 37.

¹⁷ Rooney, *Conversations with Friends*, 93.

In order to become her ideal, an extremely educated person to outsmart everyone else, to the extent that she would be so superior others wouldn't understand her, she reads essays and articles like *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*.

At the beginning of the book, Frances acknowledges her problems with ego. She says she places her intellect somewhere in the middle of the scale. Morally neutral at best, she says. When bad things happen to her, she makes herself feel better by telling herself how smart she is, she confesses at one point. "When I couldn't make friends as a child, I fantasised that I was smarter than all my teachers, smarter than any other student who had been in the school before, a genius hidden among normal people."¹⁸

7.1.2 Mental health

I believe that Frances causes anxiety attacks to herself by suppressing her emotions. When there is an unusual number of feelings at the same time, she doesn't know how to deal with that situation and to relieve the mental pain, she self-harms. That happens on multiple occasions in the book. It starts slowly, getting worse with the intensity of the experiences she goes through. First, we learn that when she had sex with Nick for the first time, she started crying for no apparent reason. She says it happened before, with Bobbi. She tells Nick that Bobbi (again, it is Bobbi's opinion she treats as the only logical truth) thinks it is an expression of her suppressed feelings.¹⁹

There is something else also affecting her mental health - not eating. Or rather, she is mentally in such a bad place it pushes her to "forget" to eat. Which eventually leads to headaches. But she sees positives in it too. She mentions that on days like that, when she forgets to eat, it seems like every sensation is new, the breeze, the singing of birds. Drinks and food taste abnormally good²⁰ (when she allows herself some). So initially the signs of an eating disorder are introduced as forgetting to eat due to long writing sessions. But then it gets more intense. There is a situation where she has a sharp headache, she hasn't eaten. She says that to her, her body feels used up and worthless, she does not want to put medicine or food into it anymore.²¹ By the end of the book, another moment of Frances not eating occurs. This time, not only that her abdomen is swollen but her legs tremble so much she cannot stand by herself

¹⁸ Rooney, *Conversations with Friends*, 35.

¹⁹ Rooney, *Conversations with Friends*, 71.

²⁰ Rooney, *Conversations with Friends*, 34.

²¹ Rooney, *Conversations with Friends*, 91.

anymore. She starts seeing blurry. At that time her diagnosis of endometriosis was at its worst, the pain coming from her spine to her skull tearing up her eyes, making her feel translucent and weak. It was at this moment she starts to pray to God for help. She thinks she is going to die, and she confesses, seemingly to God but in reality, to herself, amongst other things that she harms herself and has a problematic relationship with her body.²²

Throughout the course of the book, when she is nervous or anxious, she harms herself for example by stepping on her toes with her heel, drinking a cold milkshake without breathing until her mouth hurts not stopping until Bobbi stops her by addressing her, chewing and tearing apart her fingernails. After she undergoes a pelvic examination when she had to go to the hospital after her menstrual pain started to be abnormal, she allows herself to cry because nobody can see her, she pinches her elbow until she tears the skin open to comfort herself.²³ At one point, she is standing in front of a mirror, observing her body. She says she does so more often now, though nothing about her that she so much despises changes. Her hip bones unattractively visible, her belly hard and round to touch, her shoulders filled with broken capillaries. She confesses that by keeping looking at herself, her repulsion getting stronger and stronger, she does not stop, trying out how much she can feel. It is at that moment she feels the urge to hurt herself to return to her physical body.²⁴ The upcoming events push her to do it eventually. She scratches her arm open until it bleeds and afterwards bandages it as if it is no unusual act.²⁵ One time with Nick, she presses his hand to her neck. He asks what she wants him to do, and she thinks: “I want you to kill me.”²⁶ In that moment she expresses she feels like a damaged person who deserves nothing.

I am going to end the Frances section with a longer quote from the book that in my opinion summarizes it nicely: “Maybe having him witness how much others approved of me, without taking any of the risks necessary to earn Nick’s personal approval, made me feel capable of speaking to him again, as if I also was an important person with lots of admirers like he was, as if there was nothing inferior about me. But the acclaim also felt like part of the performance itself, the best part, and the most pure

²² Rooney, *Conversations with Friends*, 294.

²³ Rooney, *Conversations with Friends*, 171.

²⁴ Rooney, *Conversations with Friends*, 181.

²⁵ Rooney, *Conversations with Friends*, 209.

²⁶ Rooney, *Conversations with Friends*, 214.

expression of what I was trying to do, which was to make myself into this kind of person: someone worthy of praise, worthy of love.”²⁷

7.1.3 Conversations with Friends: Nick

In *Conversations with Friends*, Nick is the representative of the male world. Apart from Frances’ dad, her friend Philip and Nick and Melissa’s friend whom they meet briefly during the vacation in France, Nick is the only man in the book. Certainly, the only one with developed character traits. Rooney wrote him as an older handsome rich artist. In reality, he is still young, he is 32 in the book. That means he should be perceived as young, a young man in his early thirties. But because the novel is written from Frances’ point of view, a man 11 years older is “an older guy”, which I can only confirm, being 21 myself by the time I am writing this thesis.

But that is just to introduce the character of Nick. In terms of patriarchy and feminism, Rooney wrote him somewhere in the middle, not a macho type, not overly emotional either. In an article review, Philip Maughan writes: “Take the depiction of Nick: at first, he’s too macho (which is bad); later, he’s weak and effeminate (also bad). He does little more than shrug and agree with the women around him, making him ‘pathologically submissive’ according to his wife, a barb he, of course, accepts.”²⁸ I partly disagree with this statement. As I wrote above, I think he is a neutral character in this aspect. He does not exercise his male power, if so, it is certainly not in the beginning of the book. If he acts macho, he does so unconsciously and in its nature it is harmless. I am going to talk more about Nick’s privilege and behaviour towards Frances in the following chapter. What I agree with in Maughan’s statement is Nick’s submissiveness to the women around him and their needs and opinions. But I wouldn’t call him weak, it seems too strong of a word. I believe he acts this way not because he is weak, but to avoid conflict because it is his nature. Maybe his awareness of the privilege he has had since childhood from his parents, he compensates for this by wanting to be punished, by letting others dominate him. Frances says so herself in the book, and Frances is practically the voice of Sally Rooney: “if I lash out at you it’s just because you don’t seem very vulnerable to it... I mean you don’t have a vulnerable personality.”²⁹ Most of the times he fights with Melissa or Frances he is the one to

²⁷ Rooney, *Conversations with Friends*, 40.

²⁸ Maughan, Philip. “Sally Rooney’s *Conversations with Friends* Is an Irish Social Novel for the Modern Age.” *New Statesman*, September 4, 2017.

²⁹ Rooney, *Conversations with Friends*, 200.

submit. But he can fight for himself too. But when he does it ends up bad for him. When Melissa fought with him over having a baby, he ended up in psychiatric hospital. When he fights with Frances and they stop talking, he ends up depressed and eventually apologizing to her, perhaps he realizes that in this case it is better to stand down to avoid further conflicts and pain. Philip Maughan finishes his review with following words: “But straw men don’t tend to have much life in them. At least he’s handsome.” (Maughan) In my opinion, this is a classical patriarchal macho way to perceive emotions and vulnerability. If you are sensible and emotional, you are labelled as weak and submissive. If you exercise power or dominate in a relationship, you are labelled as “too macho” or chauvinistic. I think Nick dominates his and Frances’ relationship only to the extent Frances allows him to. He is a sensitive man who shows emotions rarely. Though it is true that when Frances talks about him, she does not really talk about his personality but rather how extremely handsome he is, almost like it defines him. What is important to take away from that for this chapter is Nick’s covert sensitiveness.

I would argue that much like with Frances, it is his suppressed emotions that result in his depression. Initially, when we first meet Nick, Frances has this high opinion of him, she thinks he is this strong independent rich handsome clever man. That’s why she is so shocked to learn he suffered from depression and was mentally in such a bad place he had to be admitted to a psychiatric hospital. He describes this event in his life to Frances. He wanted a baby and Melissa didn’t which she told him very far into the relationship. Even though he wouldn’t leave Melissa because of it, it really put him down. He wouldn’t leave the spare room he moved into, slept a lot, and lost a lot of weight. After Melissa finally realised, he is seriously sick, she made appointments with doctors to which he never went. He confessed to Frances that looking back he does not know why he acted this way. Eventually, he was admitted to a psychiatric unit and during his stay there Melissa started a love affair with his friend. When he is telling this to Frances, he says it probably wasn’t good for his self-esteem but: “I don’t know if at that point I had any self-esteem left anyway.”³⁰

Nick surrounds himself with women who are intellectually superior to him. “He said he was easily seduced by people who were smarter than he was.”³¹ I think that is what makes him feel bad about himself. “What is it with me and writers? he

³⁰ Rooney, *Conversations with Friends*, 260.

³¹ Rooney, *Conversations with Friends*, 75.

said. You just like women who can wreck you intellectually, I said.”³² In the book, he says multiple times he deems himself a bad person, and that he acts cowardly. He mentions that when he was in the hospital he felt like a burden to Melissa and his family. That they wanted him to feel better, but it felt like they did not particularly enjoy keeping him company. “I still felt like this very worthless, pathetic person, you know, like I was just a waste of everyone's time.”³³ Even though Melissa says he is pathologically submissive when Frances mentions this to him, he responds that it would be a mistake to assume that meant he was powerless in relationships with women, helplessness was often a way of exercising power.³⁴

When the whole group is in France and Melissa’s publisher Valerie comes, she asks how Nick’s health has been. Frances knows about his depression episode, but she isn’t aware of the extension of it. Melissa answers it is up and down and that she thinks he had an episode when they were in Edinburgh the previous month. Which coincides with his fight with Frances. Valerie says he is passive, and that he gets too overwhelmed by these things.³⁵ I would argue that Rooney makes Valerie the representative of the part of our society that does not take mental illness seriously. During the confrontational email between Melissa and Frances, in her rage and betrayal, Melissa writes hurtful things about Nick which I feel could be interpreted in two ways: Melissa is a cruel unloving woman, or she is just hurt, and she does not mean it. It depends on the reader, either you find Melissa evil, or you don’t hate her, she just found herself trapped in a marriage that doesn’t work. Frances herself cannot decide where she stands on that scale. The point is Melissa writes that his pathological submissiveness makes fighting with him impossible, you cannot scream at him without hating yourself. She writes: “I’ve become so used to seeing him as pathetic & even contemptible that I forgot anybody else could love him. Other women have always lost interest once they got to know him.”³⁶ If this is what your wife thinks of you, no wonder Nick feels worthless. Throughout the whole book, the question of why Nick married Melissa in the first place lingers constantly and Melissa comes to a conclusion in her email which corresponds to what I said before about him compensating for his privilege and that under his cold surface, he is an emotional man:

³² Rooney, *Conversations with Friends*, 244.

³³ Rooney, *Conversations with Friends*, 261.

³⁴ Rooney, *Conversations with Friends*, 246.

³⁵ Rooney, *Conversations with Friends*, 150.

³⁶ Rooney, *Conversations with Friends*, 235.

“It's hard to imagine marrying someone you don't love, but actually it's just the kind of thing Nick would do, out of loyalty & a craving for punishment.”³⁷

To end the Nick section, I think it is important to mention Frances' opinion about Nick's stay in the hospital. When she first learns about it, she says she isn't “repelled as such”. Which means she too had some prejudices about mental illness. She then talks about having read books and therefore being aware of the power of capitalism to drive people to depression. But before she met Nick, she thought people hospitalized for psychiatric issues were not like those she knew. “I could see I had entered a new social setting now, where severe mental illness no longer had unfashionable connotations. I was going through a second upbringing: learning a new set of assumptions, and feigning a greater level of understanding than I really possessed.”³⁸

Through Frances, Sally Rooney addresses the problem of prejudice and lack of education on topics that are essential to our everyday lives. This is not just the case for Ireland but everywhere else. In this book, Frances gets educated and her concept of people with mental health problems is altered. This effect should transpire also in the reader. Another fact connected to this is that it can happen to men too and it doesn't mean that they are weak. It makes them human.

7.1.4 Normal People: Marianne and Connell

I am going to briefly address some of the features that are similar in *Conversations with Friends* and *Normal People* if we are talking about mental health and self-doubt.

The female representative whom we could say takes the role of Frances in *Normal People* is Marianne. She also believes that she is unlovable and worthless, and has very low self-esteem and even abandonment issues, all of that also coming from an abusive family background. “Well, I don't feel lovable. I think I have an unlovable sort of...I have a coldness about me, I'm difficult to like.”³⁹ Much like Frances, she develops bad eating habits, surviving just on coffee and cigarettes. Similarly to Frances, Marianne starts to seek out sexual partners who behave violently towards her. Frances does so just in a few instants with Nick but with Marianne it is more intense. Sally Rooney is aware of the controversy that this type of violent behaviour brings

³⁷ Rooney, *Conversations with Friends*, 236.

³⁸ Rooney, *Conversations with Friends*, 238.

³⁹ Rooney, *Normal People*, 101.

and in her 2018 interview for *The New Statesman* she addresses the issue: “I’m not saying that people who have traumatic or abusive family relationships in childhood later seek out violent sexual partners. I hope people didn’t feel that I was criticising sexuality.”⁴⁰ In my opinion, during the time I am writing this, the year 2023, society seems to have created a trend out of violent tendencies in sexual relationships. Movies like *Fifty Shades of Grey* and other projects of the same nature and the activities done in them are gaining extreme popularity and it leads to apparent acceptability of such violent tendencies. It becomes a demand from the audience and therefore books and cinema are full of it right now, I’ll give a prime example- the 2023 TV show *The Idol*. Rooney condemns this trend by giving it a negative connotation in her books, always describing it as a result of issues with mental health and self-esteem and having the characters lose the need for such degrading. In the *New Statesman* interview she says: “I actually don’t care what people think I’m saying about heterosexual men. Maybe this is a controversial thing to say, but I don’t think the sexualisation of violence towards women by straight men is a good thing. And it’s very mainstream.”⁴¹

A similar male character to Nick is Connell in *Normal People*. He struggles to express his feeling too, especially the intimate ones. He does not fully realise what he feels for Marianne. He experiences feelings of worthlessness and suffers from anxiety and depression. A childhood friend of his commits suicide and that brings him to the point where he visits a college psychiatrist and fills out a questionnaire. Even though he circles answers he does not feel are true in order not to shock the doctor, the statements he accepts as true in his mind are: I feel my future is hopeless and will only get worse, I dislike myself, I would like to kill myself.⁴² He then talks to the doctor and she tells him that a mildly depressed person would score 15 or 16 and according to the questionnaire he filled, he scored 43 which means a very serious depression. Connell shares with the therapist his feelings of discomfort and isolation on the campus resulting not from an intellectual difference between him and other students. But because they are wealthier and act according to that which is an alien concept for Connell. He also talks about the sadness of losing old friendships. This realistic picture of mental health, depression and suicide thoughts Rooney paints in *Normal People*

⁴⁰ Leszkiewicz, Anna. “Sally Rooney on Sex, Power and the Art of Being Normal.” *New Statesman*, September 12, 2018.

⁴¹ Leszkiewicz, Anna. “Sally Rooney on Sex, Power and the Art of Being Normal.” *New Statesman*, September 12, 2018.

⁴² Rooney, *Normal People*, 200-203.

and the fact that she wrote this destiny to a male character brought her praise from many of her readers and critics. In an article published for the 2021 Mental Health Awareness Week under the media brand Stylist the journalist Kayleigh Dray wrote: “Connell’s emotionally-charged monologue – prompted, in a beautiful shattering of mental health taboos, by another man’s concern – reminds us that there is no selection process when it comes to the likes of depression, anxiety or OCD.”⁴³

It is essential that Rooney created a character, Connell’s friend Niall, who noticed his flatmate is struggling and offered help navigating him to the free therapy on the college campus.

I would summarize the message Rooney leaves to her readers within *Normal People* with Connell but also in *Conversations with Friends* with Nick in the same way Dray emphasizes in her article for I am in complete agreement with her: “*Normal People* shows us the quiet and insidious reality of depression, yes. But it also reminds of the power that comes from simply listening and being there for someone. It inspires us to strive towards a more open and supportive culture.”⁴⁴

⁴³ Dray, Kayleigh. “Why Normal People’s Depiction of Depression Is so Ground-Breaking.” *stylist.co.uk*, 2021.

⁴⁴ Dray, Kayleigh. “Why Normal People’s Depiction of Depression Is so Ground-Breaking.” *stylist.co.uk*, 2021.

8 Love relationships and their new conception, toxic relationships

Many critics praise Sally Rooney for her natural depiction of interpersonal relationships and her talent to write a group dynamic rather than centre her novels on just one protagonist. As I mentioned in Chapter 5, her writing emerges from the idea of two, four or more people and the relationships they form between them. It can be a friend dynamic, a lover dynamic or a family dynamic. Rooney said she is interested in gender, and she discovers the “new” types of relationships in her books. But even though all-female or all-male relationships are starting to be the standard of modern literature, despite the growing popularity and demand of such characters, Rooney still stays in the “old-school” field occasionally mentioning the LGBTQ community. In *Conversations with Friends*, she wrote Frances as bisexual, Bobbi says she is gay and Melissa had sexual relations with both men and women making her bisexual too? It is not said in the book explicitly and it is not discussed at all, Frances being the only exception. The topic of polyamory or polygamy is also introduced in *Conversations with Friends*. Frances debates if it is possible to love more than just one person, she loves both Nick and Bobbi but doesn’t understand the difference. Nick thinks he loves both Melissa and Frances. During their vacation in France, he told Frances he never stopped loving Melissa and by the end of the book he also tells Frances he loves her, he is also confused in this matter. But no matter how much experience the characters have inside the LGBTQ community, at the end of the day, the book always ends with the prototypical female-male monogamic relationship. The group of friends even have a discussion on the topic: “She said that monogamy was based on a commitment model, which served the needs of men in patrilineal societies by allowing them to pass property to their genetic offspring, traditionally facilitated by sexual entitlement to a wife. Non-monogamy could be based on an alternative model completely, Bobbi said. Something more like spontaneous consent.”⁴⁵

Rooney’s first two novels were made into TV series and so not only her books, but the film adaptations were met with incredible success. Joe Alwyn, the actor that plays Nick in the adaptation of *Conversations with Friends*, when asked about Rooney before the show aired, he said: “Sally’s mind is just so brilliant, testing the boundaries of how we love, how we are able to love, how we are able—or not—to function within structures that we have been taught. And her refusal to tie things up neatly or offer

⁴⁵ Rooney, *Conversations with Friends*, 252.

definite solutions. I love that.” Interviewing Rooney, the journalist Anna Leszkiewicz mentions her call with the director of the adaptation of Rooney’s second novel *Normal People* Lenny Abrahamson told her that in just small details of a gesture or voice, Rooney can find a way to explore the interior life of a character. Leszkiewicz described Rooney’s work as details of human interaction that never feel slow, “the dynamism of its characters and their unpredictable bonds draw you into the novel as they are drawn to each other”.⁴⁶

In her novels, Rooney also explores the power disparity in relationships and what we would now call toxic relationships. When asked in the interview with Leszkiewicz if she thinks her characters are in healthy relationships she responds: “What does it mean to have a healthy relationship? It’s such a strangely clinical way of talking about interpersonal dynamics... It’s impossible to have a loving relationship in which you never cause pain and no pain ever is caused to you.”⁴⁷

In the following sub-chapters, I am going to analyse the power disparity in relationships, the healthy/toxic relationships, and the new conceptions of what structure a relationship can form as is written in Sally Rooney’s novels, mainly in *Conversations with Friends*.

8.1 Conversations with Friends: Frances and Bobbi

The relationship between Frances and Bobbi could be called unconventional, they used to be lovers and now they are best friends and even flatmates for a time. The sexual tension between them seems to never have gone. Frances idealizes Bobbi and talks about her with love and admiration like she can do no wrong. At first glance, it seems Bobbi has the upper hand in their relationship. She is the rich one, she can afford things Frances can’t. In contrast to her, Frances is uptight. She cares what other people think about her whereas Bobbi isn’t concerned at all. If you pay attention closely, it resurfaces that Frances actually has some power over Bobbi. She cares about Frances deeply, presumably still harbouring feelings for her as well. Bobbi mocks Nick all the time which upsets Frances, but she does not do so out of hate but because she is jealous of him, which is what Frances fails to see. The way Frances puts herself below Bobbi, convincing herself Bobbi has all the power in their

⁴⁶ Leszkiewicz, Anna. “Sally Rooney on Sex, Power and the Art of Being Normal.” *New Statesman*, September 12, 2018.

⁴⁷ Leszkiewicz, Anna. “Sally Rooney on Sex, Power and the Art of Being Normal.” *New Statesman*, September 12, 2018.

friendship and that she depends on her, viewing her as a goddess both metaphorically and literally like when she describes reading the Bible and understanding it better if she pictures Bobbi as Jesus⁴⁸, is what I would call an unhealthy relationship. Frances constantly compares herself to Bobbi, she thinks Bobbi is everything she should be, from harmless thoughts like when people look at her and she feels cowed, she says it is weak of her, Bobbi is never cowed by strangers⁴⁹, to intense moments that could be viewed as toxic behaviour like when she envisions herself looking like Bobbi, believes that if she did, no bad thing would happen to her, that “It wouldn’t be like waking up with a new, strange face: it would be like waking up with a face I already knew, the face I already imagined was mine, and so it would feel natural.”⁵⁰

Their friendship is beautiful most of the time but when it comes to a fight it can get ugly. At one point they fight about Nick, Bobbi talks negatively about him again and Frances accuses her of jealousy, but she means it rather as a tease, she is not serious in that moment, but it offends Bobbi (because it is true) and they stop talking for a while. When they talk about that fight retrospectively and apologize to each other via email further into the book Bobbi addresses the accusation as follows: “BUT it was really fucked up of you to accuse me of being jealous of him. it is so stereotypically homophobic to accuse a gay woman of being secretly jealous of men, which i know you know. but even more than that it’s really devaluing to our friendship to make out like i’m competing with a man for your attention. what does it say about how you see me? do you really rank our relationship below your passing sexual interest in some middle aged married guy?”⁵¹ This statement includes not only the conception of an approach to different gender relationships and a sign of somewhat toxic friendship but also a prejudiced view on an age gap romantic relationship and on extramarital love affairs.

The whole mood of the romantic relationship/friendship and the power disparity (where Frances as the narrator puts herself willingly on the submissive lower position, intentionally giving Bobbi the power while the reality is a little different) could be summed up by the situation when Frances recalls when Bobbi told her about Liese, the first girl she was involved with. Frances claims that, just like Liese in the

⁴⁸ Rooney, *Conversations with Friends*, 205.

⁴⁹ Rooney, *Conversations with Friends*, 51.

⁵⁰ Rooney, *Conversations with Friends*, 66.

⁵¹ Rooney, *Conversations with Friends*, 81.

story, she would do anything to be with Bobbi. She expresses her concern that one day Bobbi is going to pronounce her name the same way she did Liese's when telling the story, that is "without any particular love or hatred, just a girl she had known".⁵²

Bobbi herself confronts Frances with the fact that when she likes someone, she makes them feel like they are different from everyone else, that they are special. That she once did it with her (and in her inner monologue she still does) and now she is doing it with Nick.⁵³ She glorifies them and by doing so, she sometimes makes them uncomfortable, as Bobbi expressed more than once in the book trying to convince Frances that she is just a normal person without any glorious purpose as she imagines for her.

When Frances and Bobbi are with Philip and his new girlfriend Camille in a pub they talk about polyamorous love. Camille thinks it is not possible to love more than one person with your full heart. Bobbi disagrees, making a sarcastic comment about Camille's parents having a favourite child and how hard it must have been for her. Camille argues that it is not the same with children. Bobbi counters her with yet another sarcastic statement about her believing in "some kind of transhistorical concept of romantic love consistent across diverse cultures" and ending it with "we all believe silly things, don't we?"⁵⁴

The whole plot was always designed to lead back to a monogamous stereotypical man-woman romantic relationship. Even though Bobbi and Frances get together again, but not in an official conventional way, Frances ends up going back to Nick after all.

8.1.1 Conversations with Friends: Frances and Nick

When Frances starts her love affair with Nick, it is all new to her. The only person she was involved in and subsequently in love with before was Bobbi. The fact that Nick is older and married allows Frances and the readers to explore how people function inside the institutions like marriage and extramarital affairs. We can see how it turns out for the married party and for the person in the role of the lover.

Rooney depicts this love affair as the classical forbidden love and justifies it by writing the marriage of Nick and Melissa as toxic and not working the way it

⁵² Rooney, *Conversations with Friends*, 226.

⁵³ Rooney, *Conversations with Friends*, 229.

⁵⁴ Rooney, *Conversations with Friends*, 253.

should. In a way, the readers can root for Frances and Nick without feeling ashamed or any significant moral disputes. The question of power disparity arises once more in this relationship. Here it seems again that Nick is the one with the upper hand, Frances as the narrator again idealizes and glorifies him, deciding that he would be the one to be the boss having the advantage of the experience that comes with age, the material resources and the looks too, he seems to have it all according to Frances. As I mentioned in the previous sub-chapter, she treats him like he is a god on Earth, like he is a very special intellectually rich and talented person. She desperately wants him to like her, to love her, and she would do anything that would please him, anything to make herself look cool in front of him, she wants to appear smart and unique.

The age gap between them was explicitly mentioned right after we get introduced to Nick. He asks Frances how old she is, she answers 21. She asks herself what his intention behind that might be: “Maybe what he really wanted to communicate was an exaggerated awareness of our age difference, or a mild disapproval or disappointment about it.”⁵⁵ The fact that Nick is eleven years older than her appears multiple times in the book. People around Frances talk about it with negative connotations. I don’t see how a relationship between a 32-year-old man and a 21-year-old woman should be seen as problematic in the 21st century. But I think that the main reason Rooney allows the characters to judge it this way is because of the typicality of the love affair. Because of the stereotype of an unhappy man in marriage finding himself a younger lover. Women tend to hate it more (logically) when their husband finds himself a better (younger) version of themselves, they feel not only betrayed but also jealous. That is precisely what happens when Melissa learns about them. Before anyone learns about Frances and Nick when in France, the friends play games and talk. Derek and Evelyn mention that one time a girl showed interest in Nick, and they mocked him for it. The important part is that they described her as “stupidly young...twenty-three or something”. This feels personal to Frances who is even younger. To add to her discomfort, Evelyn continued: “Maybe she knew you were married...Some women like married men, it's a challenge.”⁵⁶ Even though the affair seemed a bad thing to do to both Frances and Nick, the moral dilemma never stopped them from seeing each other.

⁵⁵ Rooney, *Conversations with Friends*, 40.

⁵⁶ Rooney, *Conversations with Friends*, 100.

Both Frances and Nick are what I would call emotional introverts, to other people they come off as cold and unemotional. That results in misunderstandings of feelings and subsequently even fights. They are so similar in this aspect that it makes them inevitably fall apart. At times it seems they were meant for each other; they complement each other intellectually and they make each other very happy. That is until something comes between them, that something essentially being themselves. They lash out at each other mostly because of misinterpreting the behaviour of the other or the subject of Nick being married and not wanting to leave Melissa comes up. After such fight comes a period of pain and depression for both. Eventually, they find a way back to each other. Sally Rooney said in an interview that the aggressive compulsive behaviour of Frances towards Nick or Bobbi originates from a deeper wound than the one caused on the surface by the momentary fights with them. She pointed out that if the readers follow the thread of events in the book, a pattern of Frances' dad causing her distress arises. She says it comes from Frances' childhood, having a father that was abusive and made her feel scared at times. She developed a self-defensive system, when her father upsets her, she takes it out on Bobbi or Nick in order to protect herself. Her father isn't with Frances physically, he just calls. Whomever Frances is nearest to at the time, she becomes hostile towards them, bottling up her anger for her father and hurting her loved ones. "I guess I feel sorry for her, because I think that her aggression, which I admit does come up in the book, comes from a place of wanting to protect herself."⁵⁷

The fact that Nick is rich (compared to Frances) also plays a role in the aspect of power disparity. I am going to address this in Chapter 8.

The justification for this affair can be found in the book during the initial stage of Nick and Frances' relationship. Frances tells Nick she does not wish to be a homewrecker. He laughs at that and tells her she never had an affair before. She explains she doesn't want to ruin his marriage. Nick is amused at the situation and tries to calm her down by saying his marriage survived several affairs, he just hasn't taken part in any of them, implying that Melissa was adulterous before so he can do as he pleases without feeling guilty.⁵⁸ Which we learn isn't what he really thinks, he hates himself for betraying Melissa and for not being able to be with Frances fully too.

⁵⁷ Nolan, Michael. "Sally Rooney: 'a Large Part of My Style Has Definitely Developed through Writing Emails'." *The Irish Times*, 13 Nov. 2017.

⁵⁸ Rooney, *Conversations with Friends*, 70.

It seems that the same effect this revelation had on Frances should also be transferred to the reader: “I hadn't really wanted to feel sympathetic to Melissa, and now I felt her moving outside my frame of sympathy entirely, as if she belonged to a different story with different characters.”⁵⁹

Another aspect contributing to the unhealthiness of their relationship is the fact that Nick acts coldly to Frances considering they are lovers and they do love each other. In her inner monologues, she complains that he never touches or kisses her spontaneously, never compliments her appearance, never says he misses her. That he is very hard to read, she doesn't know what he thinks and feels, she says there is something blank and withholding about him, she thinks he would never call her beautiful. This happens throughout the whole book. It makes Frances feel unlovable, it adds to her insecurities, she fears Nick could never really love her.

In the book review for *The Guardian*, the journalist Claire Kilroy highlights the appearance of Nick's baby niece: “She is the only person for whom Nick can freely express emotion.”⁶⁰ When Frances and Nick talk about the baby later and Nick says he doesn't love many things in life but he loves his niece immensely, in her inner monologue Frances says: “This was the by far the most emotion I'd ever heard Nick express, and I was jealous. I thought about making a joke of how jealous I was, but in it felt creepy to be jealous of a baby.”⁶¹ Frances craves to be loved so much probably because her parents didn't raise her in a very loving environment. By realizing she was truly in love with him she found a new jealousy towards Melissa. She doesn't like to imagine Nick and Melissa's everyday life together as a couple and doubts like “Did he respect Melissa more than me? Did he like her more? If we were both going to die in a burning building and he could only save one of us, wouldn't he certainly save Melissa and not me?”⁶² plague her mind.

Nick unconsciously hurts Frances many times during their love affair. But he is not the only guilty party. Frances hurts his feelings too by wrongly assuming he is unemotional and that he doesn't care about her. Every time she takes offence or lashes out at him, he willingly takes the blame, but it causes him distress and makes him feel bad about himself. In conclusion, they are unsuitable partners in many ways. They

⁵⁹ Rooney, *Conversations with Friends*, 70.

⁶⁰ Kilroy, Claire. “Conversations with Friends by Sally Rooney Review – Young, Gifted and Self-Destructive.” *The Guardian*, June 1, 2017.

⁶¹ Rooney, *Conversations with Friends*, 76.

⁶² Rooney, *Conversations with Friends*, 201.

create a toxic environment for their relationship. But good things come from their love too. Even though they must overcome a lot of obstacles on the way, they love each other still. Rooney agreed with Leszkiewicz's statement "We might be living in a time of increased sensitivities to power dynamics, but a relationship can never be 'unproblematic'."⁶³ The book ends beautifully with a phone call. Nick confesses: "You know, I still have that impulse to be available to you." And Frances says: "Come and get me."⁶⁴

8.1.2 Normal People-Marianne and her lovers

The toxicity and power disparity in *Normal People* isn't seen so much in Marianne and Connell's relationship. As I described in Chapter 6, Marianne seeks out partners who are okay with hurting her and treating her as inferior. She suffers in her relationship with her boyfriend Jamie knowing perfectly well he is too self-assured, egoistic racist and classist. And yet she endures the toxic relationship because she wants to be punished. She does break up with him but during her studies in Sweden, she starts dating Lukas who also enjoys tying her up and degrading her. During this relationship, Marianne becomes seriously depressed. She ends the relationship when, ironically, he tells her he loves her.

I would argue Rooney implies Marianne accepting that being beaten up and degraded in relationships isn't the way only after she demands precisely that from Connell. Connell is appalled by the act of hitting her and refuses. Marianne feels ashamed and leaves. She goes back home where she gets hit by her brother and Connell comes to her rescue. In my opinion, when they are in the car and Connell tells her he loves her and he will never allow something like that to happen again, that is when Marianne leaves her previous self-harming mentality behind her.

As I said before, it is important that Sally Rooney writes about degrading and violent sex in a negative light as something that is not acceptable (meaning the form it gets in Marianne's relationships caused by low self-esteem where it is harmful). In today's culture gravitating towards normalizing abusive partners, it is significant, especially for young women that we have people with influence like Sally Rooney who can say: this isn't what love looks like.

⁶³ Leszkiewicz, Anna. "Sally Rooney on Sex, Power and the Art of Being Normal." *New Statesman*, September 12, 2018.

⁶⁴ Rooney, *Conversations with Friends*, 321.

I am going to end this chapter by quoting Sally Rooney from her interview with Anna Leszkiewicz: “Relationships can never be free from power struggle, and writing a novel full of them is about being sensitive to how important those power disparities are, but also understanding that it’s not like they exhaust the complete experience of what it means to be a human being or to be with someone else”.⁶⁵

⁶⁵ Leszkiewicz, Anna. “Sally Rooney on Sex, Power and the Art of Being Normal.” *New Statesman*, September 12, 2018.

9 Financial status, family background, class differences, the precariat, capitalism and the burden of privilege

Sally Rooney writes her characters on a base made out of childhood traumas, family situations whether it be relational or financial, or the influence of the surroundings a certain protagonist evolves in. As an author, she stresses topics like abusive parents or other family members, bullying in school or toxic friendships. Without necessarily saying so explicitly, she is able to convey to the reader the consequences that these, notably negative, elements have on people. And that is their relationship towards other people, but most importantly how they treat themselves and how they think of themselves.

In her novels, Sally Rooney questions the patriarchal capitalist way of life, especially in the younger generation. She presumably gets inspiration from her own experience, making the characters her own age at the time the book was written and incorporating a female protagonist with similarities to her own life and opinions. In her first novel, she centralizes on the image of an emancipated woman, the majority of the characters of *Conversations with Friends* being women.

She does not touch upon the patriarchy to a deeper level. In a 2018 article for *The New Yorker*, the journalist Lauren Collins talks with Rooney about her life and her work. Collins mentions the time Frances is in the hospital and a young male doctor is assigned to deal with her. It is an unpleasant experience for Frances because of how he acts towards her and because of the manner in which he asks her questions for the initial medical check. Collins writes: “Rooney’s depiction of the doctor is made especially pointed by the fact that he is Frances’s peer. The patriarchy has rarely seemed more banal and inescapable.”⁶⁶ The topic of patriarchy is pointed out subtly, because of the nature of the story it does not influence the characters that much.

She criticizes how, particularly in the publishing industry, money is the goal. You write in order to be able to get from day to day. To pay rent. To be able to maintain a certain luxury that society orders us to attain. To have a certain social status and the people around you would respect you. To have value. And if you make something of yourself, become wealthy, or you are born rich, you are left with the burden of privilege.

⁶⁶ Collins, Lauren. “Sally Rooney Gets in Your Head.” *The New Yorker*, December 31, 2018.

9.1 Conversations with Friends: Frances, Bobbi, Nick and Melissa

In *Conversations with Friends* Rooney promotes the Marxist mindset mainly through Frances and Nick. In fact, all of the descriptions above reflect Rooney's own fate in life. She studied politics at Trinity College, later switching to a master's in American literature. She then became a worldwide known author and started being called a voice of her generation. She claims that she hasn't come to terms with her sudden fame and the pressure it puts on her as an author. As I said in Chapter 5, she grew up in a socialist family, her parents were left-wing idealists, and she went through a Marxist upbringing.

9.1.1 Capitalism and the Burden of Privilege

It is explicitly said in the novel that Frances is a communist, Bobbi is an anarchist and Nick is "basically" a Marxist on his own accord. The characters from this novel are fundamentally influenced by the capitalist system in which they grew up and which let them down completely forcing them to survive in a political and financial system that crashed down right after they reached the age at which they have to financially support themselves independently.

Sally Rooney discusses the characters' awareness of their privilege and the concept of capitalism in *Conversations with Friends* in the 2017 interview for *The Irish Times*⁶⁷. She and the journalist Michael Nolan discuss how when in pain, Frances turns to Christianity. Rooney explains the reason behind this is the fact that people can't really rely on capitalism in times of suffering. They wouldn't find the same comfort as they do in the healing path of Christ which is according to her essentially on every page in the Bible. She says the free market certainly won't help and so it is only logical to turn to the original source of ethical guidance which would be the Bible. Rooney also stresses that even though Frances has communism, during a time of pain reading Karl Marx isn't of much help. She thinks Frances lacks radical self-sacrifice and radical love for other people in her life and she finds it in the Christian philosophy. That time Frances stumbles to church when her endometriosis pain becomes unbearable all of a sudden, she experiences almost a Marxist epiphany that is connected to the idea of Christian community.

⁶⁷ Nolan, Michael. "Sally Rooney: 'a Large Part of My Style Has Definitely Developed through Writing Emails.'" *The Irish Times*, 13 Nov. 2017.

In this interview, Michael Nolan references another article written for *The New Yorker* by Alexandra Schwartz: “Capitalism is to Rooney's young women what Catholicism was to Joyce's young men, a rotten national faith to contend with, though how exactly to resist capitalism, when it has sunk its teeth so deep into the human condition, remains an open question.”⁶⁸ Rooney reacts by saying she thinks the power and the ideology of the Catholic Church were replaced by those of the free-market. She says that capitalism abandoned the old values we had for family and community. “We got rid of the Catholic Church and replaced it with predatory capitalism,” she complains.

Nolan and Rooney also talk about the characters, especially Nick, being aware of their privilege. Nick frequently talks about how to live with that privilege, we can make out arguments on whether it's a positive thing or a burden. Rooney elaborates on Nolan's view. She explains that even though both Nick and Bobbi can be considered wealthy privileged people, there is a difference between them. Having read the book, I agree with Rooney's insight on the diversity within the essentially same ideology of Nick and Bobbi. Rooney feels that Bobbi's opinion drifts in the direction of “Burn the landlords” and “Kill the rich”. Despite the fact that she is this radical, she doesn't notice her best friend is running short on money. Rooney questions: “How aware can you be of your own privilege if you don't pick up on something like that?” She put Nick to her contrast pointing out how quickly he figured it out and the first thing he did was offer Frances his money. She thinks Bobbi's ignorance comes from the fact that she doesn't make her own money, her parents provide for her and so her political radicality is based on the idea “Well as long as I say I hate the capitalists, I don't actually have to do anything.” I completely agree with Rooney on this. From my experience, it is always those kids who never had any part-time job and their wealth comes from their parents that fail to see other people may not enjoy the same privilege. That's the case with Bobbi.

Discussing Melissa and Nick's privilege as a couple, Rooney emphasizes that they are both decent people who recognise their position and have no desire to exploit is and force it on other people, they don't want to make other people's lives difficult. She says that even though they could become landlords they choose not to out of their convictions. Rooney thinks that most of the critiques of her novel come from the fact

⁶⁸ Schwartz, Alexandra. “A New Kind of Adultery Novel.” *The New Yorker*, July 24, 2017.

that she wrote about wealthy people who are Marxists. That she dared connect these two opposites. She says: “I think it is a little bit of, these people own a house, how dare they be Marxists?”

Nevertheless, Rooney acknowledges that her characters do live relatively privileged lives. Even Nick and Melissa are above the average when it comes to the income of an artist. The profession of a writer and an actor are still very unpredictable as far as the regularity of income and its amount goes.

9.1.2 The Precariat, class differences and financial status

Apart from studying English at Trinity College, in her free time, she writes poetry and has a summer internship in the literary sphere too. This internship is in a literary agency with her classmate Philip. They read manuscripts and write one-page reports. Rooney didn't forget to emphasize the financing situation, the underestimation of the importance of literature and the subsequent financial undervalue. Frances and Philip were both paid a stipend which means they aren't paid at all as said in the book.

Frances doesn't really need any extra money, her father sponsors her, his money pays for the food. Rooney is hinting at the fact that young people these days are not financially independent, not even desiring to be: “All I needed was food, and Philip lived at home, so it didn't matter much to us.”⁶⁹ “This is how privilege gets perpetuated, Philip told me in the office one day. Rich assholes like us taking unpaid internships and getting jobs off the back of them. Speak for yourself, I said. I'm never going to get a job.”⁷⁰ It seems like Frances feels the need to make something of herself, to contribute to society with some big achievement. Otherwise, her existence wouldn't make sense, people wouldn't admire her, or respect her. Even though having a whole life in front of her, she feels obliged to own expensive property, to manifest wealth. And because she has none of that, she believes herself to be inferior, mostly in comparison to her rich classmates. This could be seen in this passage where she is thinking about Melissa: “I didn't have the option not to take her seriously, because she had published a book, which proved that lots of other people took her seriously even if I didn't.”⁷¹ and she adds: “At twenty-one, I had no achievements or possessions that proved I was a serious person.”⁷²

⁶⁹ Rooney, *Conversations with Friends*, 17.

⁷⁰ Rooney, *Conversations with Friends*, 18.

⁷¹ Rooney, *Conversations with Friends*, 21.

⁷² Rooney, *Conversations with Friends*, 21.

Bobbi also studies History and Politics at Trinity. These are the subjects Frances' mother considers serious "real subjects".⁷³ A hint at the degradation of English studies and the inclusion of politics viewed as a very important component of everyday life and the influence of our parents' ideologies and beliefs on our life growing up and on the formulation of our own opinions and priorities. We are being pushed from an early age to live up to the standards of the capitalist world led by men.

Like Frances, it happens often that we are pressured into studying subjects we don't really enjoy but they are perceived by society as somewhat higher-status ones, those that will contribute to the country's economy. Therefore, academic fields like literature are considered a waste of time and effort, made for people that have no "real" talent or ambition. Frances's mom, apart from not taking her choice of studies and interests seriously acts as if Frances doesn't have a clue about the real world. Being a social democrat, she dislikes the rich and judges their motives. She appreciates Bobbi more than her own daughter, from France's point of view. Frances feels like Bobbi and her mother bond over discussing historical topics. It seems her mother perceives Frances as less smart. She describes moments when Bobbi wants to make a point and she turns to Frances to back her up. Her mother always makes a comment along the lines of: "You may as well ask the teapot."⁷⁴

When Melissa and Nick invite Bobbi and Frances to France and they discuss the house in which they are going to be staying which belongs to a wealthy woman Valerie who manages Melissa's work, they make fun of her prototypical capitalist lifestyle: "Anyway, old old money. And she likes to have people staying in her various properties when she's not around."⁷⁵ Bobbi states that wealthy people sicken her.

Frances also mentions the life she led when she was a kid, describing her upbringing from the point of view in which Nick is far richer than she ever was: "I told Nick I didn't think I'd eaten so much food in my life... At home my parents had never cooked with chorizo or aubergine. I had also never tasted fresh avocado before."⁷⁶ She describes how she feels about him being wealthy as being infatuated with the house he lives in, the immaculateness of it all⁷⁷ She is jealous of his lifestyle.

⁷³ Rooney, *Conversations with Friends*, 46.

⁷⁴ Rooney, *Conversations with Friends*, 47.

⁷⁵ Rooney, *Conversations with Friends*, 93.

⁷⁶ Rooney, *Conversations with Friends*, 74.

⁷⁷ Rooney, *Conversations with Friends*, 76.

In the interview Rooney did for *The New Yorker* with Lauren Collins, they discuss her childhood and the impact capitalism, and the financial crisis had on her and her family. Her father lost his job due to the crisis and she blames the rich parents of her college classmates. She recalls being accepted into Trinity and the shock she experienced coming to a different environment she wasn't familiar with, being brought up by Marxist parents: "What I wasn't prepared for was encountering the class of people who run the country. I had a feeling, on one hand, of being appalled, but on the other hand a real sense of wanting to prove myself to people, to prove I'm just as good as they are."⁷⁸

Michael Nolan asks Rooney in the *Irish Times* Interview whether the reason Frances feels stuck in the middle not feeling comfortable in wealthy people's company nor in the company of people from her background, is precariousness or if it has to do with class. She explains she is in an interim class position which is relatively socially fluid. But it results in feelings of not belonging. She cannot relate to people from the background he grew up in, sometimes that includes her parents. Rooney highlights Frances mentioning she doesn't know how to talk to taxi drivers without them thinking she is super rich even though she describes herself as a moderately poor person. But the thing is, she is not comfortable in rich people's company either. Rooney says: "She aspires to be a member of a different class, and therefore no longer feels at one with the background that she's from. So she's in that strange interim class position, and it is a precarious position." She explains that Frances is a member of the proletariat in strict class terms. She doesn't own any property and doesn't really have a waged job. Even though at the end of the book she gets a minimum wage job but Rooney stresses that the minimum wage in Dublin is extremely low. As I discussed in Chapters 3.2. and 4, the problem is that the number of educated people is increasing but work positions don't correspond to the skills these young people can offer. Highly educated people like Frances may have many academic qualifications but that doesn't guarantee they are going to find a job after they finish their studies.

Rooney feels the need to clarify Frances' situation to foreign readers because in her experience, especially with the Americans, they tend to misunderstand her social position. What may seem like a privileged lifestyle for people living in the example country of America, where they must pay great amounts of college fees, is

⁷⁸ Collins, Lauren. "Sally Rooney Gets in Your Head." *The New Yorker*, December 31, 2018.

very different in the Irish context. Frances has a college grant; her parents pay college fees and a small monthly allowance. In normal circumstances, she is provided for. But the moment her father stops sending the money she is broke; she cannot afford food. As a student, it is extremely difficult for her to find a job. This applies not only to Ireland, but it is much the same in the Czech Republic. It is the way Rooney points out, employers are not looking for students without flexible time possibilities. She addresses the critique *Conversations with Friends* received, that it is about incredibly privileged elitist people. She asks: “Yes, she's read Foucault, but if she can't afford a ham sandwich, how privileged is she?” Rooney thinks that the fact Frances seems to have a higher-class identity by dressing stylishly and her intellect is reflected in the way she speaks doesn't mean she is materially privileged.

Talking about the financial situation of Nick and Melissa, Rooney attributes their ownership of a house to the initial stage of their marriage when they probably made enough money to buy it. Now it doesn't matter that their income is inconsistent, they already have the house, they just have to make enough money to manage it. They have a nice big house just for the two of them and they aren't landlords or factory owners. That means they don't fit the traditional concept of capitalists.

In a way, all four of the main characters belong to the new class, the precariat. I think we can count Philip in too. Their income varies, some of them wealthier than others, but at the end of the day none of them knows when the money can stop coming in. Nick cannot predict when he is going to get a job offer. Melissa cannot know when she stops feeling inspired to write a book, or even if she writes a book, that doesn't necessarily mean it is going to sell well. Bobbi and Philip depend on their parents' goodwill to send allowance. And lastly, Frances depends on her drunken father never knowing when he forgets to send her money and on her part-time job working hours. This and the fact that they are all millennials corresponds to what I said in introducing Chapter 8.1.1. It is also conveyed in Collins' message for *The New Yorker* readers: “If Rooney's characters aren't especially ambitious, if they have low stress thresholds, if they prefer foreign vacations to office jobs, forgive them. The game was over by the time they came of age.”

To conclude this chapter, I want to mention the *New Yorker* article again where Collins writes: “Her writing emanates anxiety about capitalism, which purports to be a meritocratic system but actually functions as a diabolical inversion of communism,

redistributing wealth and privilege at the whim of the people who already have those things.”

9.1.3 Family background

Frances grew up in an abusive family dynamic. Her father is an alcoholic. Before Frances’s parents separated, her father whom Frances calls by his first name, Dennis, rather than “dad”, used to be aggressive towards her. Frances mentions an incident from childhood during which he threw a shoe at her face. She carries the trauma of having an abusive parent into her adulthood. The way her father treated her made her create a self-defence system about which I am talking in Chapter 6.

In an interview for *The Irish Times*⁷⁹, Sally Rooney talks about the effect it left on Frances. She says Frances doesn’t know how to love someone who hasn’t been a good parent. She refers to the fact that Frances describes her relationship with him as walking on eggshells fearing she might do something he would find upsetting. She wants to be independent from him on all fronts. She doesn’t want to be constantly worried about him doing something stupid or reckless. She doesn’t want to worry every day that something is going to happen to him and she is going to be the one who would have to take care of it.

Her family isn’t particularly rich, in fact in comparison to the people she surrounds herself she could be called poor. Her father sends her money to her account and that is the only income she receives which means she remains financially dependent on him still. Nevertheless, he keeps causing her trouble even though he isn’t physically with her or even near her. Frances lives in a flat belonging to her uncle and her father lives alone in her hometown. Not only did he stop sending her money, did not tell her about it leaving her with no possibility to pay for food. But on more than one occasion he calls her randomly in a drunken spur of the moment. First, it happens when they are in France, which he forgot she told him, and during that call, he informs her that her mother is going to pay her allowance the next month and he asks if she is not short on money. Then he continues by asking how much money she has saved and stating that the habit of saving is a good thing to practice. As if he knew she is going to need it soon. It happens again when she is in a shop. He calls her sounding drunk, but he speaks in such a manner that Frances becomes afraid he is

⁷⁹ Nolan, Michael. “Sally Rooney: ‘a Large Part of My Style Has Definitely Developed through Writing Emails.’” *The Irish Times*, 13 Nov. 2017.

considering suicide. She doesn't act on it directly; she doesn't mention it to anyone, but she feels under the weather the second day and ends up initiating a break-up with Nick for no reason at all. Another thing she does following the event is self-harm. On the surface she is upset with Nick but subconsciously the anger traces back to her father.

From time to time, she visits her father. When she does during the course of this book, it is because her mother pushes her into it. She mentions the lack of respect for her father is met with irritation from her mother: "My mother hated the way I talked about my father, like he was just another normal person rather than my distinguished personal benefactor, or a minor celebrity."⁸⁰ Frances doesn't understand this attitude of her mother because she knows he stole money from her when they were married. She even saw her crying when he fell asleep drunk only in his underwear on the stairs. When Frances comes to his place, she describes the mess it is in, dirty dishes and garbage everywhere with an ever-present awful smell.

During some of their calls, he seemed to be delusional, thinking someone is hunting him, at times expressing concern that "they" might come for Frances too. She just shrugs it off.⁸¹

It might come off as if she doesn't love her father, her mother thinks so too. Rooney explains in The Irish Times interview that "simply deciding that you don't want to be emotionally invested in something isn't the same as not being". Frances does care about her father, she loves him, he just makes it very difficult for her to act like they have a normal father-daughter relationship.

Bobbi is another character in *Conversations with Friends* who has a difficult relationship with her parents. At the beginning of the book, Frances mentions that Bobbi's parents are going through "an acrimonious" break-up. Bobbi refers to her parent by their first names too, but it is more of an inside joke, unlike Frances' case. We are told that Bobbi's mother Eleanor has always been emotionally fragile and that her father Jerry is the favoured party in the divorce. Bobbi has also a younger sister who doesn't take the divorce well. At one point in the book, Bobbi moves in with Frances because her mother has thrown out her father's stuff and her little sister Lydia has locked herself in the bathroom screaming she wants to die.⁸² The situation

⁸⁰ Rooney, *Conversations with Friends*, 175.

⁸¹ Rooney, *Conversations with Friends*, 310.

⁸² Rooney, *Conversations with Friends*, 72.

escalates and by the end of the book, Bobbi confesses to Frances that Jerry is creating a family drama. He is theorising about Eleanor trying to get all his money and he wants to have Bobbi on his side. We learn that Bobbi has told Frances in the past that she is her father's favourite child, he thinks Lydia is spoilt and Eleanor is hysterical. When Frances learns about how the divorce situation has turned out she contemplates her previous thought on France's family relations. "I had always thought that being Jerry's favourite was a privilege for Bobbi, but now I saw it was also something cumbersome and dangerous."⁸³

It is important to talk about abusive parents and alcoholism affecting our everyday lives and the lives of children who by consequence carry the weight of their childhood into their adulthood either becoming mirrors of their parents or treating themselves badly just like Frances and Marianne (whose brother beats her and mother mistreats and degrades her). This is another reason why Sally Rooney's books are groundbreaking, bring awareness on many levels and are incredibly relatable to her readers, especially to the millennial generation which is the majority of Rooney's target audience along with Gen Z.

⁸³ Rooney, *Conversations with Friends*, 256.

10 Modern-day problems, modern technologies of communication and millennials

10.1 Email and messenger communication

Most of the communication between characters in *Conversations with Friends* is taking part through instant messaging. Sally Rooney has said to her interviewers that email is how she communicates with her friends. Michael Nolan asks the question “Do you think the novel is moving in the direction of incorporating these forms of technology into the narrative more?” She explains that she uses the same voice in her email as she does in real life. She points out that Frances isn’t based on her which is a thing people assume about her work, that it is completely biographical and that upsets her: “obviously Frances isn't me, but the voice that she uses in the book isn't dissimilar to the voice she uses in instant messenger and email”.

Frances is a writer in the book, but we don’t read any of her poetry or stories. The only writing she does that we see are her messages and email to her friends and family. Rooney states, “a large part of my style has definitely developed through writing emails” and the interview for The Irish Times carries the name of that quote. She describes how late-night emails can be very long with a deep message. She says not only are emails like those in *Conversations with Friends*, but the book is like one in itself, like a “controlled outpouring”.

Rooney and Nolan discuss how messenger and email messages are different in construction and in the amount of vulnerability the writer leaves in it. Communicating by messenger, you cannot rewrite what you have written and reconstruct the idea you are trying to express without breaking the flow of information and of the communication. Rooney says that any editing you do in instant messenger is with an asterisk. This surprises me a lot because she belongs to a different generation but to one that is obviously so close to mine that the habits of each of our generation, millennial for Rooney and Gen Z for me, are fundamentally the same. The way Rooney writes about Frances thinking about what she is going to text Nick, overthinking it even, “hitting the return key” every time a word she used doesn’t sound perfect in her head or seeing three dots on the screen anxiously expecting a message: “I’m in hospital, I typed. Then I held down the delete key until this message

disappeared, character after evenly timed character.”⁸⁴ Reading sentences like that made me feel like looking in the mirror while reading *Conversations with Friends* and I am certain it is another aspect that appeals to her audience and makes it so popular.

According to Rooney, the danger in instant messaging is the fact that the people communicating aren't in the room together and the technological device of messaging doesn't transfer intonation, sarcasm or real feelings and therefore can lead to miscommunication. Nick and Frances often misjudge the nature of the situation when communicating via instant messages, they misinterpret each other's intentions. Frances is angry and Nick thinks she is joking and so on. Rooney suggests that instant messaging sits on an “interesting border between text and conversation”.

I am going to give an example of how the messages look like in the novel. This is a conversation between Bobbi and Frances:

Bobbi: if you look at love as something other than an interpersonal phenomenon

Bobbi: and try to understand it as a social value system

Bobbi: it's both antithetical to capitalism, in that it challenges the axiom of selfishness

Bobbi: which dictates the whole logic of inequality

Bobbi: and yet also it's subservient and facilitatory

Bobbi: i.e. mothers selflessly raising children without any profit motive

Bobbi: which seems to contradict the demands of the market at one level

Bobbi: and yet actually just functions to provide workers for free

me: yes

me: capitalism harnesses 'love' for profit

me: love is the discursive practice and unpaid labour is the effect

me: but I mean, I get that, I'm anti love as such

Bobbi: that's vapid Frances

Bobbi: you have to do more than just say you're anti things⁸⁵

At one point Frances recalls rereading her and Bobbi's messages after their break up and copying them into files as a reminder of the closeness they shared. She tries to look back into the texts between her and Nick looking for written evidence of their love affair but finding out the conversations don't convey any of their real

⁸⁴ Rooney, *Conversations with Friends*, 169.

⁸⁵ Rooney, *Conversations with Friends*, 180.

subtext. Frances says the messages consist only of “a few boring logistical messages about when he would be back in the house and what time I might arrive”⁸⁶

What Nolan also discusses with Rooney is the characteristics of a diary that these messages seem to carry. They agree that it is interesting that a diary is normally written just by one person, it is something intimate. But these messages have two owners and co-authors, Bobbi and Frances. Which is something that summarizes this sub-chapter about emails and messenger texts. The bottom line of the book is, just like Sally Rooney says: “it isn't so much about individual people as it is about relationships, and the interplay of Frances's dynamics with each of the other three people in the foursome, rather than Frances as a psychological entity.”

She talks about people having expectations of character development of them having an epiphany and it changing their mentality forever. Referring back to the topic of diaries, Rooney makes it known that the book is “more about developing meaningful inter-relationships within a group, or within a community, or a family, or a friendship...if Frances were to have a diary, it would be a diary in the form of exchanges with other people, rather than her relating her own experiences.”

10.2 Abortion

In *Conversations with Friends*, Frances has medical problems and, in the hospital, the doctors tell her she might be having a miscarriage. As soon as it is revealed it has nothing to do with pregnancy, Frances ponders on the thought of being pregnant: “The pregnancy was already over, and I didn't need to consider things like Irish constitutional law, the right to travel, my current bank balance, and so on.”⁸⁷

Put into context, at the time the book was published, abortion was still illegal in Ireland. A few months before the publishing of Sally Rooney's second novel *Normal People*, there was a referendum in Ireland on the subject of abortion and the repeal of the Eight Amendment forbidding it.

Rooney doesn't elaborate on the abortion laws in Ireland. But she points out to it by writing about Frances's miscarriage situation. What is more, the Frances quote above implies that if Frances wanted to have an abortion she would have to travel elsewhere, to a country where abortion is illegal, and she would have to have enough money to afford it.

⁸⁶ Rooney, *Conversations with Friends*, 94.

⁸⁷ Rooney, *Conversations with Friends*, 169.

By writing this, Rooney shares awareness of the struggle of Irish women across the whole world. Until I read *Conversations with Friends*, I was unaware of the fact. Even now it is hard for me to imagine that in the 21st century, a modern country like Ireland could have such a dehumanizing antiquated law.

10.3 The Irish housing crisis

As I described in Chapter 3.1., Ireland is now experiencing a housing crisis that is characterized by the many newspaper headlines like “renters are being exploited” which is also how Sally Rooney titled her 2023 article for The Irish Times.

As I mentioned in Chapter 8.1.2., Sally Rooney’s insight into the book *Conversations with Friends* shows that Melissa and Nick once did afford to buy a house, but she implies that if they were to do it in the present moment, their income wouldn’t suffice. As a student, Frances is lucky to have somewhere to live and the fact that she doesn’t pay rent is a bonus.

It is students, college graduates and young families suffering the most from this crisis.

The crisis is explicitly mentioned during a conversation with Bobbi and Frances’ friend Marianne: “Marianne said there was an accommodation crisis, she said she'd heard about it on the news. And they won't take students, Marianne said. I'm serious, look at the listings...It shouldn't be legal to say No Students, Marianne said. It's discrimination.”⁸⁸

Rooney feels strongly about her home country coming to this state and she expresses her anger on social media and in newspaper articles like the one from March 2023 where she writes: “The nice thing about being a landlord in Ireland today, as the late Margaret Thatcher might observe, is that you never seem to run out of other people’s money.”⁸⁹ If she wrote a novel now, she would definitely incorporate the housing crisis to a way deeper level to raise awareness and express her opinion about the matter.

⁸⁸ Rooney, *Conversations with Friends*, 190.

⁸⁹ Rooney, Sally. “Sally Rooney: Renters Are Being Exploited and Evictions Must Be Stopped.” The Irish Times, March 18, 2023.

10.4 Other problems of the 21st-century world

In *Conversations with Friends*, the characters have arguments and conversations about some of the current world events and problems like brain drain or qualifications of refugees: “Evelyn kept saying: some of these people have degrees, these are doctors and professors we're talking about. I had noticed before this tendency of people to emphasise the qualifications of refugees. Derek said: whatever about the others, imagine turning doctors away. It's insane.”⁹⁰

They mention things like the Western value systems, cultural relativism, European superiority, the universal right to asylum, the dream of multiculturalism, liberal democracy, the police state, the Camp David Accords, the Middle East, Israel, Palestine, Ronald Reagan and the IMF, the endemic racism of criminal justice in the US, the war in Syria and the invasion of Iraq.

Frances mentions talking to Nick about “the videos of police brutality that we had all seen without ever seeking them out, and what it meant for us as white people to say they were ‘difficult to watch’, we all agreed they were although we couldn't fix on one exact meaning for this difficulty.”⁹¹

But they don't talk about it in a deeper sense. The characters either just mention the issues or have a short exchange of opinions.

In *Beautiful World Where Are You* the protagonists Alice and Eileen exchange letters. Occasionally some of the current problems that civilisation finds itself dealing with appear: “The air we breathe is toxic, the water we drink is full of microplastics, and our food is contaminated by cancerous Teflon chemicals.”⁹² This is just an extract from a long list of things happening to our “decadent declining” civilization.

She doesn't have to write a book about it, just by mentioning global problems Rooney uses her fame to raise global recognition of the essential troubles that are plaguing our planet and society.

⁹⁰ Rooney, *Conversations with Friends*, 111.

⁹¹ Rooney, *Conversations with Friends*, 241.

⁹² Rooney, *Beautiful World Where Are You*, 208.

11 Conclusion

Sally Rooney gained the nickname of “the voice of her generation”. She did so not only by writing about things that the contemporary youth go through every day like friendship arguments, love affairs or feelings of self-doubt. She writes to normalize taboos like mental illness, depression, and anxiety or to emphasize the fact that self-harm or suicide thoughts are very common, and people shouldn’t be ashamed to seek help.

The findings of this study coincide with Philip Maughan’s statement in his article for *The New Statesman*: “In 1942 the short-story writer Frank O’Connor claimed it would be impossible to write a social novel set in Ireland. In that sense, Rooney has defied the odds.”⁹³

Rooney centres her novels around an interpersonal dynamic of two or more people whose lives intertwine with each other and that is what works perfectly and what makes the novels so universal and relatable to a wide variety of audiences. She writes her characters’ ages the same as she is in the time of writing. She is a young woman in her early thirties. This means that her prime readers are also millennials or Gen Z representatives. She was called by *The Times* “the first great millennial author”. The critics often compare her writing style to that of Jane Austen or George Eliot because of the nature of the books with female protagonists and topics like class differences or the burden of privilege. Rooney says herself that her books are “basically nineteenth-century novels dressed up in contemporary clothing.”⁹⁴

Sally Rooney addresses events currently happening across the world but also in her home country Ireland. She is trying to draw the attention of her readers, especially the younger generation, to such issues and so it happens often that she shares her opinion through the voice of her characters. She says: “I feel like you can really get away with putting a lot of your opinions—if you *wanted* to—in a novel.”⁹⁵

Rooney has a talent to write stories where romantic relationships, friendships and family relationships can be seen side by side with contemporary environmental or political ideologies and doubts and the overall result of a book makes perfect sense and feels natural and not forced. She explains that her aim is “to show the reality of a

⁹³ Maughan, Philip. “Sally Rooney’s Conversations with Friends Is an Irish Social Novel for the Modern Age.” *New Statesman*, September 4, 2017.

⁹⁴ Collins, Lauren. “Sally Rooney Gets in Your Head.” *The New Yorker*, December 31, 2018.

⁹⁵ Collins, Lauren. “Sally Rooney Gets in Your Head.” *The New Yorker*, December 31, 2018.

social condition as it is connected to broader systems. You would hope that by trying to show those things in process you can say, It doesn't have to be this way.”

She influences the way anyone who reads her books perceives the world and some tabooed issues. Her novels are amongst the most read right now worldwide. People constantly make podcasts about her and her books, they write articles and even adapt her novels into super popular TV series. That is why Sally Rooney deserves the title “voice of her generation”.

12 Resumé

Tato bakalářská práce se zabývá charakteristikami literární tvorby irské autorky Sally Rooney, díky kterým se jí v literárním světě přezdívá “hlas své generace”. Primárním zdrojem této analýzy je první román autorky s názvem *Rozhovory s přáteli*. Práce je rozdělená do dvou částí. První část je teoretická a obsahuje kapitoly dvě až pět. V této teoretické části jsou objasněna témata, která Rooney inkorporuje do svých románů. Rooney si vybírá taková, která v dnešní době hrají velkou roli v našich každodenních životech. Jedná se jak o celosvětovou problematiku, tak o problematiku zasahující čistě Irsko.

Kapitola dvě se zabývá konceptem marxismu a marxistické filozofie. Vysvětluje, jakým způsobem irská vláda, kapitalismus a finanční krize vede obyvatele Irska k tomu, že se vrací ke starým ideologiím a systémům jako je právě marxismus nebo například komunismus. Zmiňuje rozdíl mezi vnímáním komunismu ve světě a v zemích v minulosti utlačovaných komunismem, ve své podstatě tedy mezi Irskem a Českou republikou. Dále jsou v této kapitole rozebírány důvody nespokojenosti lidí v současnosti, které jsou spojené s místními podmínkami a rozdělením společnosti. Touha po změně a po lepších životních podmínkách činí marxistickou filozofii a komunismus mezi těmito nespokojenými lidmi opět populární. Kapitola tři hovoří o společnosti a třídním rozdělení v Irsku. Obsahuje dvě podkapitoly, první pojednává o bytové krizi, druhá o třídních rozdílech v Irsku. Ve čtvrté kapitole je vysvětlen pojem prekarizace a je zde popsána hierarchie socio-ekonomických skupin lidí a jejich charakteristiky. Jednou z těchto skupin je právě prekariát. Kapitola pět uvádí Sally Rooney jako autorku a popisuje její autorskou identitu a autorský styl.

Od šesté kapitoly po kapitolu deset už se jedná o praktickou část. Tato část obsahuje příklady přímo z románů Sally Rooney, primárně se tato práce však soustředí na román *Rozhovory s přáteli*. Kapitoly šest až devět zahrnují témata zaměřená především na mladé lidi jako psychické zdraví, problémy se sebevědomím, mezilidské vztahy se zaměřením na milostné vztahy, kapitalismus, břemeno výsad spojených s finanční zajištěností, třídní rozdíly, rodinné zázemí, finanční jistotu, prekariát. V kapitole deset jsou obsaženy zmínky nacházející se přímo v románech Sally Rooney o problémech současné doby nejen v Irsku, ale i ve zbytku světa. Tato kapitola se také dotýká používání moderních technologií při konverzaci. Je rozdělena na čtyři podkapitoly. První se zabývá komunikací přes email a messenger, druhá rozebírá problematiku potratu, třetí irskou bytovou krizi a čtvrtá shrnuje ostatní témata, která

Sally Rooney zahrnuje ve svých knihách. V každé z těchto kapitol praktické části se objevují příklady z publikace *Rozhovory s přáteli*, někdy jsou doplněny i příklady z románu *Normální lidi* a *Kdepak jsi, krásný světe*. Příklady jsou prokládány názory novinářů, literárních kritiků a také samotné autorky Sally Rooney k dané tematice.

Výše uvedená témata ovlivňují především mladé lidi, konkrétně mileniály a generaci Z, v dnešní době jsou zásadní a všudypřítomná a o moha z nich se dostatečně nemluví. Sally Rooney na nich zakládá podstatu svých knih, a dostává je tak do povědomí široké veřejnosti. U některých z nich, jako je například psychické zdraví, nejen že upozorňuje na jejich negativní vliv, ale také ujišťuje své čtenáře, že se nejedná o ojedinělé případy, že například depresi může trpět každý a není to žádné tabu. Právě toto a poutavý styl psaní se zakomponováním moderních technologií dělá ze Sally Rooney autorku, která je právem nazývána „hlasem své generace“.

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