

The Writing of Eros in the Irish Millennial Generation in *Normal People*

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Abstract

Irish emerging writer Sally Rooney's second novel, *Normal People*, tells the story of a romantic relationship, from their high school life to their university years, between Marianne and Connell, two Irish youths. Indeed, under the surface of the love story lies a contemplation on how individuals establish intimate relationships against the Modern existential crisis. Based on the examination of the intimacy between the two lovers, this paper investigates the dilemma of eros, which is commonly seen among the Irish millennial, and further proposes possible approaches to the construction of intimate relationships in the new era.

Keywords

Sally Rooney; *Normal People*; intimate relationships; the dilemma of eros.

1. Introduction

Sally Rooney (1991–), an Irish writer and screenwriter, has been acclaimed as the “Salinger for the Snapchat generation” and a female write of millennials. *Normal People* revolves around the romantic relationship between Marianne and Connell. Through their repeated separations and reconciliations—either by social circumstances or the obscure concealed within their inner hearts—the novel traces the protagonists’ gradual growth. To some extent, the novel itself continues Rooney’s “romantic Bildungsroman.” Compared with the *Conversations with Friends*, *Normal People* portrays the “younger” intimate relationships and offers a more nuanced exploration and representation of the intimacy formation.

2. The Formation of Intimate Relationships between Connell and Marianne: The Self and the Other

In the epigraph of *Normal People*, Sally quotes a line from George Eliot’s *Daniel Deronda*: “A change of spiritual state is a secret which people appropriately name conversion; and for many of us, neither heaven nor earth would reveal it until some individuality has come into contact with ours, producing an extraordinary influence and compelling us to accept it.”[1] Appropriately, it summarizes the formation of relationship between Marianne and Connell: two distinctive individuals, under the spiritual uncertainty, encounters each other, and then undergo a process of “conversion” and personal growth.

The protagonists, Marianne and Connell, attend the same secondary school in Sligo, a small town in western Ireland. In the eyes of others, Marianne appears quite isolated. And such “abnormality” has almost become a consensus among her classmates. By contrast, Connell seems to be well integrated. Yet it is such constant “integration” and self-suppression that reveals he is not truly a “normal person” either.

When enquiring the causes of their alienation, the influence of family stands out. Marianne, after the death of her father, suffers from the verbal and physical abuse by her brother Alan, and her mother’s neglect. As a consequence, Marianne is eager to love and security. Therefore, her isolation can be understood as indirectly rooted in her narcissistic self-protection: “in order to

demonstrate superiority and assert one's uniqueness and privilege, distinguishing oneself from others through isolation becomes a strategy." [2] As for Connell, he also grows up in a single-parent family, but faces a different predicament. His mother Lorraine gives birth to him outside marriage, yet she, as a strong and caring mother, provides him with sufficient love and acceptance. But the absence of a paternal figure during his upbringing leads to a deficiency of his responsibility sense. Meanwhile, within a stratified society, Connell's family poverty and his mother serving as a cleaner in Marianne's household make him be fear of contempt and ridicule from his peers. Thus, in order to preserve his self-esteem, he chooses not to reveal their romantic relationship publicly.

Whether Marianne's withdrawal into isolation or Connell's avoidance of social exposure, both are forms of self-protection when they encounter with the Other. However, such defensive strategy, to some extent, holds the Other from back. They construct an impenetrable barrier, thus create a world centered upon the self. In *The Agony of Eros*, Byung-Chul Han argues that "the crisis of love is caused not only by the increasing number of choices regarding the Other, but also by the disappearance of the Other itself." [3] The object of eros should be the Other. Yet contemporary society categorizes and compares everything, leading to a process of homogenization and standardization. All things become objects of consumption, losing their distinctiveness. Heterogeneity is the essential condition of the Other's existence. Without it, individuals lose the capacity to encounter alterity and consequently become incapable of experiencing eros.

The high school of Marianne and Connell serves precisely as a miniature homogeneous society. Marianne, for preserving her own difference, becomes incompatible with her classmates, voluntarily placing herself outside the collective. And Connell, conversely, chooses to accommodate himself to the expectations of the group, constructing a homogenized public image of himself and thereby becoming trapped in a profound spiritual struggle.

Unable to perceive the difference of the Other, leaves individuals confined within a world of self, then a state of narcissism. "Self-love (narcissism) easily becomes the opposite of a healthy expression of love." [3] Only eros can rescue the subject from the swamp of narcissism. For "eros awakens a willingness toward selflessness and self-sacrifice. A sense of weakness overwhelms the heart of the one who falls in love, yet it is immediately followed by a sense of empowerment. This dual feeling is not created by the self, but bestowed as a gift by the Other." [4] Only through the collision of Marianne and Connell's individualities, eros awakens them the willingness to sacrifice, gradually helping them move beyond their self-enclosed worlds and accept the gift offered by the Other.

Eros, first and foremost, signifies the approach, proximity, and eventual union between individuals. When discussing Fromm's understanding of love as a form of union in *On Eros*, Wang Min'an argues that "love overcomes loneliness and leads toward progress." [5] Love is never a one-dimensional act, but an active giving. One-sided self-sacrifice often is not the fulfillment of love, but its negation and tragedy. At the high school graduation dance, Connell, for the fear of his classmates discovering his relationship with Marianne, invites Rachel, the most popular girl at school, without Marianne's knowledge. As a result, their relationship becomes an unequal action in which only Marianne offers love and willingly sacrifices herself. Thus, she was hurt. However, after the dance, Eric tells Connell that everyone had already known about their relationship. Only then does Connell realize that "he had sacrificed his own happiness and another person's happiness for the sake of this secret, and that the secret had always been so insignificant and worthless." [1]

The giving in love, indeed, requires the possession of "all external and internal energies." To attain these things, individuals in love must cultivate an inexhaustible richness within themselves in order to truly give. Therefore, love is a process of learning, accumulation, development, and maturation: "Love is a power that generates love; weakness and impotence

are incapable of producing love.”[6] In this sense, Rooney does not remain the novel a separation and reunion. Instead, she portrays their transition from adolescence to adulthood as a process of subject formation, through which they gradually discover a more balanced and stable mode of constructing intimacy. As Fromm states in *The Art of Loving*, “Mature love is union under the condition of preserving one’s integrity and one’s individuality.”[6] Ultimately, Connell’s tenderness and kindness enable Marianne to recognize that no individual can exist entirely independently of others, while Marianne’s nonconformity allows Connell to understand that he does not need to conceal his authentic self merely in order to become a socially accepted “normal person.”

3. The Dilemma of Eros among the Irish Millennial Generation

In recent years, Irish literature has demonstrated “an overall shift from grand narratives toward everyday concerns, with explorations of family relationships and intimate emotions becoming a prominent thematic thread that has attracted numerous writers.”[7] That shows Ireland’s increasing attention to emotional expression and spiritual consolation after economic recession. The story between Marianne and Connell is not merely an individual experience, but a reflection of the Irish millennial generation within contemporary Irish society. While it also embodies Rooney’s perspectives on class, gender, and interpersonal relationships.

Within a century, Ireland has transformed itself from being characterized by economic hardship and cultural conservatism into a prosperous member of the EU. The “Celtic Tiger” among the 1990s enabled it to achieve rapid economic development and renewed cultural confidence. However, the global financial crisis of 2008 exposed the fragility underlying this prosperity. The aftermath caused Ireland “still trapped in a permanent state of vacuum, a seemingly inescapable condition of marginality.”[8] At the same time, economic contraction resulted in renewed divisions of class and gender. So, obviously many Irish writers have depicted the trauma and vulnerability that emerged after the era of prosperity. Among them, Sally Rooney is widely regarded as representing the voice of the millennial generation. Beneath the surface of her romantic narratives, She tries to reveal her reflections as a feminist and Marxist thinker. Through the troubled young protagonists Marianne and Connell, Rooney portrays the widespread predicament of eros among young people within a declining Irish society.

The narrative of *Normal People* witnesses the material determinism of the post-Celtic Tiger era. Connell’s experience represents it most. Marianne and Connell attend the same school, yet their social backgrounds are entirely different. Connell’s single mother works as a cleaner for Marianne’s wealthy family. So, Rooney deliberately brings together two individuals from different social backgrounds, for the purpose of highlighting the inequalities. This sharp contrast between material conditions and social status determines the subsequent transformations and instability of their romantic relationship.

Beside the abovementioned influence at the material level, their intimacy is also continually constrained by institutional structures. Within the social hierarchy, once they leave the small town of Sligo and enter the larger urban space of Dublin, their social positions undergo a dramatic reversal. Marianne’s wealth elevates her social status, but Connell’s poverty makes him marginalized.

This reversal of their positions creates a sense of alienation in Connell’s perception of himself and his relationship with Marianne. Actually, Connell’s predicament is not a personal experience, but a widespread condition among young people in Irish society. The suicide of his friend Rob has demonstrated it. Rooney reveals how an Ireland undergoing economic decline exerts destructive effects on the younger generation at both material and class levels.

Materialism and hierarchical social structure burden the love between Marianne and Connell with social relations, making their love inherently risky. As Byung-Chul “The risks of love are always closely connected with the institutions of love... Love has continuously developed its own universal grammar and codes throughout history.”[4] This is because every individual exists within particular social relations and hierarchies, and every union between individuals represents the intersection of two different social systems. The personal love between Marianne and Connell carries numerous social meanings beyond individual affection; therefore, they must love while bearing the weight of their respective social relations and structural positions. Yet the profound gap between these two social systems makes their union extremely difficult.

Under the effect of materialism, an even more deeply rooted issue emerges : the objectification of the female body. Marianne’s experience is the best example. On the one hand, Marianne suffers both psychological and physical violence from an early age. This violence not only damages her dignity but also represents the projection of patriarchal family structures into the private sphere. Consequently, she is eager for love and intimate relationships, but simultaneously feeling inferior. On the other hand, she internalizes and rationalizes the violence, transforming her own body into a site of self-punishment. She demands her lovers to verbally abuse, suffocate and utilize violent sexual acts. Such demands mean no sexual freedom, but a repeat: only through bodily suffering can she prove that she is worthy of being loved. Marianne’s family relationships exert a profound and lasting influence upon her, directly resulting in the psychological condition of an “inability to love” that emerges when she confronts relationships.

4. Constructing Intimate Relationships in the new Era

Sally Rooney’s writing of eros does not merely aim to represent the development from youth to maturity, nor does it try to reveal the social problems existing in contemporary Ireland. In fact, what she attempts to explore more is how individuals may chase intimate relationships against individuality and independence, and how human connections may transform those involved. As Luca’s *The Inventor of Love* writes: “Following the lover / appearing in the world / is like gazing in astonishment / at a distant planet / emerging from chaos.”[9] Marianne and Connell are just like two planets emerging from chaos. It is through the encounter that eros comes into being.

The searching for the counterpart is rooted in our nature, and the existence of eros likewise arises from human part. In Plato’s *Symposium*, Aristophanes argues that human beings were originally complete and whole. At the very beginning, humans possessed a spherical form and existed in three genders: male, female, and androgynous. These spherical beings were extraordinarily powerful and sought to rival the gods. So as a punishment, Zeus divided their bodies into two halves, and those who had been separated thereafter spent their lives searching for their missing halves in order to return to their original nature. “Christianity seeks to cleanse human sin through the love of God, whereas Aristophanes, that fragmented human beings restore their health through love... and return themselves to a state of wholeness and completeness.”[10]

The intimate relationships first requires the ability to recognize. In a homogenized society dominated by hierarchical consciousness and materialism, the exclusion of the heterogeneous Other obstructs the possibility of eros. Human beings, by no means, is an isolated “islands”. The recognition of the Other’s existence constitutes the prerequisite for establishing intimate relationships. On the basis of recognizing the Other, the recognition achieved through love represents the highest form of recognition. Accidental encounters and romantic attachment are transformed into destiny through continuous declarations and commitments. When Connell

confesses his love to Marianne, she experiences the intensity of that moment as almost unbearable: "She had always believed herself undeserving of anyone's love. But now she possessed a new life, and this was its first moment. Even years later she would still think: yes, my life began from that moment." [1]

For Hegel, love signifies self-abandonment and sacrifice. Fundamentally, love seeks to overcome the difference between two individuals. It requires each person to relinquish individuality and become united with the other. Yet this self-negation ultimately leads to the affirmation of the self, producing a renewed self through union. However, unilateral love cannot constitute genuine love; love requires both individuals to negate themselves in order to accommodate and recognize each other. As Alain Badiou argues, love is a "dance for two": it breaks away from the perspective of the isolated individual and allows the world to be reborn through the perspective of the Other, from elsewhere. The establishment and maintenance of intimate relationships therefore require mutual sacrifice and mutual recognition, through which individuals achieve a "rebirth" of the self on the basis of equality. Marianne and Connell regard each other as points of reference, thereby redefining their own positions and compensating for their individual deficiencies. At the conclusion of the novel, they finally recognize the irreplaceable significance of each other. Connell helps Marianne gradually escape the enclosure of isolation, while Marianne helps Connell resist the encroachment of depression. Marianne's final reflection reveals the essence of their relationship: "He had given her his goodness, and now it belonged to her. Meanwhile, his life opened before him, extending in every direction. They had done so much good for each other. Really, she thought, really. A person could truly change another person." [1]

5. Conclusion

Sally Rooney's *Normal People* reveals the predicament of eros faced by millennial youths within the context of a new historical era. Due to the influence of various external factors—including family relationships, economic conditions, social class, and physical appearance—they remain haunted by vulnerability, powerlessness, and anxiety. The disappearance of the Other caused by social homogenization has become one of the primary reasons why young people hesitate before eros, giving rise to widespread loneliness and even psychological struggles in contemporary society. To recover the capacity to love, individuals must learn to offer recognition through love and achieve a renewed self within the "dance for two" of intimacy.

Through her portrayal of the predicament of eros among Irish millennials, Rooney offers a possibility of resolution rather than a simple conclusion. She does not provide a conventional happy ending; instead, she allows Marianne to understand that even if what they possess together can never return, Connell has already given her his goodness—and that gift has become an enduring part of herself.

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