

Equal Affection Cannot Be

Imagining Happiness Through Affect in Sally Rooney's *Normal People*
and *Conversations with Friends*

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	i
Table of Contents	ii
Introduction	1
2. Affect Theory: a Framework	6
2.1. Reading Affect	7
2. Living Empty: Post-Crash Ireland as a Character	11
2.1. A Neoliberal World	11
2.2. The Celtic Tiger	14
2.3. Visible Consequences of the Fall of the Tiger	16
2.4. Money Talks	19
2.5. Class Divides	21
3. Emotions as Connective Tissue	25
3.1. What Are Emotions?	25
3.2. Experiencing Pain	28
3.3. Feeling the Other	29
4. Performing Identity	33
4.1. Conventionality as a Pitfall	33
4.2. Flat Affect	36
4.3. Identity as Performance	37
4.4. Genre in Love	43
5. Finding Happiness	49
5.1. Outlining Happiness	50
5.2. Happy Spaces	51
5.3. Happy Places	53
6. Conclusions	57
7. Works cited	61

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INTRODUCTION

Most people spend their entire lives looking for a place where they truly feel at home. Unfortunately for them, this search for comfort is fraught with difficulties and complications. Immanuel Kant stated that “the notion of happiness is so indeterminate that although every human being wishes to attain it, yet he can never say definitely and consistently what it is that he really wishes and wills” (qtd. in Ahmed, *Happiness* 1). Spending an entire lifetime searching for happiness or belonging can be rewarding for some, but this quest may just as well play into any existing anxieties or even become a source of stress in its own right. The resulting journey, one where the subject is not quite aware of either the destination or what direction to take, lies at the heart of many stories. So too in Sally Rooney’s novels, *Connell*, *Marianne and Frances*, its main characters exist only within these books. What they have in common is that they are all highly educated, intelligent, young people who are growing up in a post-Crash Ireland. Their world is a complicated one, one where the economical landscape that surrounds them has been upended not long before the start of the stories. It is also a world where people struggle with mental health, with self-expression, with communication and forming meaningful and healthy relationships with others. All of these aspects are connected, as “according to Lauren Berlant, literature, and the concepts of happiness and belonging it explores, must be seen within the societal context in which it has been produced” (Schaefer 1). The context here is one of confusion, of economic inequality and the dysfunctional families that stem from both.

Rooney’s debut novel, *Conversations with Friends* (2017), tells the story of Frances, a young literature student in Dublin, and the people around her. She writes poetry and performs it with her former girlfriend Bobbi, with whom she has been friends since secondary school. When the novel starts, the two meet Melissa, a photographer, and her husband Nick, a television and stage actor. The entirety of the novel revolves around those four characters, the love triangles that unfold and most importantly, the difficulties that arise as a result of this. The story spans not more

than a year, but over the course of those months, Frances develops a very intense relationship with Nick, who is about a decade older than she is. The reader is granted access to Frances's thoughts, where it becomes clear that Frances struggles with her mental health, not only when it comes to her own body image, but also in regard to the relationships she forms with other people.

Connell and Marianne are the two main characters in *Normal People* (2018), Sally Rooney's second novel. The reader meets them in their final year of secondary school in Carricklea, a small town in the North of Ireland. Connell comes from a working-class home, Marianne from a wealthy family. The two go on to study in Dublin, where the story follows them along this journey. The two characters have an on-again, off-again relationship that is troubled by communicative struggles. Over the course of four years, Connell evolves from a popular, but shy sports student into a writer, although he is plagued by depressive bouts and a general inability to express his emotions. Marianne similarly goes through a transformation, from a social outcast into what appears to be a more confident woman. She grew up in a loveless family however, where she was abused, both physically and emotionally, by her brother and gaslit and generally neglected by her mother. The novel is focussed on the relationship between these two characters and the many complications that threaten both their development as individuals and as partners.

This dissertation will consist of a close reading of Sally Rooney's novels *Normal People* and *Conversations with Friends*, specifically its main characters Frances, Connell and Marianne. These novels were chosen due to their subject matter, their mainstream success, the insight into the minds of its narrators that they grant the reader, as well as the opportunity for self-reflection that they grant said reader. All three characters are heavily impacted by the economic crash, as well as more personal forms of sustained trauma. These stories of crisis are catalysts for all three narrators to create barriers between how they feel and how they express those feelings. This dissertation is interested in their inner thoughts, their experiences and

their feelings, to show how they choose to underperform and even hide their emotions from their surroundings.

The main claim that I argue in this dissertation is that Connell, Marianne and Frances's underperformances of emotion are conscious efforts to combat the sources of crisis that affect them, which in turn become barriers to their own pursuits of happiness. In order to substantiate this, I will shed some light on Rooney's works, each from a different angle, but all within the framework of Affect theory. The more specific questions that will build towards proving the thesis statement are these:

- How does a reading through the framework of Affect theory facilitate an understanding of Rooney's novels on a level not yet brought up in public discourse?
- How are issues of class and poverty in Ireland, exacerbated by the rise and fall of the Celtic Tiger and the subsequent economic crash, functioning as sources of crisis in the lives of Frances, Marianne and Connell?
- How do painful experiences allow Frances and Marianne to differentiate between their own bodies and external, but individualised sources of crisis?
- How does flat affect function as a defence mechanism for Connell, Frances and Marianne to differentiate between affective experiences and emotional expressions?
- How do the events of the novels allow for Marianne, Frances and Connell to overcome these emotional restraints and start to work on building meaningful and conventional relationships?

Both novels were immediate successes upon release. *The Guardian* lauded *Normal People* as "a future classic" (Clanchy), while *The New Yorker* said that *Conversations with Friends* reminds them of Jane Austen's *Emma* (Schwartz). One has already been turned into a television series, while the other is in the process of adaptation. Much of the public discussion on these novels has focussed on the romantic relationships, the tension within them and the drama that becomes the characters. However, they have not yet been academically analysed. This dissertation therefore has a secondary function as a for-your-consideration

campaign. These characters have all experienced traumatic events in their young lives, moments of crisis that have severely and thoroughly impacted and perhaps even stunted the formation of their identities. The results are, among others, a warped sense of self and others, anxiety and depression. Through the analysis that unfolds here, I argue that further research is justified, not only on a literary level, but for different fields as well.

The five chapters that make up the body of this dissertation, the questions posed here will be answered, working together to substantiate the main argument. The first chapter will introduce the framework of Affect theory and show how an understanding of larger moments of crisis and sustained trauma allows for a reading of *Conversations with Friends* and *Normal People* on a more personal level. The second chapter consists of an overview of neoliberal order, post-Recession or post-crash island culture and their influence on Rooney's work, with the aim being to show the world in which the novels take place, the political and economical context surrounding their characters and how all of this is connected through Affect theory. The third chapter makes use of Sara Ahmed's theory on the surfacing of emotion as outlined in "Collective Feelings" to see how more individualised experiences of affect leave lasting marks on Marianne and Connell. The fourth chapter is about Lauren Berlant's Flat Affect, how the three main characters decline any outward expression of their emotions. The result of this underperformance will prove detrimental to the relationships they maintain throughout the novels. Finally, in the fifth and final chapter, I use Sara Ahmed's ideas on happiness and show how, despite their emotional underperformances, Frances, Connell and Marianne manage to grow over the course of their stories, leading to possible avenues for happiness. The three main characters learn to actively confront the defence mechanisms that they have set up in order not to buckle under the sources of crisis that they experience. In the end, by breaking down these barriers, they manage to renegotiate the relationships that they broke off over the course of the novels, setting up confined spaces that allow them to communicate those feelings that they chose to keep from the outside world. It is this combination of realising how societally-defined norms and individualised emotional barriers function as prohibitors for happiness that will

conclude this dissertation. The chapters all collaborate to show how those larger stories intersect with the individual, and how Connell, Marianne and Frances must each confront these sources of crisis to find something that resembles happiness.

2. AFFECT THEORY: A FRAMEWORK

A German television cartoon for children uses only images and no words to tell a story about a man who builds a snowman; this is how Brian Massumi starts off his 1995 article titled “The Autonomy of Affect”, in which he argues in favour of a serious exploration of affect as a framework to understand media, politics and perhaps even the world (105). This effort by Massumi could be considered one of the main avenues through which to differentiate between affect and emotion, a theory that dictates that affect is, to some degree, a universal force that intersects with emotions, a more personal expression of affect (Gibbs 251). For Massumi, affect is autonomous; it does not choose which people to impact and which to leave alone (Berlant, “Intuitionists” 845). Emotions then become the individualised reflection of affect, influenced and nuanced through personal experience: a response to affect. Lauren Berlant says of this immediacy of affect:

“The present is perceived, first, affectively: the present is what makes itself present to us before it becomes anything else, such as an orchestrated collective event or an epoch on which we can look back.” (Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* 4)

In this sense, Affect theory is seemingly a way to understand the world at large, a framework through which to filter events and histories, no matter how big or how small. By connecting stories that vary in scope from the global to the very personal with the individuals that live them and experience them, it becomes possible to investigate the long-lasting effects that follow suit.

Within Affect theory, those events that give shape to the present as an affective experience are considered “scenes of ongoing trauma or crisis ordinariness” (Berlant, “Intuitionists” 846). It is necessary to differentiate between these concepts of crisis and trauma. Berlant argues against the use of trauma as a framework for analysing the present. The idea of trauma implies some sort of life-changing event in the past, something that impedes an ordinary life (Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* 9). For her, life is more likely to be a series of these events, stacking up to become crushing pressures that threaten any semblance of an ordinary life. Nonetheless, a traumatic event can be a catalyst, laying bare the other moments of

crisis that led to this singularity (Berlant, "Intuitionists" 852). As such, she prefers to investigate the ordinary "as a zone of convergence of many histories, where people manage the incoherence of lives that proceed in the face of threats to the good life they imagine. Catastrophic forces take shape in this zone and become events within history as it is lived" (Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* 9-10). In this context, the good life is a life that can be managed without having the walls of existence come crashing down on those who live it.

2.1. Reading Affect

When Massumi talks about the German cartoon, he mentions how it "drew complaints from parents reporting that their children had been frightened" (83). He uses this story to explain how an experience affects unilaterally and how, dependent on the amount of context granted to its audience, it can elicit a whole range of responses. The study that he references here involved three different versions of the television short, wherein a group of children were shown these three different versions, each one slightly different:

"The first voice-over version was dubbed 'factual.' It added a simple step-by-step account of the action as it happened. A second version was called 'emotional.' It was largely the same as the "factual" version, but included at crucial turning points words expressing the emotional tenor of the scene under way.

Sets of nine-year-old children were tested for recall and asked to rate the version they saw on a scale of 'pleasantness.'" (Massumi 83-84)

After monitoring the children, it appeared that the less factual the version they watched was, the more memorable of an impression it made (84). I include this reference to Massumi because it can be paralleled to the reception surrounding both *Conversations with Friends* and *Normal People*. This is not to say I believe those reviewers whose work I feature here to be cognitively equal to a group of children watching a cartoon; Massumi does indicate that similar results regarding retention can be seen with adults (84). More relevant here is the idea that a less explanatory telling of events can elicit a more emotionally charged response in an audience.

In reviews for Rooney's work, both different ends of the spectrum of response that Massumi describes, can be seen. The review for *Porter House Reviews* notes the following:

“One receives the impression that Rooney has a programmatic disinterest in depicting her characters' inner lives . . . There is something intentionally vague, even deliberately oversimplified about the wording of Frances's reaction to Bobbi's email.” (Madole)

The review in question mentions that they find the text to contain very little colour in its descriptions, considering its style to be “flat, muted affect, avoiding flights of lyricism or theatricalized emotion”, while also calling it “spellbinding” (Madole). Similarly, the review of *Conversations*¹ in *The Guardian* writes that “Rooney is not a visual writer. There are no arresting images, no poetic flights. She is of the tell-don't-show school: many of the conversations that comprise most of the novel are presented as he-said she-said reportage” (Kilroy). Both Kilroy and Madole praise the novels and the emotional weight they carry, thereby substantiating the claim that a parallel between Massumi's case study and the readings performed in these literary reviews can be drawn.

What becomes apparent from these excerpts, is a certain reticence from the reviewers to delve deeper into Rooney's works, to try and find any possible reasoning behind what they perceive to be a lack of emotional response by Frances, Connell and Marianne. This is showcased by a review of *Normal People* for *De Reactor*, a Dutch digital platform for literary reviews. In a more negative review, its author says that “[het] lastige van het analyseren van Normale mensen is dat alles er al staat” (“Bothersome about an analysis of *Normal People* is that everything is already there.”; Koopman). The authors of these reviews, regardless of the level of praise that accompanies their writing, seem to ignore what I consider to be rather crucial, and that is the possibility that the omission of emotional responses is at least to some degree a conscious act on the narrative level. In other words, it should be

¹ From here on out, for brevity's sake, I choose to refer to *Conversations with Friends* simply as *Conversations*, both in the running text and in citations, as it is rather evident to which book is being referred.

considered that Frances, Connell and Marianne do not portray emotions not because of Rooney's sober prose, but rather that their flatness is a character trait. Unlike the cartoon that Massumi uses, the three narrators exist within their own stories and the assumption that their portrayals of emotion are solely a feature of Rooney's writing seems quite reductive. While a more thorough analysis of these reception of these novels may be warranted, this dissertation builds on the idea that there is a certain divide between the narrators of a story and its author (Booth 429). The reviewers mentioned earlier all indicate that there is a certain flatness to the narrators in *Conversations* and *Normal People*, and that is what I am most interested in. Moving forward, I will leave behind these reviews and discussions on authorship, instead focussing on the stories of crisis and trauma that give shape to the lives of the narrators of these two novels.

Berlant's focus on crisis and catastrophe as organising factors in the lives of individuals serves this dissertation well, as it justifies a reading of a story as a collection of events that threaten the world in which its characters find themselves. In the chapters that follow, some of these stories will be brought up and connected to the events and characters of *Conversations* and *Normal People*. Affect theory as a framework enables a reading of Rooney's novels on a level that is informed by the histories that surround it and allowing those events to interact with the characters, which in turn generates a series of responses — or lack thereof — from the characters. Rooney's works are shaped by the rise of neoliberalism, the Celtic Tiger as an era of Irish prosperity, the 2008 recession, and the feelings of crisis these events and stories have induced within Rooney's characters. Lauren Berlant explains the use of Affect theory in regard to such a series of crisis as follows:

“Especially when the terms of survival seem up for grabs, the aesthetic situation turns to the phenomena of affective disruption and the work of retraining the intuition.” (Berlant, “Intuitionists” 846)

If a rethinking of responses to crisis is required in order to retain a semblance of normalcy in life, then those affective disruptions must be understood. As such, before trying to figure out how such a retraining of intuition would take shape, the next chapter of this dissertation will try to outline what those terms of survival are, what

the most macroscopic threats to this sustained mode of crisis are, and how those visibly impact the lives of Connell, Marianne, Frances and their immediate surroundings.

2. LIVING EMPTY: POST-CRASH IRELAND AS A CHARACTER

If Affect theory says that a text cannot be separated from the world in which it was constructed (Schaefer 1), then it is necessary to understand the context in which Rooney wrote her two novels. Both *Normal People* and *Conversations with Friends* take place in a version of Ireland that has lived through a tumultuous few decades. After what is often called the ‘Celtic Tiger’, an era of unbridled growth and prosperity in Ireland during the end of the twentieth century, and very much after the crisis of 2008, the country had been through plenty of ups and downs. While this dissertation does not mean to provide a year-by-year rundown of Irish politics and economics — this has been done before and in much more detail (Böss; Kitchin et al.) — scrolling through this era in Irish history will prove invaluable to any reading of Rooney’s novels. The rise and fall of the Celtic Tiger cannot possibly be separated from the larger context of neoliberalism, since its tenets have directed much of the political shifts in Ireland, as well as the Western world at large, over the last few decades. Additionally, much of Affect theory is influenced by these ideas. As such, by pairing up an introduction to modern Irish history with a critique of neoliberalism as informed by Affect theory, a more thorough understanding of the world in which Connell, Marianne and Frances live might be gained.

2.1. A Neoliberal World

An exploration of neoliberalism as an ideology is a gargantuan undertaking. It does no longer seem to point to a single point of view, a simple term with a simple definition. What it seems to be centered on, is a post-war idea of privatisation, of unending corporate growth. It might be easiest to understand through comparison with a more classical interpretation of liberalism, as much of its differences lie in the oppositions between the two. In doing this, the nuanced differences between German, French and American neoliberalism will be overlooked, as the goal here is simply to try and comprehend some of the main structures at play. Michel Foucault

may have explained it best, by saying that neoliberalism has shifted not only the role of the government in relation to the free market, but also the role of the individual in this relationship.

If classical liberalism was centred around the absolute freedom of the market, without any government interference, then neoliberalism is characterised by the state's corrections of "the destructive effects of the market" (Gane 358). Without delving too deep into the economic specifics of this situation, there seems to be an ideological shift here. If a government's role is to prevent the market from crashing, then that same government has to move its focus from the individual that elected it onto the market that it now serves. This shows quite clearly in the new role that the individual has taken on in this different society. Whereas under classical liberalism the individual was supposed to be assured a certain set of freedoms, now its function is to take part in a cycle of production and consumption, one they have been assigned at birth (Gane 358). Defining for this new role for the individual is the conception that their worth is one of capital, the amount of value they manage to create through their work (Foucault and Senellart 225). In other words, the value of a person is calculated by the amount of capital they can create for the market. This is clearly a very cynical interpretation of the world, and not every theorist sees neoliberalism as a unilaterally malevolent force. Ferguson mentions that plenty of progressive literature has evolved into a movement against those things achieved through neoliberalism. He instead proposes a more positive look on the world we inhabit: "what if politics is really not about expressing indignation or denouncing the powerful? What if it is, instead, about getting what you want?" (167). This is a rather noble statement, but the reality of Ferguson's solutions to inequalities on the market seem to be less ideal.

Ferguson's case study aims to show how neoliberal policy may ameliorate the lives of its subjects. His work focuses on the implementation of certain policies in a South African context, policies that would offset the inequalities that have come with a certain impersonal style of government. He mentions that there are ways for

governments to push people upward and to grant them more purchasing power, but by saying so, he claims that it is not government interference that is required to fulfill its people's most basic needs, but rather the market itself. His proposal is for corporations to organise food aid and bring it to the people who need it.

“Why should relying on this sort of mechanism be inherently right-wing, or suspect in the eyes of progressives? The answer is, of course, not far to find: markets serve only those with purchasing power. Market-based solutions are thus likely to be true ‘solutions’ only for the better off, whose needs are so effectively catered to by markets. But the food aid example shows a way of redirecting markets toward the poor, by intervening not to restrict the market, but to boost purchasing power. I have become convinced that (at least in the case of food aid) this is probably good public policy.” (180)

While Ferguson himself is not a proponent of conservative, neoliberal government — he does go on to say that none of the solutions he posits are “unequivocally good” — it is not difficult to see the irony in this situation, as these policies seem to be mostly concerned with turning those without adequate purchasing power into active, moving parts of the economy. In fact, he admits that the “logistical task of moving thousands of tons of food each day from thousands of local producers to millions of urban consumers would be beyond the organizational capacity of any state” (180). This indicates that the shift in power that Foucault mentions has seemingly taken place to some extent. A government no longer fulfills people in their needs so that they may be free, but rather serves the market and supplies it with consumers.

Ferguson tries to convince progressive lawmakers to repurpose neoliberal policies, because he claims that there are good ideas already in place, and that reconfiguration trumps a thinking that is too one-sided and idealistic (183). Similarly, in *Cruel Optimism*, Lauren Berlant warns against a position that would paint too broad a picture of neoliberalism as a “world-homogenizing sovereign” that purposefully contains its subjects, who in turn become pawns with merely an illusion of free will. The world according to Berlant is more messy, less intentional than that. She is very much interested in the interplay between histories, postwar narratives about “the good life” and the subject, but it must be framed within a certain

regionality that still applies today, especially because the scope of this locality varies wildly, much like different histories do (Berlant 15). As such, I will now turn to the Irish peculiarities that have led to the crash of 2008, the rise and subsequent fall of the Celtic Tiger.

2.2. The Celtic Tiger

The Ireland on display in Rooney's works is marked by crisis. They both take place after the financial crisis of 2008, an event that has been discussed often and in great detail (Reinhart and Felton; Rose and Spiegel). Set on by the initial crash of the American housing market, its ramifications were felt all across the world. Although a recession can rarely be attributed to a single event, there seem to be some universal indicators that a collapse is imminent. A common denominator may be a sense of exceptionalism, a brazen overconfidence spurred on by a period of economic growth that precedes the crash itself. In the case of the Celtic Tiger, the boom that preceded the 2008 recession occurred in phases, each one conveniently tied to a different decade. The goal in this chapter is to show how the Celtic Tiger and the subsequent financial crisis changed Irish society, and how this impacted the people living in it and more specifically, how Rooney's characters bear the scars of the Tiger.

The first wave of the Celtic Tiger takes place in the 1990s, a time marked by highly successful liberalisation. Through a neoliberal focus on "the free market, light regulation, and low personal and corporation tax" (Cawley 601), the Irish economy became an example for developing countries and seemed to be a useful showcase of neoliberal ideology. The main political party responsible for this nation-wide turnaround was Fianna Fáil. Their origins are tied to the Irish Civil War, with Fianna Fáil taking a stance against Sinn Féin's more radical position on Irish independence. Their moderate, but still republican position has allowed them to extend their electoral base "from small farmers to the urban working class and the industrial bourgeoisie, and . . . the party leaders tended to identify their own party with the Irish state" (Böss 121). Following a crisis in the late eighties, the Irish economy blossomed in the decade that followed, due to a combination of widespread voter

support, a focus on export, lowered corporate taxes and privatisation. After this initial boom, around the change of the century, this growth stagnated to some extent, in part due to the attack on the Twin Towers and other circumstances not directly linked to Ireland itself (Cawley 602).

Despite the economic slowdown at the start of the decade, the 2000s brought a second wave of growth. Something had changed, however, as this new burst of energy was fueled by the housing market and affordable credit (601). These are the same policies that led to the housing crisis in the United States in 2007 and would be essential to the devastating impact of the 2008 recession (Levitin and Wachter). More so than in the decade that preceded it, this era of Irish politics had its fair share of critics, with many not only expecting a crash, but handing out warnings about its aftermath at the same time. When it came to the financial measures that were introduced at this time, critics judged them to be closely linked to Thatcher's austerity measures, claiming they would contribute to social inequality: "it was thus only people in jobs who were lifted out of poverty, whereas the probability of falling below key relative income thresholds remained high for those without, and for single person households" (Böss 126). This echoes critiques of neoliberalism, as well as Ferguson's focus on purchasing power. Those who did not have access to the market, those without jobs were neglected as they did not contribute. Cawley echoes this sentiment:

"[T]he model received robust critique from a number of academics, particularly of the resilience of inequality and poverty among lower socio-economic groups, the failure of public services to rise to levels that matched the country's economic prosperity, the unproblematic equation of material well-being with spiritual well-being, and the corrosive effects on individual and group identities of a creeping 'economisation' of Irish society" (601)

This type of critique, which says that underlying economic and social struggles were not properly addressed during a time of relative prosperity, would be proven right after the crash. The Celtic Tiger, the promises of prosperity and welfare it held for the Irish, only made the downfall after 2008 even tougher for its people, especially those who were already at risk of poverty before the crash. In order to avoid complete

economic disaster, the banks were nationalised and the same large, international corporations previously lured in through lower taxes were protected “at the potential expense of the taxpayer” (Kitchin et al. 1322). At a time like this, it would be valuable to govern proactively and reform — the scale of these reforms are left open to interpretation — as opposed to more reactive politics (O’Brien 1152; Kitchin et al. 1323). Unfortunately for the Irish, their recent governments seem more focused on the latter. The Irish economy has not recovered as of yet, and as a result, there exists a generation of young people who have grown up during and after the recession, people who become adults in a broken country. This will become quite clear when analysed through Sally Rooney’s novels, as the consequences of the crisis have left lasting scars on its characters and their surroundings.

The issues of class, poverty and inequality are very present in *Conversations* and *Normal People*. Simply put, Connell is poor, Marianne is rich. Similarly, Frances is less well-off than those with whom she surrounds herself. However, there seems to be more at play here, as if financial issues have left their marks on a deeper level. Money problems have become not only an intergenerational struggle, but it seems as if it has become part of the characters and their personalities as well. This manifests itself in multiple ways, which I will explore in the following few pages. Through an exploration of Frances, Connell and Marianne’s financial situations, it will become clear how the 2008 recession and larger, societal structures of neoliberalism, austerity and the economic uncertainties that preceded and followed this crisis have all influenced these characters’ outlooks on life, their politics and even the relationships with their families.

2.3. Visible Consequences of the Fall of the Tiger

The financial crisis of 2008 had far-reaching consequences for the Irish, both on a personal level, and a tangible one. It has already been brought up how the second wave of the Celtic Tiger was fuelled by construction and property development, which becomes the easiest way to see how the economy has ravaged the Irish landscape.

When Connell takes Marianne to visit an empty mansion behind the school they attend at the time, they call it a “ghost estate”, a group of mansions that were only partially constructed but never finished (*Normal People* 33). Most of the windows are unfinished but the doors are mostly locked. The two wander around and wonder:

“Just lying empty, no one living in it, he said. Why don’t they give them away if they can’t sell them? I’m not being thick with you, I’m genuinely asking.

She shrugged. She didn’t actually understand why.

It’s something to do with capitalism, she said.

Yea. Everything is, that’s the problem, isn’t it?” (*Normal People* 34)

This scene serves as a very clear example of the remnants of the Celtic Tiger in post-Crash Ireland. These houses call to mind a future previously thought possible, but now mostly remind those who are enveloped by them of the hubris held by those responsible for the state of the nation. This idea of empty, unfinished houses is especially relevant to the Irish, since housing development was one of the main features of the second wave of the Tiger. As *The Economist* put it: “Even the locations are enticing, from rural beauty spots blighted by ‘ghost estates’ to high-end networking jamborees masquerading as racing events.” (qtd. in Bonner 51). The idea here is that there are tangible remnants of a more prosperous time in Irish history.

Less obvious than unfinished construction in *Normal People* is the change in drinking culture that occurred in Ireland during the Celtic Tiger. Bonner makes note of changing drinking habits in Irish society. Whereas Ireland used to be characterised by its many pubs and beer-drinking, post-crash Ireland is remarkably different:

“During the Celtic Tiger years the Irish developed a taste for coffee, for drinking at home, for wine consumption, for eating out” (52)

This change is very apparent in both *Normal People* and *Conversations*, and very clearly shows how far the novels go in displaying the consequences of the recession. While in Dublin, Connell and Marianne regularly meet for coffee, which Connell finds quite odd at first (*Normal People* 120). His position on this changes towards the end of the novel, there is a scene in which Marianne makes coffee at home for both her and Connell, where it is implied that he is now more comfortable with the practice of drinking coffee, proving the point made by Bonner (52). Similarly, in *Conversations*,

coffee is mentioned frequently, such as when Nick is holding a bag of coffee beans, or when Bobbi's breath smells of it (140, 153). In this novel, Bonner's observations about wine and drinking at home are more apparent, with Frances regularly describing scenes of being with Nick or Bobbi and drinking wine (4, 145, 202). It is not unthinkable that coffee and wine become markers of a modern Ireland, one that has moved away from its heritage of pubs and beer. As a result, all the times when Rooney's characters are drinking coffee may be seen as them partaking in some sort of gentrified cultural act. It is quite striking how rarely the very Anglo-Saxon pub culture rears its head in the Dublin-centered lives of Marianne, Connell and Frances. This classification of pubs returns in *Normal People*, when Connell attends a literary reading. There is a reception at the university, where the characters are shown to drink wine. The author whose book was being read then takes Connell to a pub shortly after, where they further discuss Dublin and Carricklea while drinking beer (*Normal People* 220). This passage is interesting, as it shows that many people have learned to adapt to a different type of social culture, while not having forgotten about the past. During their conversation, the two discuss Carricklea, Connell's home, and some businesses that went bankrupt over the last few years, again referring to the recession.

While the presence of ghost estates and the change in drinking culture are the most visible relic of the recent past in *Normal People* and *Conversations*, there are many passages in both novels that refer back to the 2008 recession and the housing crisis, as a result of which home ownership has become a very clear sign of wealth. Early on in *Conversations*, Frances and Bobbi are visiting Nick and Melissa's house, where Frances observes that "this is a whole house. A family could live here" (4). Nick is very self-conscious about owning a house, which he reveals to Frances (75). Additionally, Connell mentions his job at a restaurant in Dublin as an establishment that is no longer financially profitable (*Normal People* 99). Both novels are packed with such small passages, and it could be quite interesting to see how far-reaching the consequences of the financial recession are. This dissertation is more interested in the psychological implications, however, which is why I will now turn towards

poverty and class in Rooney's works, as those issues are more pronounced and impactful for Connell, Marianne and Frances.

2.4. Money Talks

Throughout the entirety of *Conversations*, Frances is shown to struggle financially. She lives in a flat owned by relatives, much like Marianne does (*Conversations* 17; *Normal People* 88). This allows her some freedom of movement, but she still needs to work a student job to pay for food, but notes how the job does not even cover that cost (*Conversations* 17). Frances's financial situation becomes an increasingly relevant issue as the story goes on, and it becomes very clear that Frances is ashamed of her situation. It is through interactions with Nick, Bobbi and her father that the reader slowly starts to understand how big of a role money plays and how big of a taboo it is, especially for those without it, and how this all leads to shame, embarrassment and more long-term problems (Whysel). When she starts her affair with Nick, for example, she realises that he pays for everything they do together, but does not want to bring up the issue (75). This is similar to *Normal People*, where Connell declines to reveal to Marianne that he can no longer pay for his flat, and has to move back home as a result of it. In fact, it is explicitly said that "[he] and Marianne never talked about money" (*Normal People* 122). Frances's precarious financial status becomes especially apparent in *Conversations* when she is having a conversation with Nick in her flat. She comments on the value of his clothes, and explicitly mentions that she wishes for financial stability. Nick jokes about giving her money, but says that their relationship is already ethically unstable (*Conversations* 198).

When her father stops paying her allowance each month, Frances desperately tries to hide how poor she is, describing her own attitude towards money as "flippant", as if a sense of apathy towards money makes the struggle more acceptable (240). She only reveals the extent of her situation to Nick when he presses her on it, saying that she lives on what Bobbi shares and what Nick brings over when he visits (250). As a result, the following interaction occurs:

“Frances, that’s insane, he said. Why didn’t you tell me? I can give you money. No, no. You said yourself it would be weird. You said there were ethical concerns. I would be more concerned about you starving yourself. Look, you can pay me back if you want, we can call it a loan.” (250-251)

Frances is surrounded by people who do not struggle with their financial situation, and because money is a taboo subject, she is reluctant to talk about it with anyone. That does not make the issue go away, however, and the impact of her poverty impacts all other aspects of her life. She mentions how she “had become obsessed with repaying the money, as if everything else depended on it. Whenever he called me I hit the reject button and sent him texts saying I was busy” (276). It does not occur to Frances that Nick does not expect to get this money back, nor does Bobbi think of the goods she has shared with Frances. This example proves what I elaborated upon earlier in regard to poverty in neoliberalism, though on a different scale. Ferguson (180) argued that a lack of money leads to a subject not being able to participate in the free market and argued in favour of food banks as a means to compensate for a lacking welfare state. In Frances’s case, a lack of money leads to insecurities, anxiety and a lack of perspective. It could even be said that if money were less of an issue, the subject is free to deal with other struggles they might face, such as Nick and his struggle with mental health. When Melissa emails Frances about Nick and his medical history, Frances notes the following:

“I had thought people who were hospitalised for psychiatric problems were different from the people I know. I could see I had entered a new social setting now, where severe mental illness no longer had unfashionable connotations” (*Conversations* 238)

The concept of a social setting here is inextricably linked to financial stability, which Frances never really becomes all that aware of. She herself also deals with issues other than money, but her monetary struggle prohibits her from dealing with other problems. Interestingly, in *Conversations*, Frances does not experience class as an issue; she manages to successfully engage with people from different backgrounds. This is not the case in *Normal People*, where the issue of class largely coincides with that of poverty.

2.5. Class Divides

In *Normal People*, the reader quickly discovers that Connell and Marianne come from very different financial backgrounds. They both live in Carricklea, a small rural town in Ireland, about as far removed from Dublin as possible (*Normal People* 32). Connell and Marianne both live here with their mothers. The Waldrons live in a small council home, with Connell's father not being in the picture. Marianne, on the other hand, lives in a mansion. Lorraine, Connell's mother, works for the Sheridans, as a maid. Both of the characters mention their living situations throughout the novel, with observations — not so much remarks — being made about Connell's clothing, such as his sober Adidas trainers being mentioned occasionally. While these situations do not necessarily speak to the economic context of the times, their different stations in life will become more relevant later in the novel. Early on, Connell's friends talk about Marianne and ask:

“What's she like in her natural habitat? Rob said.

I don't know.

I'd say she thinks of you as her butler, does she?” (23)

This excerpt shows how easy it is to differentiate between classes and how conscious young people are of those divides. The opposite also frequently occurs, where more well-off people make claims about those from the working class. Jamie, one of Marianne's boyfriends in university, has the following to say about the person who just robbed Connell on the street:

“Fucking lowlife scum, says Jamie.

Who, me? Connell says. That's not very nice. We can't all go to private school, you know.

. . .

I was talking about the guy that robbed you, says Jamie. And he was probably stealing to buy drugs, by the way, that's what most of them do.” (145)

Connell is aware that Jamie is not talking about Connell here, but by saying it, he does criticise Jamie for overgeneralising the working class. In other words, Jamie is a snob and Connell points it out. These interactions happen throughout the novel in both directions, but with very different connotations. When Marianne's male friends say they do not believe Connell to be intelligent, she is aware that this is a classist remark.

This correlation of intelligence and wealth is a dangerous one, and plays into some of the more dangerous sets of ideas surrounding neoliberalism. While there is a very likely correlation between the level of schooling and IQ (Daniele 35), it is unwise to draw conclusions about intelligence based on wealth, since a higher IQ is not an accurate predictor of financial stability (Zagorsky 500). A study by Winston explains how any connection drawn between IQ and other societal factors such as race or other hereditary sources is highly problematic, as these ideas stem from racially inspired theories from the 19th century that have long been disproven. The only exception here again, is education, which he does find to be an influential factor on IQ (612). He concludes that this false correlation between intelligence and wealth lies at the basis of many neoliberal ideas on economy, even drawing on Thatcher-era neoliberalism as an example of an ideology that attempts to legitimise these ideas of success as a matter of intelligence. Winston calls the most recent regurgitation of these ideas “cognitive capitalism” (613), wherein an individual is held responsible for their own success, and their origins are deemed irrelevant when it comes to their possible failure in regard to their participation in the neoliberal machine. Jamie’s character functions as a stand-in for this group of neoliberals, and serves as a narrative vehicle for the novel to criticise neoliberalism as such. Connell then becomes an opposing voice, an example of someone who is actively anti-classist in their convictions and does not shy away from critiquing the prejudice he faces.

While being anti-classist does not correlate to a critique society at large, Connell is aware of the disadvantages he faces and he does struggle with his own station in life. He grows up in a working-class family, and is quite concerned with his future. He is self-conscious about how his birth is the cause of his mother’s education being cut short (*Normal People* 46). Marianne less so, as her upbringing has given her more financial freedom, of which she becomes increasingly aware as she grows up. When the two are filling out applications for university, Connell takes job prospects into consideration, while Marianne says he should not take that into account, since “the economy’s fucked anyway” (20). For Connell, this decision is part of a larger

dilemma, one that reveals the existence of two possible lives in Ireland. There exists one life in Carricklea, where a university close to home would allow for him to retain a strong connection to home and do reasonably well for himself. On the other side, there is that version of Connell that studies at Trinity, where he “would start going to dinner parties and having conversations about the Greek bailout” (26), but he would lose this connection to his home. To Connell, this contrast between Dublin and the rest of the country is quite stark. Dublin stands for intellectualism, elitism, more nuanced stances on politics and gender identities, much of which he experiences as a veneer, as if most of the activities he would indulge in would be performative in nature. This is confirmed by Connell’s attendance to a literary reading organised by the university, where he and the author whose book is being read agree that “a lot of the literary people in college see books primarily as a way of appearing cultured” (221). As opposed to Connell and his acute awareness of class divides, Marianne is less aware of these differences and the implications and consequences of poverty. This is brought up later in the novel, when both of them have received a scholarship for the rest of their education. The following excerpt is worth showing in its entirety, as it summarises most of what has been discussed earlier:

“Everything is possible now because of the scholarship. His rent is paid, his tuition is covered, he has a free meal every day in college. This is why he’s been able to spend half the summer travelling around Europe, disseminating currency with the carefree attitude of a rich person. He’s explained it, or tried to explain it, in his emails to Marianne. For her the scholarship was a self-esteem boost, a happy confirmation of what she has always believed about herself anyway: that she’s special.” (159)

This opposition, between what amounts to a difference between pride and necessity, exemplifies the core issue of class and how wealth leads to those who have it to be less aware of it, and those who do not have the same means need to excel just to even be allowed in the presence of the upper-class.

When Connell is talking to his therapist near the end of the novel, he once again brings up the divide between Dublin and the town he grew up in. He says that he thought Dublin would bring him into contact with people who shared his opinions

more than his friends at home, but that he was appalled by the superficiality of those he met there. Additionally, the move to Dublin led to an alienation of his friends at home (217). In his last visit, his therapist says “you used to say you felt trapped between two places” (243), a sentiment which Connell does not deny at this point, confirming that the issue has not resolved itself. Much like Connell, the Irish identity is split between two worlds, one held up by neoliberal ideals, concentrated on Dublin as a city of the wealthy, where those blessed by their origins can roam freely, but those who come from the outside are alienated, for they represent the other Ireland, a country upended by years of crisis and government that inadequately addressed the issues that faced its people. One can, as Connell does, only wonder if there is a way forward for both himself as an individual and the country at large, a solution that is not reactionary as much as it is revolutionary and proactive, while not losing sight of the past in the process.

3. EMOTIONS AS CONNECTIVE TISSUE

The previous two chapters of this dissertation have served to show how Affect theory can provide a framework for reading Sally Rooney's novels, exposing events and histories as sources of crisis and sustained trauma that irreversibly affect individual bodies. The second chapter explored how the rise and fall of the Celtic Tiger and the subsequent economic recession functions as such an event in the lives of Marianne, Frances and Connell. According to Schaefer, "[this] is the promise of affect theory, the possibility of sliding together analytical tools used to pick apart both highly individuated and highly social contact zones - bodies and histories - as incarnated realities" (1). This third chapter changes the scope of analysis to one that is much more focused on the individual.

Focusing on Sara Ahmed's ideas on collective feelings, this chapter is interested in the differences between the self and the outside world and how individuals differentiate between these two. In her article on collective feelings, Ahmed argues that "emotions play a crucial role in the 'surfacing' of individual and collective bodies" ("Collective Feelings" 5). The central claim of her argument is that emotions are what bind and frame bodies. She challenges the assumption that emotions are strictly private. In the following paragraphs I will discuss Ahmed's ideas on emotions and how they function as the connective tissue between individuals. By first introducing her concepts of feeling and attachment, I can then explore how those connections between characters are shown to be additional, more individualised sources of crisis for Frances, Connell and Marianne.

3.1. What Are Emotions?

On a primary level, an emotion is something abstract, something that moves. When she defines the concept of emotion, Ahmed links it to Sartre's concept of "contingent attachment" ("Collective Feelings" 27), who says that emotion is also tied to contact. This connection lies at the centre of the argument Ahmed constructs, turning emotions into both something that an individual comes into contact with, as well as

something that moves them. “What moves us, what makes us feel, is also that which holds us in place, or gives us a dwelling place” (Ahmed, “Collective Feelings” 27). Emotions are now both linked to movement and attachment, a connection that allows Ahmed to argue that proximity to others is what leads to attachments to those others. According to this theory, Emotions are formative experiences, connecting bodies to each other and informing them about each other. I argue that this concept aids my analysis of *Conversations with Friends* and *Normal People*, as it reveals certain connections between characters to be more individually-defined sources of crisis.

Ahmed raises the idea that emotions do not originate within the body, or outside of it, but that they come to exist at the time of contact with another being. Furthermore, emotions “work to create the very distinction between the inside and the outside” (“Collective Feelings” 28) and this distinction is made in response to contact with outside forces, either people or objects. Specifically, Ahmed claims that “it is through the movement of emotions that the very distinction between inside and outside, or the individual and social, is effected in the first place” (28). As such, it could be argued that emotional awareness is necessary for the formation of identity, as it is through emotional experiences that the individual becomes more aware of themselves within a social environment. This corresponds to Schaefer’s idea that affect theory means to draw connections between the body and its surroundings, or “bodies and histories” as he puts it (Schaefer 1). An emotional experience can emphasise the distinction between the self and the outside.

Such examples of characters drawing connections between themselves and their surroundings can be found throughout *Conversations*. Most evidently from the perspective of Frances, who regularly experiences dissociative episodes, where she seems to lose such a connection to her surroundings. “I was starting to feel adrift from the whole set-up, like the dynamic that had eventually revealed itself didn’t interest me, or even involve me” (*Conversations* 13), Frances notes. In this moment, she seems to lose the attachment to her surroundings that is required for the formation of connection. Although Ahmed connects emotions to connective

experiences, for Frances such moments of dissociation are always linked to emotions. This occurs when Frances seems overwhelmed usually, and can therefore be considered a defence mechanism, where she distances herself from her surroundings in an attempt to feel less. A poignant example of this occurs early on in the novel. When she is talking to Nick, the following exchanges can be read:

“I’ve read your work actually, is that a terrible thing to say? Melissa forwarded it on to me, she thinks I like literature.

At this point I felt a weird lack of self-recognition, and I realised that I couldn’t visualise my own face or body at all. It was like someone had lifted the end of an invisible pencil and just gently erased my entire appearance.” (*Conversations* 39)

By having her work — which she considers a personal good — read by another person without her explicit approval, she feels as if her personal boundaries have been crossed. Her immediate response to such an event is one of dissociation, which is reminiscent of Lauren Berlant’s focus on the present: “Focus on the present . . . involves anxiety about how to assess various knowledges and intuitions about what’s happening and how to eke out a sense of what follows from those assessments” (*Cruel Optimism* 4). This means that such experiences of dissociation are responses of anxiety to what amount to moments of acute crisis in the present.

For Frances, these episodes indicate a sudden awareness of the self in relation to others, onset by an affective experience. In the example I brought up here, a crisis is initiated by a realisation that her poetry is shared with someone without her knowledge. She experiences this as a breach of the distinction between the inside and the outside and her dissociative response is an indicator of the anxiety that follows, an uncertainty about where the self begins and ends. In order to reaffirm a distinction between what emotions can be considered private, and which are more shared with others, it is necessary to look back at Ahmed’s theory.

3.2. Experiencing Pain

Ahmed's main claim on feelings is that they are the experiences that give shape to the distinction between the inside and the outside ("Collective Feelings" 28). To explain this theory, she focusses on pain as such a sensation that is crucial to the process of identifying the self. The simplest explanation is that a painful experience can lead to an increased awareness of the self. She says that "it is through experiences such as pain that we come to have a sense of our skin as bodily surface, as something that keeps us apart from others, but as something that also 'mediates' the relationship between internal and external, or inside and outside" ("Collective Feelings", 29). Painful encounters with others or objects are how we become aware of the body as an entity, with skin being the surface that distinguishes between the self and everything else.

If a painful experience is one that distinguishes between the interior and the exterior, then a painful experience can be induced or provoked by an individual to emphasise where it is that this distinction lies. An example of such an event is found in *Conversations* when Frances goes to visit her father. She finds his house ravaged, but he is not there. In a rather distraught state, she leaves again:

"I wanted to hurt myself again, in order to feel returned to the safety of my own physical body. Instead I turned around and walked out. I pulled my sleeve over my hand to shut the door." (*Conversations* 182)

In this instance, Frances is considering resorting to a painful experience to reassert her sense of self. Whereas Ahmed argues that pain informs the body that it should turn away from the cause of this pain ("Collective Feelings" 29), it does not seem to be as straightforward for Frances. It could be said that for Frances, when she feels overwhelmed, she considers self-harm as a way to connect pain with the sources of her distress, evidenced by her never going back to her father's house in the novel. Then again, the opposite also seems to hold some truth to it. When she returns home from the hospital, distraught, she mentions the following:

"I towelled my skin off properly and blow-dried my hair until it crackled. Then I reached for the soft part on the inside of my left elbow and pinched it so tightly

between my thumbnail and forefinger that I tore the skin open. That was it. It was over then. It was all going to be okay.” (*Conversations* 171)

This excerpt shows that for Frances, pain can be a way to reaffirm her sense of self. She seems to find comfort in this painful experience, as if the sensation remedies the temporary sensory overload that preceded it. Such events where Frances introduces physical sensations into her life after moments of dissociation or crisis are common throughout the novel (*Conversations* 53, 212, 274) and they all seem to serve this same purpose. Frances suffers from dissociative episodes when she is overwhelmed by sources of crisis or sustained trauma, threats to ordinary life as outlined by Berlant (“Intuitionists” 846). By reintroducing physical sensations, Frances manages to reaffirm her sense of self in relation to the outside world and not become entirely overwhelmed by those outside sources of crisis. If Frances uses pain to outline the borders of her own body, then Connell and Marianne’s have markedly different experiences with physical sensations that can be understood by returning to Ahmed’s theory.

3.3. Feeling the Other

I already mentioned how pain functions as an indicator to the body that it should turn away. To further clarify this claim, Ahmed introduces two concepts coined by Judith Butler, namely materialization and intensification. In short, the process of intensification of feelings can lead to the materialisation of bodies (“Collective Feelings” 29). Through an interaction that we perceive as painful, we not only gain an understanding of our own boundaries, such as the outline of a body, but also a sense of the other, as they leave their mark on us by interacting with us. Ahmed summarizes it by saying we could imagine “skin as a surface that is felt only in the event of being ‘impressed upon’ in the encounters we have with others” (29). An impression here means both how an interaction with the other can leave a mark on us, as well as how a series of interactions can construct an image of them, how we remember them, based on all the marks left by them.

Ahmed concludes her argument by emphasizing how emotions are not the same thing as sensations, but that they cannot be seen as entirely separate either. She notes that sensations are judged by the previous experiences lived by the individual, thereby indicating that the impressions left by others are central to our future interactions (“Collective Feelings” 30). In other words, if we have experienced a series of painful interactions with another, we may come to think of said person as someone who inflicts pain upon others. This idea can be seen throughout *Normal People*. The clearest example of such a series of events that lead to a person judging someone on their previous experiences, thereby anticipating future interactions, is between Marianne and her brother Alan. During the first interaction with Alan that is mentioned, Marianne comments on Alan’s behaviour and then she says that she “regrets speaking” (*Normal People* 59). Not soon after, when she once again disagrees with him, she registers what she calls a “wild expression of fury” (59) on his face, leading to him hurting her. Their relationship is one of abuse, with Alan often physically and emotionally hurting Marianne. I choose not to go very in-depth with this relationship, as a full exploration of the trauma that is on display here would lead me away from my argument. What is useful here, is that Marianne has already learned to expect pain as a sensation that is likely to follow an interaction with Alan. Their previous interactions have taught Marianne to expect violence, since Alan is to her a person who commits violent acts. Later on, when Marianne returns home for Christmas, she once again interacts with Alan. In this scene, she is shown to physically withdraw from Alan, choosing to focus on washing dishes instead of engaging him in discussion, during which he continuously shouts at her. When, eventually, she responds to his shouting with involuntary laughter, he forcefully grabs her and spits at her. Once again, her past experiences have informed her that engaging with Alan in open discussion leads to violence. In this scene, she made an effort not to talk back at him, believing that this might lead to a diffusion of the situation, which was unfortunately not the case.

When, near the end of the novel, Marianne arrives home for the last time, she is confronted by Alan, with whom she has a history of abuse. She notes the following:

“She shrugs. She knows a confrontation is coming now, and she can do nothing to stop it. It’s moving towards her already from every direction, and there’s no special move she can make, no evasive gesture, that can help her escape it. (*Normal People* 239)

Her previous experiences at the hands of Alan have led Marianne to expect violence and pain whenever she is confronted with him. The result in this case is once again violence, even though she tries to lock herself in her room. She has sought out different ways of turning away from the source of the painful encounters (Ahmed, “Collective Feelings” 29), but has figured out that the only way to deal with this source of crisis and sustained trauma is to turn away entirely. Her painful experiences have allowed Marianne to see Alan as the main source of her physical pain. As a result, by limiting his access to her, she removes this source of stress from her life.

Much like how Frances leaves her father’s house never to return, Marianne asks Connell to come and take her away, after which Marianne and Alan never meet again. For both Marianne and Frances, painful sensations function as formative experiences that engage with highly individual sources of sustained trauma and crisis. For Marianne, her history of violence and abuse leads to her associating her brother Alan with pain, which in turn informs her of Alan as a source of trauma. The result is that she chooses to turn away from him entirely. For Frances, self-inflicted painful experiences function as tools for her to ground her and outline her sense of identity. Instead of pain being an external source of crisis, Frances engages in self-harm to reaffirm that those crisis-inducing and traumatising are not internal. Pain allows her to become more aware of her skin as a barrier between the inside and the outside. This chapter has shown how painful experiences allow these characters to differentiate between their own bodies and those individual sources of crisis that plague and affect them. By combining this insight with those more macroscopic affective experiences discussed in the second chapter, it becomes clear in what ways Connell, Marianne and Frances experience the present as a barrage of impressions and moments of crisis. It is now that I turn to how the three narrators navigate their lives, while avoiding shutting down entirely.

4. PERFORMING IDENTITY

In their study of Lauren Berlant's work, Duschinsky and Wilson have noticed how she draws attention to "the diverse cultural registers across which sense and feeling organise public and private life from sexual and aesthetic experiences to political participation and economic struggles" (179). Following this interpretation of Affect theory in the previous chapters, I have explored various ways in which we as individuals are formed and influenced by the world around us. Not only on a societal level, but also on the very personal, to show both how the individual is not immune to their surroundings and how those can thoroughly affect them. Berlant has researched not only how interactions are governed by certain conventions, she also wrote on trauma and on what Duschinsky and Wilson call 'flat affect', where an underperformance of emotions in a social interaction can in some cases be interpreted as a subject's aversion to affect (186). This chapter will look more closely at both genre and flat affect as featured in Rooney's works. By exploring how this concept dominates many interactions in the lives of Connell, Marianne and Frances, it may shed light on how they view themselves and their relationships with other people and the role flat affect plays in the performance of identity.

4.1. Conventionality as a Pitfall

Much like how we start the lecture of a text with certain expectations, based on our knowledge of literary genres, both from previous experiences with the medium, as well as through what impressions we have gathered from others whose opinions we respect, so too do we initiate social interactions of any kind based on conventions of genre. Duschinsky and Wilson call genre "a cluster of promises, a scene of feeling and sensing which sheds light on the organisation, the delight and difficulties of everyday living" (179). Genres tell us how to act, how to pace ourselves, thereby streamlining encounters between subjects into smoother interactions. If the subject sticks to these genres, an interaction or conversation will wrap up without hiccups or trouble. It is in those other times, when things go off the rails, that genre becomes most interesting and useful, because "the concept also highlights that the glitches and gaps on the way to reproducing conventions are not exceptions, but the warp

and woof of our plots and practices” (Duschinsky and Wilson 180). These imperfections in interaction, by exposing their desires through the ways in which conventions are not adhered to, the researcher is granted more insight into a character’s inner world.

When a subject cannot conform to the conventions that have implicitly been set up, an interaction can lay bare the struggles and difficulties someone faces. This seems to be linked to Judith Butler’s concept of trouble. The word trouble refers to a multitude of situations, most importantly punishment, as handed out by those who wield power, against those who would challenge a status quo (Ahmed, “Interview” 484). The promise of violence as a consequence of transgression is nearly identical to what the supposed outcome of the transgression itself would be. In other words, “the prevailing law threatened one with trouble, even put one in trouble, all to keep one out of trouble” (qtd. in Ahmed, “Interview” 483). The idea of trouble is inextricably linked to deviation from conventions, genres and norms as such, since trouble functions both as a desirable goal and as a sword of Damocles at the same time.

A distinction between genre and norm should be made, since their meanings overlap, but not coincide entirely. Duschinsky and Wilson distinguish the two on the basis of applicable circumstance, considering genre as markedly more dialectically focussed, while the idea of norm is more sociological in nature (180). According to them, “genre is how we organise the heterogeneity of sensations and experience so that we can each have a day and manage its demands and intensities and drabness in a way that retains a sense of meaningfulness and continuity, as well as a balance between cruising along and exploring what might be possible” (180). Genre conventions are decided upon by the participants in any interaction, each actor bringing with them their own set of expectations and desires. As a result, genre conventions are largely determined by a set of individuals, as opposed to the norm, which represents a more generalised set of conventions, functioning more as “a felt aspiration” than genre’s more personalised practices.

Butler distinguishes between the norm as a repressive tool, but also as a generative force (Ahmed, "Interview" 484). The first part likely refers back to the reprimanding that accompanies a transgression of a norm, while the second part is more complex. It is through conscious deviation of a norm that a form of creative energy is generated, while still being aware of the risks and difficulties that this deviation may carry with it. Butler mentions anxiety as a side-effect and a difficulty of such a deviation, which makes it possible to draw comparisons between this and Ahmed's theory on collective feelings and Berlant's flat affect. Butler talks about how naming another person - in this text it is used in the context of gender assignment - is an affective action, perhaps one of the first that any subject experiences (Ahmed, "Interview" 485). Ahmed ("Collective Feelings" 29) already discussed the concept of impressions, entanglement and how interactions with others leave marks on the subject. The act of giving someone a name could be seen as such an act, where the subject and their identity are impressed upon by a parent, this act setting in motion the formation of an identity. This can of course be extrapolated to name calling as a general practice, which Butler links to vulnerability (Ahmed, "Interview" 485). It seems to her that being called a name leads to a response within the subject. Being affected by this act of name calling is not a passive experience, because either we respond to said name, thereby accepting it, or we revolt against it, which could be seen as a deviation from a certain norm. It is in these deviations that we connect back to affect itself. How someone responds to an impression, not solely the act of name calling, but any social act, is entangled with the idea of genre, as it reveals the expectations and genre conventions held by both parties involved.

In her analysis of genre, Berlant focuses on both citizenship and love, which she ties to biopolitics (Duschinsky and Wilson 180). Closely linked to neoliberalism through Michel Foucault's exploration of these concepts, biopolitics is concerned with installing largely invisible measures that allow a sovereign or hegemonic power to control a population of any size without actively interfering with their daily lives (Foucault and Senellart 66). In both love and public life, the idea of genre indicates a set of conventions and expectations for anyone involved. Genre, as an influence on

both love and identity, will be looked at in the following pages, while using flat affect as a common theme, as any divergent interaction in each aspect informs us about the lives of Frances, Connell and Marianne, and allows for a better understanding of their desires in life itself.

4.2. Flat Affect

When Lauren Berlant says that “the power of a generic performance always involves moments of potential collapse that threaten the contract that genre makes with the viewer to fulfil experiential expectations” (qtd. in Duschinsky and Wilson 180), she lays bare some of the difficulties and pitfalls that accompany any and all social interactions. The successful nature of a subject’s performance is strongly linked to the way they respond to unexpected or marked elements in the interaction. This is where flat affect comes into the picture, as one way to deal with these threats is through underperformance. Duschinsky and Wilson explain how the term flat affect is borrowed from psychiatry, where it indicates “a kind of emotional opacity in which affective display, in the face in particular, has little range, intensity and mobility” (185). Traditionally, in this context, a flat response betrays a traumatic experience, or an inability to properly uphold a level of expression that is expected by convention. Berlant expands on this concept and supposes that underperformance is not necessarily an involuntary response, but could very much be a more conscious effort on the subject’s end. In a more literary context, flat affect is likely to reflect a general reservedness on the subject’s end, a way for them to maintain some semblance of control over the interaction they might feel is being threatened (186). It is this layered interpretation of flat affect that proves most useful to Rooney’s novels, as the reader is granted insights into the characters’ thoughts, where the narrators are shown to frequently mediate between what they feel and what they show. For example, when Connell is filling out a questionnaire on his mental health ahead of his visit with a psychologist and it asks him how he feels about his prospects future, the following passage is shown:

“0 I am not discouraged about my future

1 I feel more discouraged about my future than I used to be

2 I do not expect things to work out for me

3 I feel my future is hopeless and will only get worse

. . .

Reading the fourth sentence, which for some reason is labelled '3', gives Connell a prickling feeling inside the soft tissue of his nose, like the sentence is calling out to him.

. . .

Not wanting to alarm the woman who will receive the questionnaire, he circles statement 2 instead." (*Normal People* 200-201)

Connell is very aware of his mental state at this point, but chooses to understate his feelings, so that he is allowed to diverge information at his own leisure, if and when he feels comfortable doing so. Crucially, Connell's performance will prove futile, since the score he ends up with on the test is still considered dangerously high, indicating to the psychologist that he is experiencing a serious depression. I have already explored how important physical responses to external impressions are to Connell, Frances and Marianne and how those affect the characters' sense of self, but in this chapter, I am interested in applying those conclusions to social interactions, how those impressions have influenced characters and give form to their public performances of emotion.

4.3. Identity as Performance

In the first chapter of this dissertation, I have already gone over the amount of insight a reader gets into the minds of Connell, Frances and Marianne, how they view events and how they often misinterpret social signs. While they can all be seen as unreliable narrators in the sense that they misrepresent events and intentions, it is crucial to remember that this is rarely on purpose. Instead, the ways in which they mistakenly interpret signs are very useful indicators of their actual desires, the sets of conventions they adhere to in different circumstances. By analysing these instances of heightened self-awareness, both accurate and mistaken, it is possible to extract some idea of how these characters not only view themselves and others, but how they want to be perceived by others as well.

In many social interactions in *Conversations* and *Normal People*, the narrators explicitly reference their bodies, making sure they frame it in a certain way so that a specific emotion can be shown or hidden from the other parties involved. For Frances, framing her body and in certain ways becomes a way for her to acclimatise to situations where she might otherwise not feel entirely comfortable. The following excerpt shows how she prepares her visible expressions in anticipation of a social event, predicting an outcome based on how she presents herself:

“I felt excited, ready for the challenge of visiting a stranger’s home, already preparing compliments and certain facial expressions to make myself seem charming” (*Conversations* 3)

This example shows how Frances is aware of what is expected of her and the others involved in the social interactions that will follow. In preparation of this, she amplifies those parts of her personality that she believes will be most placating, hoping to avoid a social breakdown. The amplification of affect is crucial to analysis, as it appears that Frances’s natural state is one that she herself considers to be underperformance. In other words, she feels like she appears flat to other people and feels the need to compensate for this. This sense of performance is also present on a less physical scale, such as when Frances has received a gift and she feels that “a fun person would send a thank-you email” (30), revealing a sense of self-awareness, that she considers her natural responses to be unconventional and unwanted. Similarly, when Connell reflects on his behaviour towards his mother, he reflects on the following:

“[he] finds he’s curiously eager to impress on Lorraine how normal their relationship is and how nice a person Helen considers him to be. He’s not sure where this stems from exactly.” (*Normal People* 156)

Connell here displays, much like Frances does, an acute sensibility to the expectations and desires of others, again, playing into those genre conventions and responding in a manner that he feels will most effectively satisfy the other parties. Based on these few excerpts, it can be said that both Connell and Frances can accent certain aspects of their personalities to please those around them.

While Frances manages to use her sense of self-awareness to hide a certain flatness when it comes to social situations, she can also do the opposite at times, amplifying her underperformance. “It was easy to act unfazed around her. I just said: sure” (*Conversations* 8), Frances reports when she describes one of her first meetings with Bobbi. She finds Bobbi to be very mysterious and rebellious at this point in her life, describing how she was quite politically outspoken and almost actively trying to resist any form of authority or normalcy, within the context of their school. At this time, they are alone for the first time and Bobbi asks her “if [Frances] liked girls” (8). Frances now judges the situation she finds herself in and believes, because Bobbi is herself deviant from the norms set by the school and what little the characters have experienced outside of it, that Bobbi expects Frances to be similarly apathetic and underwound. Frances starts wielding this underperformance as a weapon, in line with how Butler talks about norms as being a generative force, using flat affect in response to the expectations of what she perceives to be a repressive and patriarchal society (Ahmed, “Interview” 484). When Frances sees herself in a picture, she finds herself to look “bored and interesting” (*Conversations* 9), indicating that she believes her own underperformance to be a positive feature.

All that being said, such moments of coolness mostly serve a different function, one that is more in line with how Duschinsky and Wilson talk about how flat affect functions as a defence mechanism, one that allows for the subject to control a situation to some degree(186). In public, Frances, Connell and Marianne will not show emotion, because that allows them to appear collected, and because they feel as if showing emotion is a display of weakness. In line with the psychiatric interpretation of flat affect, this can be because of a certain trauma that has accumulated within the characters. When Frances talks about her father, for example, she mentions that she “learned not to display fear, it only provoked him” (*Conversations* 49). This shows that she has experienced multiple traumatic experiences at the hands of her father, experiences that have led to a dissociation of her emotions and their physical expressions. This also ties back to how Butler talks about trouble (Ahmed, “Interview” 484). A repeated trauma here leads to Frances expecting trouble. Her instinctive response is one of fear, which in turn would lead to

more abuse. As a result, she has shut off any display of emotion, choosing to uphold an air of indifference instead.

Much of this holds true for Marianne as well, whose abuse at the hands of her family, as discussed in the third chapter, has led to a similar façade. I have already brought up the exchange between Marianne and Alan that results in him spitting at her in the kitchen and the consequences of this violence for Marianne's identity. Afterwards, she goes to talk to her mother, and this exchange occurs:

“If you can't handle a little sibling rivalry, I don't know how you're going to manage adult life, darling, she said.

Let's see how it goes.

At this, Denise struck the kitchen table with her open palm. Marianne flinched, but didn't look up, didn't let go of the envelope.

You think you're special, do you? said Denise.

Marianne let her eyes close. No, she said. I don't.” (*Normal People*, 143)

Much like Frances, Marianne has learned that displaying emotion here functions as weakness in a sense. Again, the promise of violence and abuse has led to Marianne hiding her feelings in order to avoid further pain, but unlike Frances, this response has become a marked element in the interactions between Marianne and her family, the result of which is even more abuse. As a result, these characters have become very self-conscious about how they portray themselves in social interactions, so that they might more tightly control other people's ideas about them.

Possibly as a result of how he finds himself able to impact other people's impressions of him, as well as his own fear of displaying emotion in general, which he here explains as shyness, Connell believes that identity is something that is managed by genre conventions and adherence to certain norms:

“Back home, Connell's shyness never seemed like much of an obstacle to his social life, because everyone knew who he was already, and there was never any need to introduce himself or create impressions about his personality. If anything,

his personality seemed like something external to himself, managed by the opinions of others, rather than anything he individually did or produced.” (70)

Connell is under the impression that he is no longer able to impact his own identity or personality. He believes that the flatness with which he approaches interactions is a marker of who he is and that any attribution of character is extrapersonal in origin. Much like Ahmed (“Collective Feelings” 29) describes, Connell takes the impressions put upon him by other people as foundational to his idea of identity. By diminishing his own impact in this process however, he forgets that feelings might originate within him and that he too impresses upon other people. Connell has a tendency to underestimate his own feelings and influence over people and, by contrast, assume that others will be much more in tune with their emotions. This is shown when Connell thinks about Marianne:

“He seemed to think Marianne had access to a range of different identities, between which she slipped effortlessly. This surprised her, because she usually felt confined inside one single personality, which was always the same regardless of what she did or said.” (*Normal People* 14)

The most important observation here is that Connell assumes that other people are putting on a performance much like he is, that Marianne in this case is so in tune with her emotions and with the genre conventions at work in different types of interactions, that she manages to portray herself differently, efficiently impacting other people’s perception of herself. That Marianne vehemently disagrees only goes to show that this is once again Connell’s tendency to skew social dynamics in order to frame himself as a less influential character than those around him.

Much like Connell, who seems unable to realise how his actions and the impressions he makes on others are expressions of identity, as a result of which he believes himself able to maintain different identities in different circumstances, Frances is deeply concerned with her own portrayal of identity and how others perceive her, but slightly differently from Connell. This is exemplified when Bobbi remarks on this tendency of Frances’s:

“When we were outside smoking and male performers tried to talk to us, Bobbi would always pointedly exhale and say nothing, so I had to act as our

representative. This meant a lot of smiling and remembering details about their work. I enjoyed playing this kind of character, the smiling girl who remembered things. Bobbi told me she thought I didn't have a 'real personality', but she said she meant it as a compliment. Mostly I agreed with her assessment. At any time I felt I could do or say anything at all, and only afterwards think: oh, so that's the kind of person I am." (*Conversations* 19)

Frances too believes that she has no core identity, but unlike Connell, she does not give other people the power to define her identity for her. Instead, she retroactively transforms her own actions into conclusions about genre conventions and consequently her identity.

While it is true that these characters often consciously downplay or amplify emotions in public as a conscious effort to appear more interesting or mysterious, it is just as likely that they use this emotional flatness as a defence mechanism, choosing to shield their emotions from their surroundings. Unfortunately for these characters, their unaffected airs do not always have the desired outcomes. On many occasions, the three narrators misinterpret the expectations of others, mistakenly believing that flatness is required, wanted or expected, which results in a drastic failure of communication. Additionally, by chronically misrepresenting their true intentions, Connell, Marianne and Frances have each developed a crisis of identity of some sorts. Connell displays this most clearly:

"He can have the respect of someone like Marianne and also be well liked in school, he can form secret opinions and preferences, no conflict has to arise, he never has to choose one thing over another. With only a little subterfuge he can live two entirely separate existences, never confronting the ultimate question of what to do with himself or what kind of person he is." (*Normal People* 28)

This passage once again shows that Connell is very much actively trying to influence how others see him and impact the world around him through his portrayal of his own desires and feelings, here choosing to hide his relationship with Marianne from the rest of his social circle. In doing so, he assumes not only that this is the desirable thing to do, but also that nobody around him will figure this out. Unfortunately for Connell, it turns out that not only did his friends know, but they also, and this is what

truly surprises Connell, they do not care about his relationship with Marianne, something which he always assumed would be frowned upon (77). It is here that Connell realises that he overestimated the amount of influence his emotional portrayal had over others and that he was not as good a judge of character as he had previously assumed himself to be.

It has now been established that Marianne, Connell and Frances each attribute a lot of meaning to the differences between their personal feelings, beliefs, how they portray themselves in public and how others perceive them. While it is true that they occasionally manage to influence how others view them, as a result of which they can maintain a degree of control over social interactions, it is equally true that they all underestimate how self-sabotaging these tendencies are, and how any overanalysis of genre conventions and the performance of affect can backfire. By now turning to Frances, Connell and Marianne's romantic relationships, it will become clear that such emotional underperformances can result in more stunted relationships, indicating that what used to be a conscious effort to interact with genre conventions and norms has become a prohibitive to their emotional and interpersonal development.

4.4. Genre in Love

There are three main relationships that should be explored in regard to romantic emotions and how the portrayal of affect can adversely influence the dynamic within them. Not only are Frances, Connell and Marianne afraid of emotions, both as something to experience on their own, as well as something to communicate to the other person in the relationship, but many of the problems and insecurities in these relationships are exacerbated precisely by the participants' lack of emotional communication. In the relationships between Connell and Marianne, Frances and Bobbi, and Frances and Nick, these issues come to the forefront in rather different ways, and as such they should each be featured here to show how genre conventions, flat affect and the interaction between the two can be detrimental to any healthy relationship.

Connell and Marianne's relationship is one marked by bad communicative skills. Both characters are afraid to show their emotions or make clear to the other person what they feel or expect from each other. Marianne, for example, when Connell says something hurtful, notes that "[she] nodded. She continued looking up at the black ceiling, swallowing, worried that he could make out her expression." (*Normal People* 91). Marianne indicates here that she is actively suppressing her emotions, as she does not feel comfortable with displaying them to Connell. Similarly, he is uncomfortable with sharing his own emotions with her: "He kept thinking of himself saying to Marianne in bed: I love you. It was terrifying, like watching himself committing a terrible crime on CCTV" (54). In their case, this lack of communication is what repeatedly drives them apart.

The most explicit and well-covered example of Marianne and Connell's lack of communicative skills is after he loses his flat, the circumstances of which have already been covered in chapter 2. There is a moment when the two are lying in bed together and he reveals to her that he will have to return home. This event is shown multiple times, from both perspectives, and each iteration reveals new information that facilitates an understanding of the foundational cracks in their relationship. The first time is when Marianne meets Connell after he has left Dublin, and she notes the following:

"Marianne hasn't seen him since May. He moved home after the exams and she stayed in Dublin. He said he wanted to see other people and she said: Okay." (110)

From this explanation, a reader can only assume that Connell intended to leave Marianne and wanted to end their relationship. She later elaborates on this by revealing that a conversation on this topic did occur, one of which Marianne only says that Connell "told her he was leaving for the Summer" (116), an event which she interpreted as him breaking up with her and moving away (116). From Connell's perspective however, this situation unfolded quite differently:

“His eyes were hurting and he closed them. He couldn’t understand how this had happened, how he had let the discussion slip away like this. It was too late to say he wanted to stay with her, that was clear, but when had it become too late? It seemed to have happened immediately. He contemplated putting his face down on the table and just crying like a child. Instead he opened his eyes again.

Yeah, he said. I’m not dropping out, don’t worry.

So you’ll only be gone three months.

Yeah.

There was a long pause.

I don’t know, he said. I guess you’ll want to see other people, then, will you?

Finally, in a voice that struck him as truly cold, Marianne said: Sure.

. . .

Marianne had just wanted to see someone else all along, he thought.” (124)

This exchange shows how both characters are continuously choosing to not display their emotions, not share their feelings and how they hope that the other person will take charge. By not clearly communicating their intentions, their relationship is irreversibly damaged. Connell wants Marianne to offer him a place to stay, but by not even making sure that she knows that money is the reason for his departure, she is not in the position to make any such offer. They never make explicit the nature of their desires, but yet they assume that the other person is so attuned to the emotions of both that there is no need for words. The result is a relationship where the two participants have no way of knowing how the other feels, dooming many of its future prospects, as evidenced by this point being the end of their relationship until the end of the novel.

Whereas Connell and Marianne’s relationship is marked by an unending string of misunderstandings, much of which is due to their mutual lack of emotional performance, Frances and Bobbi’s relationship is more opaque. The end of their formal relationship is announced rather dryly. Frances notes that “several months after more than a year together, Bobbi and I broke up” (*Conversations* 8). What is remarkable here is that Frances mistakenly believes herself to be extremely adept at underperforming her emotions and playing into the genre conventions for other

people that she, unlike the characters from *Normal People* who rely on the other person to fill in any gaps in understanding. To showcase this, there is one scene in *Conversations* that shows how badly Frances misinterpreted Bobbi's expectations for their relationship. At some point well into the story, when they are living together, Frances writes a story about the two of them, and it gets published. Upon reading it — without permission by Frances — Bobbi gets angry and they argue:

“Were you ever going to tell me?

. . .

I'm sorry, I said.

Sorry for what? said Bobbi. I'm so curious. Sorry for writing it? I doubt you are.

No. I don't know.

It's funny. I think I've learned more about your feelings in the last twenty minutes than in the last four years. (264-265)

At the start of the novel, Frances perceived Bobbi's attitude and her abnormalcy as indicators that she too needed to appear more mysterious and uninterested (9). The opposite appears to be true however, as Bobbi's lack of understanding about how Frances felt, shows that the latter had too effectively hidden away her feelings. This can be explained by a different set of expectations by both parties involved, each revealing different genre conventions through which they moderate their interactions. In the end, it is both Frances's misinterpretation of Bobbi's desires and her hiding away of her own emotions that lead to a breakdown.

The third and final relationship that can be involved in this comparison is the one that evolves between Frances and Nick. Unlike all the other characters, Nick manages to see through Frances:

“When he looked at me, I felt vulnerable to him, but I also felt strongly that he was letting himself be observed, that he had noticed how interested I was in forming an impression of him, and he was curious about what it might be.” (40)

Whereas Connell and Marianne shut themselves down, underperforming their emotional displays, just like how Frances locks up so that Bobbi cannot gain insight into her feelings, Nick seems to welcome Frances into his mind. Additionally, as evidenced by Frances's feeling of vulnerability, he manages to break through

Frances's façade of flatness. To Butler, vulnerability is a matter of being addressed. At this point in their relationship, Frances is not certain of Nick's intentions and as such unsure whether her reciprocation would lead to something good or a "chain of injury" (qtd. in Ahmed, "Interview" 485). Later on, further along in their relationship, Frances grows to understand this dynamic, one where Nick is able to understand her on an emotional level, something that she had long learned to hide (*Conversations* 49). She realises that her flat performance does not hold water and begins to resent Nick for it, as shown when they see each other near the end of the novel and she says that she "needed to leave. Nick saw me, our eyes met. I felt it like always, a key turning hard inside me, but this time I hated the key and hated being opened up to anything" (280). Frances is no longer comfortable with her position of vulnerability, since she perceives their dynamic having shifted from one that could "embrace" (Ahmed, "Interview" 485) into one that is more painful and possibly traumatic. The presence of Nick in Frances's life is one that leads to more revelations, as their relationship leads to Frances letting her guard down towards Bobbi as well. For example, when Frances gets a message from Nick on her phone, as observed by Bobbi, she then describes this scene:

"Melissa's husband. You have a serious thing for him.

I rolled my eyes. Bobbi lay back on the bed and grinned. I hated her then and even wanted to harm her.

Why, are you jealous? I said.

She smiled, but absently, as if she was thinking of something else. I didn't know what else to say to her." (*Conversations* 74)

This passage makes it clear that Frances is afraid to be known. Her public identity is one of underperformance, but her relationship with Nick has made it possible for other people to see past that façade. The persona that she has built up over the years, one influenced by past personal trauma and a desire to be thought of in a certain way, by certain people, is one of indifference, of underperformance. When it becomes clear to her that despite all this effort, she can still be understood, Frances grows angry and resentful.

Any social interaction that people engage in is subject to conventions of both genre and norm. The different participants each have their own set of desires and expectations, and in order to pilot their way through an engagement, there needs to be a mutual understanding between the different characters involved. Additionally, the norms at play are more societally based, setting expectations on a larger scale than the very personal genre conventions. All narrators in *Normal People* and *Conversations with Friends* respond differently to those norms, but they each try to actively influence other people's perception of them, so that they might better navigate the world in which they find themselves. The result for each of them is quite similar however, as theirs is a constant struggle to perform an identity that is not necessarily their own, while also trying to deviate from the norms that have been set up for them. On norms and any sustained deviation from them, Ahmed says the following:

“I think it might require a certain wilfulness just to be confident enough that falling off can still mean getting somewhere, even when falling off is not a matter of will.” (“Interview” 486)

While this chapter has explored different relationships, both in everyday life and on a more personal level, it has focussed on how norms and genre conventions can be paralysing factors in the formation of identity. The next and final chapter of this dissertation will look onwards, to find the good in these novels, trying to find a way out for Frances, Connell and Marianne.

5. FINDING HAPPINESS

In his article on Lauren Berlant and Sara Ahmed's approaches to Affect theory, Schaefer describes it as a framework to bring together "bodies and histories", to understand realities as a spectrum of stories and influences that range from extremely personal to much more public (Schaefer 1). Through an exploration of the socio-economic context in which Connell, Marianne and Frances grow up, its impact on their lives, as well as some more personal factors that influence the construction of identity for these characters, I have sought to understand how those different stories are detrimental to their development as adults. When Berlant outlined her concepts of genre and norm, she showed how the successful completion of any interaction could be considered something of a miracle, seeing how there are many obstacles and pitfalls that stand between the different participants involved (Duschinsky and Wilson 180). In an interview, she discusses these ideas on a larger scale:

"To my ear, the genre of the "life" is a most destructive conventionalized form of normativity: when norms feel like laws, they constitute a social pedagogy of the rules for belonging and intelligibility whose narrowness threatens people's capacity to invent ways to attach to the world."

(Berlant and Prosser 181)

At the start of this dissertation, I said that to many people, the act of living is a never-ending search for happiness, rarely knowing what it looks like or where to look for it. It would appear that "rather than simply an affect that circulates between bodies and objects, happiness is also a promise that is passed around" (Schaefer 2). In this final chapter, I will look at happiness, to explore if and how Frances, Marianne and Connell see their own lives, if they have known moments of happiness and to see if there are foundations in the present that could indicate a future that could bring them happiness, if such a thing were possible.

5.1. Outlining Happiness

After Connell's relationship with Marianne breaks down for the first time, it is revealed to him that the secrecy they maintained out of fear of public chastising, was entirely unnecessary:

“He knew then that the secret for which he had sacrificed his own happiness and the happiness of another person had been trivial all along, and worthless. He and Marianne could have walked down the school corridors hand in hand, and with what consequence? Nothing really. No one cared.”

(*Normal People* 77)

This passage warrants a discussion on the nature of happiness. At the start of her book *The Promise of Happiness* (2010), Sara Ahmed ponders on the same topic. She describes happiness as a guiding light in human life, something everyone strives for, but also as something that defies easy definition. “If happiness is what we wish for, it does not mean we know what we wish for in wishing for happiness. Happiness might even conjure its own wish. Or happiness might keep its place as a wish by its failure to be given” (1), Ahmed says, indicating that the concept of happiness is perhaps dangerous in its very nature, as happiness might not be an achievable promise, and perhaps that promise could evolve into a never-ending cycle of unfulfilling experiences.

Lauren Berlant also explores concepts that can be linked to happiness, although she builds up a slightly different argument. In *Cruel Optimism* (2011), she warns the reader about a type of relationship where “something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing” (1). According to Berlant, this time in history is one marked by faltering stories, or promises that have been told to the people. “The fantasies that are fraying include, particularly, upward mobility, job security, political and social equality, and lively, durable intimacy” (3). She is interested mostly in “the good life” as a set of such promises and what happens when one or more of them are not fulfilled (15). What binds together Berlant and Ahmed here is the shared realisation that these ideas of happiness and desires are less likely to be healthy prospects, but rather they frequently become destructive forces that only lead its subjects away from them. That being said, for all of the dangers that happiness

brings with it, it is still a topic worth exploring. Ahmed describes three basic thought patterns on happiness, all based on their placement in time. It can be a prospect or something that may or may not be achieved in the future, something to be remembered as a thing of the past, or perhaps it can be imagined as a current possession that can be lost at any time (*Happiness* 160-161). Whereas the previous chapters of this dissertation have focussed on the past and on moments of trauma, this chapter is interested most in happiness as Connell, Frances and Marianne, remember, experience and expect it, both in the present and as a future prospect.

5.2. Happy Spaces

Right at the end of *Conversations with Friends*, Frances is talking to Nick. They are on the phone, hearing from each other for the first time since they broke up. “Don’t hang up”, she thinks, the phrase being repeated two times over the course of what cannot be more than a minute (311-312). Ahmed says that “when happiness is present, it can recede, becoming anxious, becoming the thing that we could lose in the unfolding of time (*Happiness* 161). Both *Conversations* and *Normal People* feature such moments, instances of realising that happiness not only exists in the moment, but may also be lost at any given time. In the previous example, Frances realises that this conversation with Nick hinges upon their phone connection. It is here, when they discuss their previous relationship, where certain things might have gone wrong, that the two acknowledge the different aspects and complications in their lives and challenge the concepts of conventional relationships and, as a result, the concept of normalcy.

Lauren Berlant talks about the present in the introduction to *Cruel Optimism* (2010), calling it something that is felt before it can be acknowledged. “The present is what makes itself present to us before it becomes anything else, such as an orchestrated collective event or an epoch on which we can look back” (4). As a result of this, it can be hard to experience a present moment as a happy one. In order for us to characterise a moment as a happy one, some time must have passed after the initial experience, therefore increasing the odds that the sentiment has come to pass as

well. As such, the present “is also a thing that is sensed and under constant revision” (Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* 4). If the present is a moment of happiness then, things become quite complicated.

“When happiness is present, we can become defensive, such that we retreat with fear from anything or anyone that threatens to take our happiness away.” (Ahmed, *Happiness* 161)

Happiness as an experience lived in the present can be quite complicated. If the present is a moment not immediately recognised, but always sensed, and happiness is something that we can be afraid of losing once we have it, then the combination of the two must be an exceedingly fragile construct. It would seem that in this case, happiness itself does largely coincide with Berlant’s object of cruel optimism. If we cannot immediately judge the present moment, how can we then know if this is not precisely that which is threatening our happiness? In fact, what if the current moment is one of happiness? In other words, how can we make sure that we do not run away from the very thing that brings us happiness?

The clearest example of happiness as a dangerous sentiment surrounds Connell. The events surrounding his return home after losing his flat have already been featured earlier on in the dissertation, but the moments that precede it are quite telling when it comes to experiencing happiness:

“At the side of the pool he kissed Marianne’s shoulder impulsively and she smiled at him, delighted. No one looked at them. He thought he would tell her about the rent situation that night in bed. He felt very afraid of losing her.” (*Normal People* 123)

In the moment, Connell manages to acknowledge happiness as a current state, but unfortunately he is mostly focussed on the very thing that stands in his way. His fear of telling Marianne about his financial struggle is in itself also a threat to his happiness, as he believes that revealing his position would ruin their current relationship. By leaving it unspoken, he hopes that some semblance of normalcy might be maintained. Their relationship does in fact break down because Connell refuses to open up, and the novel moves on from there. At other times in Connell and Marianne’s history, moments of happiness are found, acknowledged and lived

in. The most telling and all-encompassing thought on this subject occurs when Connell is dating Helen, where he remarks that “he finds himself rushing to the end of the conversation so they can hang up, and then he can retrospectively savour how much he likes seeing her, without the moment-to-moment pressure of having to produce the right expressions and say the right things” (154). Once again, his fear of losing a sense of happiness becomes the most marked obstacle for him. Here, he is willing to sacrifice the moment in order to cherish it afterwards, as if the memory of happiness is more valuable than its presence. This echoes Christopher Janaway, who writes that “the wickedness of optimism is that it causes unhappiness by inculcating these false beliefs about happiness, beliefs whose consequences are pain and disillusionment” (qtd. in Ahmed, *Happiness* 176). Connell’s conviction that happiness with Helen is best experienced in her absence, is what leads to the end of their relationship.

5.3. Happy Places

All three characters end their stories in rather happy places. They find themselves in situations that seem to indicate that they have acknowledged the crisis-inducing stories that affect them. Perhaps, when imagining happiness, it is most useful to think of it in terms of genre and norm. On the difference between the two in regard to happiness, or a sense of belonging, Berlant says the following:

“[Only] sometimes is the taking up of generic form the taking up of a normative norm (a norm to which valorization is attached). Sometimes conventionality is a defense against norms too, a way to induce proximity without assimilation (this used to be called “inauthenticity”); and sometimes it’s a way of creating another, counterconventional, space. Think of Foucault’s ‘heterotopias,’ the folds within the normative world where one can encounter the positivity of being otherwise.” (Berlant and Prosser 181)

This idea indicates, unlike what Connell, Marianne and Frances have experienced up until the end of their stories, that communicating your desires to the other person in a relationship can be beneficial, since it allows for the pairing up of conventions explicitly stated, as opposed to assuming the desires of the other person and hoping that sentiments are automatically understood by them.

At the end of *Conversations with Friends*, Frances calls Nick and they resume their relationship. At this point, she is also living together with Bobbi, after Frances wrote in an email if they “could develop another model of loving each other” (299). At last, she manages to express her own desires. Where she previously grew to resent those people who understood her, she now realised that she can be happy by letting herself be seen by others. Her relationship with Bobbi is one that she herself describes as both “a relationship, and also not a relationship” (303), affirming that Frances has acknowledged the difference between a conventionalised relationship as an agreement between two people, and a more normalised one. When she talks to Nick on the phone, she describes it as something that is testing the norm of what can be considered “best friendship”, saying that it is working out for them (314). During this conversation, while they are reigniting their relationship, both of them acknowledge that their previous affair, as well as what they are starting up at this point, is non-conventional, by which they refer more to something resembling normalcy. Again, it shows that Frances has realised that being understood by another person, largely by properly communicating with them and sharing her desires with them can be a more promising start to any relationship. Not coincidentally, this talk between Frances and Nick ends with them agreeing to see each other again, right at the end of the story. Unfortunately, this progressive arc for Frances is not entirely positive, as it is during this very conversation that she consciously hides another one of her desires from Nick, believing that expressing it will jeopardise their budding reunion. This is reminiscent of Connell’s situation with him losing his flat, where the realisation of a danger to his happiness becomes what causes the relationship itself to collapse. What makes Frances’s situation different from that one, is that Frances has learned — at least to some extent — to share her emotions with other people, and to acknowledge a moment of happiness and embrace it.

As for Marianne, whose life has been marked by a continuous cycle of violence and abuse, she has decided at the end of the novel that the only way out is to completely turn away from her family, realising that her search for belonging cannot be fulfilled by them. In the final scenes of the novel, she and Connell have reignited their relationship and they appear to be happy. A crucial moment seems to be the following thought by Marianne:

“No one can be independent of other people completely, so why not give up the attempt, she thought, go running in the other direction, depend on people for everything, allow them to depend on you, why not. She knows he loves her, she doesn’t wonder about that anymore.” (*Normal People* 262)

Much like Frances, Marianne has learned to rely on other people, to open herself up to those around her, so that they might understand her desires. In this moment, she seems to embody what is called a “[reinvestment] in a fantasy of family life”, a self-contained space where participants are sheltered from the outside world and everything that accompanies it (Duschinsky and Wilson 184). This sentiment is exemplified by the portrayal of Christmas at Connell’s house in Carriclea:

“In the end Lorraine called Marianne herself and personally invited her to stay for Christmas. Marianne, trusting that Lorraine knew what was right, accepted. On the way home from Dublin in the car, she and Connell talked without stopping, joking and putting on funny voices to make each other laugh.” (*Conversations* 259)

Much like Frances, Marianne has allowed herself to be knowable to other people. By having communicated their own wishes and desires, she and Connell both, the two manage to come to a mutual understanding of their relationship, relying on each other in the process instead of shutting down when they are supposed to communicate.

In the end, Frances, Connell and Marianne each have managed to overcome much of what prohibited them from forming meaningful relationships. By allowing themselves to properly communicate their desires, they can all conventionalise their connections, without succumbing to those societally set norms or influences that would otherwise cripple these relationships. In Frances’s case, it is an

acknowledgement that she is not merely seen as an unfeeling subject, but can in fact be understood by the people she loves, and that her desires are not things to be ignored or diminished. To Connell and Marianne, connection is called to life when they allow themselves to open up to the other person and rely on them, instead of running away from moments of happiness as they present themselves.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The world is a complicated place, and the act of living in it no less so. Lauren Berlant calls the adherence to the fantasy of “the good life” a source of cruel optimism, a situation wherein that thing that you desire becomes a source of despair (*Cruel Optimism* 2). Similarly, Sara Ahmed questions whether happiness might not function as some sort of red herring within life (*Happiness* 1). When Connell and Marianne are living together near the end of their story, she wakes up early in the morning, leaves the bed, makes them two cups of coffee, hers with some milk and sugar, his pure black, and then goes back into the room and wakes him up (*Normal People* 255). Meanwhile, at the end of *Conversations with Friends*, right before she goes out to meet Nick, Frances takes a moment to look around as she makes the following observation:

“Things and people moved around me, taking positions in obscure hierarchies, participating in systems I didn’t know about and never would. A complex network of objects and concepts. You live through certain things before you understand them. You can’t always take the analytical position.” (*Conversations* 321)

In these scenes, all three characters seem to have found themselves in places that could be considered happy. As such, they function as examples of what this dissertation has been concerned with. Using the framework of Affect theory as imagined by Lauren Berlant and Sara Ahmed, I have sought to find out where stories of economy, politics and history intersect with individual bodies. By applying theories surrounding Affect theory to the works of Sally Rooney through a close reading, I have tried to draw connections between the world that Connell, Frances and Marianne inhabit, the people that more directly surround them and their own dispositions in life. In doing so, the scope of this dissertation has increasingly narrowed down in order to show how all of these different actors and influences are tied together.

Using Affect theory as a framework allowed for a reading of *Conversations* and *Normal People* that had not yet been performed in academic contexts or in popular media. The first chapter introduced Affect theory as a framework for reading

Rooney's works The reviews that I have featured in that first chapter were concerned with superficial readings of these works, without asking questions about the intentions of the characters or more subconsciously motivated actions. Affect theory allows for a more nuanced characterisation than what was assumed previously, which is the point from where the rest of the dissertation continues.

The second chapter of this dissertation showed how the world of *Conversations with Friends* and *Normal People* functioned as a source of crisis and sustained trauma for its characters. Both novels tell stories of young adults growing up in Ireland in the first half of the 2010s. Their world is one of crisis, marked by a steep economic decline not more than five years before the start of their stories. After two decades of immense financial prosperity, during what was called the Celtic Tiger, the country crashed during the financial recession of 2008. These events have severely impacted the Irish landscape, not only in a visual sense, but also on much more personal levels. The recession has laid bare issues of inequality, class and poverty that decades of neoliberal government and declassification had tried to sustain rather than respond to. The result is that Connell and Frances are economically disadvantaged in comparison to their surroundings, which becomes a main source of stress and crisis for both of them, and an exacerbation of their more individualised struggles.

By using these theories on affect as outlined by Sara Ahmed and Lauren Berlant, it has also become possible to look at those sources of struggle that directly impact the lives of Connell, Frances and Marianne. Ahmed explains how much of our idea of identity and reality is formed through interactions with and impressions from others. Through an analysis of impressions made upon these characters, it has become possible to show how those in turn influenced the narrators' outlooks in life and how they deal with and perform emotions. All three characters have been taught to see emotions as weakness and to view emotional transparency towards others as something that can be manipulated and used as a source of torment. The underperformances of emotions that Connell, Marianne and Frances display are

shown to be detrimental to the relationships that they are trying to maintain. Over the course of the novels, they all come to realise that these defence mechanisms are just that, and not inherently tied to their personalities. As a result, they are able to engage in more emotionally involved relationships, opening themselves up to the other person without being as afraid of the emotions that accompany such commitments.

The last question this dissertation sought to answer was one of happiness. The events of the novels are largely marked by unhappiness, by Marianne, Frances and Connell's inability to experience moments as they occur, but rather isolate themselves emotionally or even actively disengage from any emotional experiences. It is still possible to find moments of happiness within these stories, however, as their emotional developments over the course of the plots allow them to slowly register small moments of happiness before they disappear again. By the end of the novels, the three characters have actively tried to engage with their own emotional struggles, which indicates that they are now more ready to form meaningful relationships with other people. Most importantly, they manage to do so on their own accord, without blindly following those norms set by the very society that has been at the cause of much of their personal struggles. Instead, they succeed in creating spaces set-up and defined by genre conventions agreed upon by all parties involved, showing that they are in the process of overcoming their previous judgements and presumptions, clearing the space for what could possibly amount to a happier future.

While this dissertation has its own queries that it meant to answer, it also served a secondary function, as *Conversations* and *Normal People* have not yet been studied in any academic context. Being focussed on its own reading, this work has also tried to lay bare other avenues for research to be conducted in the future. For starters, a more thorough study of reception of these works is very much warranted. The first chapter of this dissertation drew inspiration from reception theory through its inclusion of popular reviews and by indicating that readings had not yet unveiled all that they could from the two novels. An exploration of public perception of Rooney's

works, not only out of interest in readership and genre classification, but also Rooney's role as a public figure and the influence of her very public profile on the interpretations of her characters, could prove productive. Similarly, while I did cover poverty and inequality in regard to the 2008 recession, a more political reading of these works could dive deeper into the portrayal of politics and the role it plays in the lives of its characters. On the topic of emotions and impressions as formative experiences, I limited my work to the three main characters, declining to look into the aspect of Ahmed's theory that applies this theory as an epistemological tool, as a means of giving form to the world and the people surrounding the individual. I believe here it could be intriguing to explore the other characters in these two novels, those about whom the reader only gains information as filtered through the minds of the narrators. Furthermore, a more in-depth and perhaps better-informed psychological analysis of Frances, Connell and Marianne could yield even more insight than what has been written here. In a perfect and slightly naive world, this dissertation could serve as a starting-off point for a discussion on the portrayal of identity in post-recession literature, with Rooney's characters serving as a point of view not often seen before. If not, then at least this work could serve as an attempt to tackle an interconnected web of issues varying in scope and severity in its own right.

Both *Conversations with Friends* and *Normal People* tell stories of adults coming into their own in a world that has been steadily individualising and obscuring those struggles in life that are too complex to comprehend, all the while continuing its relentless assault on the lives of its subjects. In the end, Frances, Connell and Marianne all realise that perhaps the only way to find happiness is to be aware of these issues and actively combat them. Their response is one of community, creating spaces where they and their loved ones can be happy, be normal by standards they set for themselves. At the beginning of this dissertation, Kant said that people would never attain happiness, but that they are bound to search for it indefinitely. I would argue that in the case of Connell, Marianne and Frances, they seem to have each found a place where they might truly be happy.

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