U.PORTO
FLUP FACULDADE DE LETRAS
UNIVERSIDADE DO PORTO

2º CICLO DE ESTUDOS
MESTRADO EM ESTUDOS ANGLO-AMERICANOS

Adapting Sally Rooney to the screen:
Are the politics of sameness still relevant in Adaptation Studies?

Inês Santos

M

2025



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Adapting Sally Rooney to the screen: Are the politics of sameness still relevant in Adaptation Studies?

Dissertação realizada no âmbito do Mestrado em Estudos Anglo-Americanos, orientada pelo Professor Doutor Rui Carvalho Homem.

Faculdade de Letras da Universidade do Porto

2025



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To my sister,

you didn't have the chance to write your own dissertation, so I wrote this one for you.

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Declaration of Honour

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Porto, 01/09/25

Inês Santos

Acknowledgements

To my parents, without whom I would not have had the chance to pursue my wildest dreams, such as devoting my life to education.

To my sister, for always being there for me since I was a little girl, for guiding me and teaching me the most important things.

To my beloved friend, Joana, the most important friend this master's has given me, for listening to my never-ending complaints, frustrations, and yet being there also to celebrate my small wins.

To my best friend, Misael, without whom I would lose myself in the last few months, you have shown me true friendship, and I owe you so much.

To my friend, Mariana, for always saying the hard things no one could say to me and for laughing with me whenever I felt like I was about to give up.

To Professor Lucy Collins, your support in Dublin changed my perspective on so many things. I am very thankful for all the insightful conversations and contributions you have provided me.

To my supervisor, Professor Rui Carvalho Homem, your guidance has been indispensable to my work, to which I am thankful.

To Sally Rooney, for creating stories that feel like home to so many people, and for turning me into an avid reader in 2019. Without her books, this dissertation and my devotion to literature would probably not exist.

Thank you to all my friends who supported me emotionally throughout the process, both in university and in life.

And lastly, to myself, for all these years of work that seem unproductive and useless to some, but that make me feel so accomplished by the end of the day.

Resumo

O presente estudo analisa o processo de adaptação de dois romances da escritora contemporânea irlandesa, Sally Rooney. Num primeiro momento será prestada a devida atenção aos contextos e conceitos relevantes para este estudo, incluindo quer questões históricas e histórico-literárias, quer contributos do campo teórico dos estudos de adaptação- com uma dívida especial à teorização de Linda Hutcheon. Os dois capítulos seguintes incluem uma leitura de pormenor dos romances, onde serão analisados de acordo com o contexto histórico-cultural assim como literário- questões relacionadas com género, classe social, assim como relações inter-humanas no contexto do presente século. Esse segmento é acompanhado de uma reflexão introdutória sobre a reputação e escrita de Sally Rooney, bem como uma perspetivação crítica do processo de adaptação dos dois romances, sustentada pelas ferramentas contextuais e conceituais apresentadas na Introdução.

Palavras-chave: Estudos de Adaptação, Sally Rooney, Literatura Irlandesa

Abstract

This study analyses the adaptation process of two novels by contemporary Irish writer Sally Rooney. First, due attention will be paid to the contexts and concepts relevant to this study, including historical and historical-literary issues, as well as contributions from the theoretical field of adaptation studies, with special reference to Linda Hutcheon's theorisation. The following two chapters include a detailed reading of the novels, which will be analysed according to their historical-cultural and literary context, addressing issues related to gender, social class, and interpersonal relationships in the context of the present century. This segment is accompanied by an introductory reflection on Sally Rooney's reputation and writing, as well as a critical perspective on the adaptation process of the two novels, supported by the contextual and conceptual tools presented in the Introduction.

Key-words: Adaptation Studies, Sally Rooney, Irish Literature

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1. Introduction

Sally Rooney's writing has established her as one of the most important writers in contemporary Irish literature. It seems impossible to browse bookstore shelves without encountering a copy of one of her novels. Born during the period of Ireland's economic boom known as the 'Celtic Tiger'—about which more will be said below—millennial writer Sally Rooney took over the literary world from the moment she published her debut novel, *Conversations with Friends*, in 2017. Rooney won almost instant critical acclaim, she was nominated for several awards, including the *Irish Book Award*, and went on to win the *Sunday Times Young Writer of the Year Award*. *Normal People*, her second novel, published the following year, became a worldwide phenomenon, also nominated for several awards, including the 2018 *Man Booker Prize* and the *Women's Prize for Fiction*. It won both the *Waterstones Book of the Year* and the 2018 *Costa Book Awards*. Aside from all the praise this novel received—both inside and outside Ireland, and across the Anglo-Saxon world—*Normal People* became widely popular among the masses, particularly after the release of the television series adaptation directed by Lenny Abrahamson, which aired on BBC and Hulu, and was nominated for an Emmy. By 2020, this book had been recommended thousands of times across the internet by people worldwide. *Conversations with Friends* was later also adapted by the same team, although it did not garner as much praise and attention as the former adaptation—as will be explored and demonstrated in the following chapters.

Her success and influence on current literary trends stem from her ability to do something new while still feeling painfully familiar. Rooney herself does not feel comfortable with being labelled the writer of her generation—the millennial one. As Francesca Wade, co-editor of the *White Review*, says,

> In many ways what she does so well isn't anything especially 'new' or 'millennial'- her attention to relationships, power and the ways we (mis)communicate is all there in 19th-century novels too, except that her characters might more naturally iMessage rather than write letters. (Wade, as cited in Godwin, 2020).

Indeed, Rooney is a writer of her time; through her, readers can find relatable aspects. Besides human and romantic connections, millennials and other individuals are able to discover new ways of communicating, debating politics, and writing. Apart from this, Rooney is also a victim of historical contexts that have inevitably shaped not only the way she writes, but mostly the way she sees the world. Through an apparently simplistic narrative, she dives into social disparity, gender violence, and economic hardships. All of which will be examined in the following segment, where a comprehensive historical, cultural, literary, and theoretical context will be reviewed.

With this in mind, this thesis aims to explore the ways in which Sally Rooney's first two books, *Conversations With Friends* (2017) and *Normal People* (2018), were adapted to the screen. Both novels established her presence in the literary world, and both adaptations allowed her to expand her fanbase to include enthusiasts of other media. Rather than viewing these adaptations as inferior or superior to the novels, we will simply examine how her writing was transformed into another medium and understand how this experience influenced her as a writer. The goal is never to argue whether they were successful or unsuccessful in terms of their fidelity towards the primary text; instead, we sustain that the simple fact that both adaptations were created and shared with the world is in itself an accomplishment.

Initially, I will address the contextual frameworks that are essential for understanding my analysis in the first and second chapters. These frameworks include a brief overview of the general historical context. Since Rooney is considered a Post Celtic-Tiger writer, there will be a brief discussion of the consequences of that period in Ireland. To understand certain themes in Rooney's novels, it is crucial to grasp the Irish literary legacy — not only to understand where her writing originates but also to appreciate the continuum of women writers in Ireland and what they have advocated and written about. Although stylistics and narrative technique are not the focus of my analysis, it would be impossible to overlook Rooney's management of the verbal medium. As we study the adapted works, it is essential to be familiar with the texts and understand their relevance and how they translate to the screen. In one final moment, within the contextual frameworks, we will explore adaptation studies as a broad field,

marked by its never-ending critical debates. The works of several scholars will be taken into account to provide a comprehensive and detailed understanding of what we consider an adapted work, which, in this case, cannot be qualified simply by being considered faithful or unfaithful, as this would be a very shallow analysis. In this framework, Linda Hutcheon's work will prove particularly important. However, most of her arguments will be discussed in the two main chapters, alongside the analysis of the adaptations, as her views will help us understand the transit undergone by these works. As stated, this introductory material will provide the theoretical basis for what will be addressed later, in the hope of complementing our knowledge of the matter.

Regarding the following chapters, initially, we will carefully analyse *Conversations With Friends,* Sally Rooney's first full-length novel. There will be a discussion of the novel's central themes, as well as its writing style, to gain a deeper understanding of its dynamics and facilitate a more informed study of its adaptation later. After this close reading, we will examine the adapted material and discuss it in the light of Linda Hutcheon's views. The same dynamic will be found in the second chapter, where we will look closely at *Normal People*, a novel that had a bigger impact than *Conversations With Friends*, as we will see later.

2. Contextual and theoretical frameworks

2.1. The place: historical and literary context

As mentioned earlier, this thesis focuses on analysing two literary texts influenced by their period of creation; the stories are set in contemporary Ireland, requiring us to understand that particular context. As previously noted, Sally Rooney was writing against the backdrop of an economic crisis that affected an entire generation.

The term "Celtic Tiger" originated from an American merchant banker (Smyth, 2012), and it's connected with the various changes that occurred in Ireland during the 1990s, leading to a period of exponential economic growth similar to the "Tiger economies" in Southeast Asia. According to Gerry Smyth, the targeting of foreign investment and desirable corporation tax rates were two of the principal reasons for this overwhelming economic flow (Smyth, 2012). People from all over the world began to immigrate to Ireland, in the hope of creating a better future for themselves, as it was one of the richest nations of the time. The country's financial collapse in 2008 confirmed that the Irish economy was codependent on "shaky foundations indeed" (Smyth, 2012, p. 133), as Smyth states, resulting in several consequences for the population, including homelessness, poverty and other bleak realities. The ghost estates began to rise, a consequence of glamorous wishful thinking, with the population no longer able to afford new houses, so they were left as they were, becoming empty walls spread all over Ireland.

This economic crisis, along with the fall of the Catholic Church's credibility, significantly impacted the way Irish people lived. One of the most powerful institutions, if not the most, when it comes to morality as well as education, in a state that struggled with identity and independence for centuries. The scandal of the Magdalene Laundries, involving as it did the exploitation, both physical and psychological, of women in the whole of Ireland, as well as the network of paedophilia amongst the Catholic clergy, all of which the church elite was aware, granted an obscure place for the church. By the end of the early 2000s, Ireland was importing priests from various countries (Smyth,

2012, p. 134). These circumstances, as Smyth argues, reevaluated what Irishness means, with many of the moral and social changes disrupting what was designated and representative of the Irish people.

Due to this historical context, the literature of the Post-Celtic Tiger years was deeply influenced by the new social and economic realities experienced by the Irish people, with Sally Rooney being one of the finest examples. When it comes to the Irish literary canon, historical context cannot be, once again, overlooked since Ireland, of all places, has a shared cultural past with Britain. Even though the literary canon is a controversial notion nowadays, it dates back to the 19th century and the need for Nations to establish their literatures, which justifies its frequent description in our era as the hegemonic type of writing that ideologically sustains the dominant class, gender, and race. Ireland's canon is often explicitly political, with many works reflect upon identity, cultural liberation and history. As stated by Norman Vance:

> The sense of tradition itself is a major dynamic of Irish writing. The literary work of any given period needs to be read with some sense of Irish History not just because it is historically produced, responding to and reflecting particular historical circumstances but because memory, including the memory of earlier literary modes and concerns, is one of the constant themes of Irish writers and a sometimes pressure upon them. (Vance, 2002, p. 4).

In this context, the obstacles Irish writers faced throughout history, due to, as mentioned, their ongoing struggle for independence, which originated from their shared cultural past with Britain, were even more severe for women writers, as they lacked the resources and opportunities to find a means of expression. As Heather Ingman writes in her study "it seems to me that Irish women's writing from all parts of the twentieth century, implicitly or explicitly deals with women trying to find a place for themselves within the narrative of the Irish nation." (Ingman, 2007, p. 1). Now, it is pertinent to consider the literary legacy of women writers in Ireland in our era, much marked- as Paige Reynolds suggests- by the influence of modernist fiction across the century that precedes us. For Reynolds, "modernism announces itself in such works of contemporary

fiction, as a reminder of the questions it asks, the problems it seeks to solve, the issues it has yet to resolve." (Reynolds, 2024, p. 24).

In Paige Reynolds' exciting study, *Modernism in Irish Women's Contemporary Writing: The Stubborn Mode* (2024), she explores the literary traditions that women writers have used over the past decades, and how these have enabled new authors, such as the one examined here, to establish their own presence in literature. She argues that stubborn modes are "tried-and-true literary tactics that trigger a sense of recognition when readers encounter them, a constellation of traits- including style, tone, forms, content and history- commonly associated with a particular literary movement or school that travels across time." (Reynolds, 2024, p. 16). For her, in Irish women's writers there are certain literary traditions that are used across time and create a sense of homogenous creative writing that "sustains the aesthetic as well as the political impulses associated with the movement's early history." (Reynolds, 2024, p. 16). When it comes to the aesthetics, Reynolds considers that there is a common ground between them and these usually include "an isolated and alienated central character, a narrative heavily inflected by stream of consciousness (…) non-linear plots to broken syntax to unconventional punctuation." (Reynolds, 2024, p. 17). All of which we can find in Rooney's writing, as we will see in the following chapters. Reynolds' study focuses on modernist writing as a starting point; her analysis explores the modernism of various authors, from Elizabeth Bowen to Sally Rooney, offering an interesting perspective and in-depth examination of a literary legacy in Irish literature. The author argues that the modernist mode is visible across many contemporary works; however, the same appears throughout the works of various Irish women writers such as Kate O'Brien, Mary Lavin, Evelyn Conlon, Anna Burns, Emma Donoghue, and Louise O'Neill (Reynolds, 2024). For her, these Irish women writers have reclaimed certain literary traditions and transformed them into something fitting for the period in which they lived, thus creating a tradition and a space for women writers to explore their social condition and their marginalised position. As Reynolds writes:

> In the twenty-first century, the familiarity of modernism- its intellectual challenges, its cultural cachet, its historical resonance- has rendered it a

> particularly meaningful device for underscoring the obduracy of certain social, cultural and personal problems that women have faced across the past century, even amid the dramatic cultural changes that have altered life in the Republic and Northern Ireland across recent decades. (Reynolds, 2024, p. 18).

Patricia Boyle Haberstroh also emphasises this idea, that Irish women now had the opportunity to speak about their condition, what it means to be a woman in Ireland, and describe their realities as wives and mothers (Haberstroh, 1996).

The modernist tradition, though, is mostly known for its association with Irish male writers such as W. B. Yeats, James Joyce, and Samuel Beckett, and not for women's contributions. At the core of this problem, Reynolds finds that the lack of access for Irish women to the arts, as well as their reluctance to adopt new techniques, are the main reasons for their limited visibility. On the other hand, the success of the male writers stemmed from the Irish Literary Revival, which empowered new ways of expression, more fitting for the historical and cultural revitalisation of the time. In Reynolds' words, "during (…) 1890 and 1922, Irish artists worked towards producing, performing, and promoting native art to build and buoy national self-interest- art that, notably, was often drawn from past traditions, recuperated and reworked." (Reynolds, 2024, p. 19). Even though there seems to exist a tradition of preferred genres and narrative styles such as Drama and Poetry, Seán Ó Faoláin claims that "there is no such genre as the Irish Novel." (Faoláin, 2005 as cited in Reynolds, 2024).

Alongside these aspects, and considering the political side of Irish literature, as Vance's statement above suggests, that foundational moment of change in the arts also allowed Irish writers to amplify their artistic voice and find independence in their creativity. Reynolds considers that "both revivalism and modernism in Ireland can locate their origins in a historical moment when (…) aesthetic experiments successfully helped to provoke a shared national feeling that contributed to the political outcome of Irish Independence." (Reynolds, 2024, p. 20). For this reason, when it comes to modernist women writers, we find that their works are often interwoven with social and political causes that reflect their position in society as sidelined individuals. However, because these women writers sought a stable position in the literary world during the rise of

modernism, many chose not to explore less strict and more experimental styles, as they aimed to maintain their accessibility to readers worldwide, as stated: “throughout the twentieth century, many Irish women writers expressed skepticism about the public value of experimental literature, fearing that overt experiment in their fiction might somehow obscure its public impact.” (Reynolds, 2024, p. 23). This phenomenon inevitably influenced and delayed Irish women writers from rising to prominence in this movement. Moreover, as Reynolds concludes, “the marginal status of Irish women writers is often a problem of their own making.” (Reynolds, 2024, p. 22). Their reluctance to embrace modern ways of expression and to open doors to change and new methods of writing created a sense of doom within the literary tradition of women writers. This inevitably delayed their creative development and legacy. The consequence of their own actions is that they prevent women from progressing and from becoming familiar with different ways of expressing their realities, resulting in a kind of repetitiveness and an outdated literary legacy. As Reynolds eloquently argues:

> To remain blind to such fiction across the twentieth century because it employed accessible forms and themes, or because it was commercially successful, or because it was out of sync with familiar literary historical timelines, inevitably results in the erasure of a substantial corpus of women’s writing and thwarts any understanding of its influence on subsequent fiction. (Reynolds, 2024, p. 23).

In the coming years, Irish reality would change, coinciding with the end of high modernism in 1939, the death of W. B. Yeats, and the publication of certain novels that reflected a shift in aesthetics. Historically, this year also marked the beginning of the Second World War, during which Ireland chose to remain neutral. What could have been a positive decision ultimately became a destructive one in terms of the reinforcement of outdated ways of thinking. As Reynolds states, “neutrality reflected the quest of de Valera’s Fianna Fáil government to extract Ireland from manifestations of modernity such as cosmopolitanism and secularism, and thus from many of the political and social advances for women.” (Reynolds, 2024, p. 24). This historical period would then diverge from the revolutionary and anti-establishment traits of high modernism. Nonetheless, the issues faced by women in the Republic of Ireland would be further worsened in the

North of Ireland, a place that was built “on a (…) foundation of antiquated attitudes about femininity derived from colonial legacies and religious traditions, Catholic as well as Protestant.” (Reynolds, 2024, p. 25).

For these and many other reasons, it is worthwhile to examine the past when it comes to Irish women’s writing because, for the most part, they consist of a thread of tendencies, aesthetics, and realities that permeate themselves into contemporary writers. Given that Ireland has experienced many drastic historical events, women authors not only continue writing about their position in those periods but also find new ways to express their trauma.

When stating that Irish fiction is ‘political’, one considers nationalism, the relationship with the British Empire, the Catholic Church, but also key aspects of the social setup, such as the nuclear and yet dysfunctional family (Haekel, 2020). The prominence of issues such as these in contemporary Irish literature is notable. However, others also feature in many other contemporary Irish novels written by women, including Eimear McBride, Anna Burns, Naoise Dolan, and Anne Enright, among others.

The turn of the century, during the economic boom and after its collapse, marked a significant shift in the course of Irish fiction. Although Ireland appeared prosperous, it was not the ideal society that people might imagine when discussing the Celtic Tiger. Anne Enright, along with many other writers, explored the true effects of neoliberal ideals that had infiltrated Irish society, which was not the popular response of the time. As Sofia Mendía argues, “the capitalist economic boom and the urge to invest gave way to a cultural environment in which the arts stayed at a remove from the popular interest”. And she continues, quoting Cahill, “by becoming a literary writer, you were pretty much setting yourself in opposition to the dominant ideology of the time, which was to make money, buy property and spend ostentatiously.” (Cahill 2018 as cited in Mendía, 2023, p. 150). Gerry Smyth also mentions the materialistic and consumerist approach the Irish inevitably succumbed to, stating that people could now afford more cars, and more cars, and more cars. (Smyth, 2012). Contemporary Irish literature is then divided between the works produced during the Celtic Tiger and those afterwards; as stated by Haekel, “the classification itself shows the social and cultural impact of the

years of extraordinary prosperity as well as sudden shock in its aftermath caused by the bursting of the bubble in 2008." (Haekel, 2020, p. 24). In the following chapter, there will be a brief analysis of Sally Rooney's writing, along with an explanation of the characteristics of post-Celtic Tiger writing.

2.2. The theory: Adaptation (its attractions, its limits).

This dissertation cannot claim to thoroughly draw on the broad and complex field of Adaptation Studies, but it benefits from the points of view of prominent scholars in the field —and especially from the landmark contributions of Linda Hutcheon, who will be the main theoretical source for what follows.

Adaptation Studies is often mistakenly reduced to the categorisation of an object as faithful or unfaithful to its source. Critics have been debating whether, when it comes to the transition of novels into other forms, such as opera, plays, video games, film, and television, people often rely on fidelity as the central point of analysis. Initially, when adaptations became regular features in spaces of cultural production, the matter of fidelity was rather decisive in many aspects. At the time, intellectuals believed that the transition from canonical and classic works to a stage play had to be done in a way that privileged what they considered to be the original work, from which adaptations would arise and always come as secondary.

Throughout the years, this primitive idea has been deconstructed and debated among scholars, who have sought to understand the complexity of adaptation, which extends to other realms that analyse the impact of a body of work when it is used and adapted into something else. The development of adaptation studies in the early twentieth century enabled this 'hybrid field'[1] (Cartmell & Whelehan, 1999) that employs both film and literary studies to explore other dynamics and examine adaptations as individual creations that can, but certainly do not have to, recreate the excellence of the

[1] This term is used by the authors, which derives from other theoretical works. It emphasises the idea that the field of adaptation studies was, for a long time, a blend of film studies and literary studies. Nonetheless, the separation between the two and the unwillingness to open space for a shared discussion prevented it from growing.

primary text. For some scholars, such as Linda Hutcheon, experiencing the 'original work' after the adaptation revolutionised the way people think about adaptation studies, since the written text would be perceived differently. When the original text is known first, the individual will swing between the new and the old art that is being consumed. Additionally, when the public is not familiar with the primary text, they will not engage with it as an adaptation of something else. Her work aims to remind people of the interconnectedness of the arts and the fact that they are never isolated. For this reason, Linda Hutcheon has significantly changed the way adaptation studies are approached today; however, many academics, though to a lesser extent, have successfully introduced the discussion she deepens in her work.

According to Cartmell and Whelehan, in their *Introduction: Literature on Screen: a Synoptic View* (2007), in 1936, Allardyce Nicoll published an academic text reflecting on how films fail to attain the successful nature of literature. George Bluestone would apply the same theory in his work, *Novels into Film,* published in 1957, which is considered the first substantial body of work regarding adaptation (Cartmell & Whelehan, 2007). Even though Adaptation Studies are relatively new, the adaptation and translation of primary texts to other media, such as film and theatrical plays, has been a heated debate among scholars since those who first began to problematize it. In a world where Shakespeare has been quoted and referenced exhaustively, how can one be against the continuing adaptations of his works if those sustain his never-ending relevance? In the words of Julie Sanders, "Shakespeare has been a particular focus, a beneficiary even, of these 'proximations' or updatings" (Sanders, 2006, p. 19). Linda Hutcheon, as well as Margaret Jane Kidnie in her influential work *Shakespeare and the Problem of Adaptation* (2008), have questioned the true nature of an adaptation and the fact that most of them allow a text to enjoy a long afterlife. Although Kidnie's work does not resonate entirely with my analysis, it is relevant to understand that her study valued adaptation as a collaborative and creative act that allowed famous Shakespeare works to be reworked and reinterpreted for contemporary audiences and showed how these permitted his works to resonate with individuals from various cultural backgrounds, across time. For her, the problem of adaptation is non-existent and instead of collaborating with

traditionalistic views on the matter, Kidnie argues that within adaptation, there are more important matters, such as the innovative, reinterpretative nature, which reframes adaptation as a starting point itself, other than reducing it to a merely secondary place concerning the primary text.

When it comes to influential thinkers, Robert Stam has been a renowned name in the field of adaptation studies, especially after his work *Beyond Fidelity: The Dialogics of Adaptation* (2000), a text that challenged many outdated perspectives on adaptation, which, once again, mainly relied on the concept of fidelity versus infidelity. Known for his fearless critique of the matter, Stam's contribution has been substantial, even though it fails to expand the discussion to other issues beyond film and canonical texts. Regardless of its limitations, he considers the "notion of fidelity [to be] highly problematic for several reasons" since "it is questionable whether strict fidelity is even possible" (Stam, 2000, p. 54). He considers the process of adaptation to be more complex than most people take into account, since it means the process of transit of a novel, which contains mostly words and written work, into something that can include "theatrical performance, music, sound effects and moving photographic images", for him this complexity is already enough to explain "the unlikelihood- and I would suggest even the undesirability- of literal fidelity." (Stam, 2000, p. 56). Stam understands that the question of fidelity is not only shallow, but it also ignores matters of importance, such as the fact that these media vary and require different needs, as he states:

> The demand for fidelity ignores the actual processes of making films- for example, the differences in cost and in modes of production. A novel is usually produced by a single individual; the film is almost always a collaborative project, mobilizing at minimum a crew of four of five people and at maximum a cast and crew and support staff of hundred. (Stam, 2000, p. 56).

This idea also problematises the question of what he calls "material infrastructure" (Stam, 2000, p. 56), considering that many opponents bring the matter of profit and greed into the discussion of adaptations, Stam believes that to be, once again, insufficient, because the financial aspect for novels "enter at the point of distribution, whereas in the cinema they enter at a phase of production of the text itself." (Stam,

2000, p. 56). As he explains, while for an author it is free to write a paragraph of a story set in a specific country, within a specific historical period, with specific elements, the same does not hold true in cinema, since financial aid is necessary to recreate such contextual conditions. Stam boldly states that while “a novel can be written on napkins in prison” (p. 56), a film needs more. Whelehan seems to agree with this issue when she writes that the concept of ‘high art’ is connected to the novelist for “it emerges from the solitary efforts of the individual to express their distinct vision, untrammelled by concerns about the commercial value of the product which is deemed subsidiary to aesthetic value.” (Whelehan, 1999, p. 6). For her it seems contradictory to relegate film studies and adaptations to such inferior place for it has “auteur- directors who rise to the challenge of classic adaptation in order to realize ambitions of producing the most compelling, truthful and authentic version- or a radical revisioning- of a particular text.” (Whelehan, 1999, p. 6). Whelehan ponders the biggest question of all, which concerns the fact that certain works are deemed successful solely because of the amount of profit they generate. Does that mean that a well-done adaptation is inevitably one that sells the most tickets? In her words, “whenever a film becomes a financial or even a critical success, the question of ‘faithfulness’ is given hardly any thought. If the film succeeds on its own merits, it ceases to be problematic.” (Whelehan, 1999, p. 7). As will be observed in the following chapters, Sally Rooney's adaptations enjoyed different receptions, and coincidentally, the one that garnered the most viewers and generated the most capital from its production is considered the most successful.

Apart from this, Robert Stam also problematises and raises an important question regarding the legitimacy of a text being superior to any possible adaptation it undergoes, an idea that “assumes that a novel ‘contains’ an extractable ‘essence’, a kind of ‘heart of the artichoke’ hidden ‘underneath’.” (Stam, 2000, p. 57). For him, this superiority is rooted in superimposed prejudices such as seniority, “the assumption that older arts are necessarily better arts”, iconophobia “the culturally rooted prejudice (…) that visual arts are necessarily inferior to the verbal arts” and logophilia “the converse valorization, characteristic of the ‘religions of the book’ of the ‘sacred word’ of holy texts.” (Stam, 2000, p. 58). Stam can explain that there is a hierarchy of arts in the world,

and when it comes to this matter, literature is superior to film simply because it existed first. Moreover, the issue seems to be that fidelity, apart from what has been explained above, also derives from the idea that the adaptation does not have to be exclusively faithful to the 'original' text, "but rather to the essence of the medium of expression" (Stam, 2000, p. 58). To Stam, this principle implies that there is good and bad inherently in every medium, which he finds detrimental to the development of our understanding of adaptation. In fact, when it comes to media, film can incorporate a handful of them: "moving photographic image, phonetic sound, music, noises, and written materials." As he continues, "in this sense, cinema has not lesser, but rather greater resources for expression than a novel, and this is independent of what actual filmmakers have done with these resources." (Stam, 2000, p. 59). For this reason, he finds it unproductive to even try to compare both spheres of expression, especially because "both novel and film have consistently cannibalized other genres and media." (Stam, 2000, p. 61).

When it comes to the analysis of an adaptation, Stam proposes that we address adaptations as 'translations' and consequently ignore fidelity as a means of observation, for him "the trope of adaptation as translations suggests a principled effort of intersemiotic transposition, with the inevitable losses and gains typical of any translation." (Stam, 2000, p. 62). Apart from translation, Stam explains that there are other 'tropes' available to discuss this matter, he enumerates "dialogization, cannibalization, transmutation, transfiguration." (Stam, 2000, p. 62). There is also the possibility to use 'reading' as a trope since a novel is a victim of various readings, and so can it "generate any number of adaptations" (Stam, 2000, p. 62). Instead of relying on their statements in 'unacknowledged hierarchies', individuals, as well as academics, should focus on much more critical concerns, such as questioning what gets picked up from the novel and what gets ignored. Additionally, this concern will be expanded in the following chapters, as we will examine two adaptations and understand what parts of the primary text were elevated and which parts were sidelined, an analysis that allows us to comprehend that a text originates various opinions and interpretations, which will translate themselves into different, not inferior, versions.

Robert Stam, as presented, pays attention to the question of fidelity and stresses the variety of media in the cultural world. Julie Sanders, in her work *Adaptation and Appropriation* (2006), goes even further, debating the distinction between adaptation and appropriation and whether the two are inherently linked. She adds to Stam's panoply of tropes, many other words for our vocabulary, such as "version, variation, interpretation, continuation, imitation, forgery, (…) revision, rewriting, echo." (Sanders, 2006, p. 18). According to this author, adaptations should be seen as a way to resurface old texts that might have fallen into the background and allow particular works to continue to be relevant across time. In her words, "adaptation can also constitute a simpler attempt to make texts 'relevant' or easily comprehensible to new audiences and readerships via the processes of proximation and updating." (Sanders, 2006, p. 19). As Imelda Whelehan explores in the manual *Adaptations: From text to screen, screen to text* (1999), "even when a literary text is the subject of an adaptation it may not be a text that many potential viewers are familiar with: it may be (…) an obscure work of fiction that only became widely known through the process of realization on screen." (Whelehan, 1999, p. 4).

Arguing once more against the unproductiveness of the matter of fidelity, Sanders writes that "it is usually at the very point of infidelity that the most creative acts of adaptation and appropriation take place." (Sanders, 2006, p. 19). Frankly, and as Sanders argues, adaptation studies are not solely based on this point of analysis- it is a serious field that requires methodology and ideology. Contrary to what Stam stood for, Sanders finds it "misleading to apply adaptation studies solely to cinematic versions of canonical plays and novels, although that is perhaps the most common and easily understood manifestation." (Sanders, 2006, p. 23). Nonetheless, it is still necessary to draw the line between an adaptation and an appropriation and to Julie Sanders, that seems to be related to the outcome of certain products that deviate from their original intentions. As she notes, "appropriation frequently affects a more decisive journey away from the informing source into a wholly new cultural product and domain." However, more importantly, an appropriation is when the "text or texts are not (…) clearly signalled or acknowledged as in the adaptative process." A process that would "occur in

a far less straightforward context than is evident in making a film version of a canonical play." (Sanders, 2006, p. 26). That is not to say that adaptations are not allowed to go beyond the primary text; however, one should not ignore the matters of intellectual property and even plagiarism.

Imelda Whelehan's study does not stop here; she introduces the conversation on the influence of the audience, including readers, cinemagoers, and, more importantly, media fans. Her ideas are tied to Hutcheon's understanding of double awareness, mentioned earlier, which occurs when an individual watches an adaptation having already read the novel, creating a sense of watching the film and thinking about the book simultaneously, thereby creating a toxic dependency between the two media. In Whelehan's perspective, "it is well documented that more people who have enjoyed a film/TV adaptation will buy the literary version than will actually read it, but there is little research on how this potential new readerly community treat the novel or why they often never finish it." (Whelehan, 1999, p. 17). In her opinion, reading, in this context, is the norm. The priority of people when it comes to consuming art, however "we take the pragmatic view that people have more problems finding the time and leisure to read a novel than they do to view one." (Whelehan, 1999, p. 17).

Furthermore, Thomas Leitch, another important thinker in the field of adaptation studies, published an article in 2003 that enumerates twelve fallacies in contemporary adaptation studies. In this study, Leitch unravels the errors that still haunt this critical and theoretical school of thought. Firstly, he addresses the fact that adaptation studies remain relevant in contemporary times, and contrary to what many critics have suggested, multiple questions are awaiting a proper answer. One of the fallacies for Leitch is the fact that individuals still rely on the fact that "literary texts are verbal, films are visual" (Leitch, 2003, p. 153), for him "instead of saying that literary texts are verbal and movies aren't, it would be more accurate to say that movies depend on prescribed, unalterable visual and verbal performances in a way literary texts don't." (Leitch, 2003, p. 154). He recalls that the difference between a written text and a script is that, in contrast, the former is only interpreted by readers, the latter is interpreted by performers and then by viewers. And instead of asking why individuals still care for the

differences, to him “the question to ask is not why this assumption is wrong but why it is so stoutly, albeit tacitly, maintained.” (Leitch, 2003, p. 155). To finalise his argument as to why the matter of fidelity remains useless, Leitch argues,

> Fidelity to its source text- whether it is conceived as success in re-creating specific textual details or the effect of the whole- is a hopelessly fallacious measure of a given adaptation’s value because it is unattainable, undesirable, and theoretically possible only in a trivial sense. (Leitch, 2003, p. 161).

Before delving into Linda Hutcheon’s contributions, it is worthwhile to examine Sarah Cardwell’s study, as this thesis focuses on a TV adaptation rather than films or plays. Thus, she wrote a text titled *Literature on the Small Screen: Television Adaptations*, which is worth examining. According to Cardwell, television adaptations are regarded as a conservative medium that occupies a specific place in the context of the arts. In her words, “one of the most commonly held prejudices against these television adaptations is that they reflect television’s tendency towards conservative, staid, and unimaginative programming in contrast with cinema’s more vibrant, eclectic and innovative offerings.” (Cardwell, 2007, p. 182). The author points out that there is a misconception that television productions are mostly canonical texts that are repeated constantly, thereby perpetuating the same style, narrative, and outdated perceptions of adaptations. There is a difference between independent productions and television productions, where the latter are “regarded as dull, formulaic products, further subsumed into categories with vaguely derogatory labels.” (Cardwell, 2007, p. 182). According to Cardwell, this phenomenon has evolved over the years, and the once-strict content available on television is now considered to be more nuanced and developing better skills that allow its viewership to understand the complexity of adapted works. As she writes, “the affiliation to the source text remains, but it is possibly better conceptualized as a desire to show respect to that text, rather than to be faithful to it.” (Cardwell, 2007, p. 193). However, nowadays, streaming platforms are taking over the world with their accessibility and convenience, relegating traditional television to second place in terms of priorities. Stephen King himself has stated that he prefers to work with streaming platforms rather than traditional television, as he feels that he has

more freedom —a matter that will be revisited in the second chapter. Nonetheless, it is essential to recognise that the way individuals consume media is constantly evolving, and this trend is particularly evident today, with a growing preference for binge-worthy content, especially after the Covid-19 crisis (Horeck, 2021).

Finally, it is time to explore Linda Hutcheon's pioneering contributions to the field of adaptation studies. Although most of the authors briefly mentioned earlier share similar ideas with Hutcheon, this author broadened the scope of analysis to a much wider landscape. Most of her ideas will be examined alongside the analysis of both adaptations in this thesis; however, it is also relevant to discuss some key elements at this initial stage.

Overall, Hutcheon's thesis aims to "tackle the subtle denigration of adaptation in our culture that still tends to value the original, despite the ubiquity and longevity of adaptation as a mode of retelling our favorite stories." (Hutcheon, 2013, p. XX). Through her analysis, this academic will highlight the persistent conflicts within the field of adaptation studies, as well as attempt to answer old questions with new insights. Hutcheon notes in the beginning of *A Theory of Adaptation* (2013) that adaptations have a significant, noticeable, and ever-growing presence in contemporary society, as 85% of Oscar-winning best pictures are adaptations of novels. They also make up 95% of all miniseries and 70% of all TV Movies (Hutcheon, 2013, p. 4). For this reason, she finds it counterproductive to rely on fidelity as a theoretical framework in contemporary society. She claims that an adaptation is "an extensive transposition of a particular work" (Hutcheon, 2013, p. 7) that can change its medium and its genre. As Whelehan mentions, sometimes the only thing that remains of the original text is the title, and that does not mean that specific transitions into the screen are less faithful than others. By all means, and as Hutcheon defends it, to adapt is to readjust and to alter. Reinterpretation and recreation are integral to the process, even though for some, this means 'appropriation' and 'salvaging' (Hutcheon, 2013, p. 8), which can be compared, at times, to plagiarism.

Virginia Woolf, for instance, believed that cinema was unable to recreate the power of narrative, arguing that it should focus on its visual nature and leave

metaphorical writing to writers. However, for some scholars, this kind of opinion is hostile, as they privilege fiction for its complexity, thereby undermining the value of film. Hutcheon challenges this obsolete idea by quoting Seger when he says that "a best-selling book may reach a million readers; a successful Broadway play will be seen by 1 to 8 million; but a movie or television adaptation will find an audience of many million more." (Hutcheon, 2013, p. 5). This phenomenon happens because, contrary to what critics seem to believe, an adaptation "has its own aura" and its "own presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be." (Benjamin 1968, as cited in Hutcheon, 2013).

Regardless and as mentioned above, Hutcheon explains the concept of being both aware of the text and the adaptation at the same time, as she states: "if we know the adapted work, there will be a constant oscillation between it and the new adaptation we are experiencing; if we do not, we will not experience the work as an adaptation" (Hutcheon, 2013, p. XVII). If the individual happens to do this process in reverse, they will also be a victim of this oscillation, nonetheless and as she notes, "an adaptation's double nature does not mean, however, that proximity or fidelity to the adapted text should be the criterion of judgment or the focus of analysis." (Hutcheon, 2013, p. 6). If anything, the criteria of fidelity should never be taken into consideration if the critic is not open to exploring all the other ways of looking critically into an adapted work. For Hutcheon, as well as Stam, an adaptation can be considered a translation of a text; she quotes Walter Benjamin to explain that "translation is not a rendering of some fixed nontextual meaning to be copied or paraphrased or reproduced; rather, it is an engagement with the original text that makes us see that text in different ways." (Hutcheon, 2013, p. 16).

To exemplify how small details can change a whole body of work, emphasising the translating effect, Hutcheon argues that geographical or historical specifications can change the outcome of an adaptation. Overall, the author asks us to consider how we would react if a male director adapted a woman's work or when an American adapts a British work. She explains that "in shifting cultures and therefore sometimes shifting languages, adaptations make alterations that reveal much about the larger contexts of

reception and production." (Hutcheon, 2013, p. 28). Regarding the question of material infrastructure that Robert Stam reflected upon, Hutcheon finds it self-explanatory for it is a risk to adapt a work that is not well-known in the artistic world, but the most important aspect is that sometimes, more than the financial aspect, it is the legal one that matters the most because adapters "often choose works that are no longer copyrighted." (Hutcheon, 2013, p. 29). Other than this, she finds it important to discuss the place classical works hold in the world of adaptation. Apart from the fact that these are usually the ones people are most concerned with, the simple act of adapting canonical texts and making them accessible to everyone should be contemplated. Hutcheon writes:

> Closely related to these moral and educational concerns for audiences is the idea that television adaptations of literature, in particular, can act as substitute vehicles for bringing literature to a larger public, cutting away the class differences inherent in access to literacy and literature. (Hutcheon, 2013, p. 120).

In the end, for Hutcheon, the real matter of an adaptation being successful is whether the adapted work can capture both knowing and unknowing audiences. For the latter audience, it is easier to be impressed with the originality of the film and to give credit to the director's choices. In contrast, the other audience will succumb to the constant comparison as they try to fill the gaps of what is missing from the primary text.

In an article titled *In Defence of Literary Adaptation as Cultural Production* (2007), Hutcheon focuses on arguing in favour of literary adaptations, using a panoply of 'successful' ones to sustain her argument. She stresses once again that there is no room for originality or rawness when it comes to literary texts, as they are also subject to alterations by editors, publishers, and readers themselves- "editors influence, even change, what authors want to write. Designers control how we literally see the work of literature." (Hutcheon, 2007, p. 2).

As addressed before, Stam's opposing argument to the hierarchy of arts is also used by Hutcheon, who agrees with this author on the matter, for her "these works adapted from literature are now part of our readerly experience of that literature, and

for that reason deserve the same attention we give to the literary, and not only the same attention, but also the same respect." (Hutcheon, 2007, p. 6). In the end, even if a novel has been adapted many times to the screen, this does not mean that it has lost its primary value, or that some adaptations are more important than others, because "adaptation and appropriation (…) are, endlessly and wonderfully, about seeing things come back to us in as many forms as possible." (Sanders, 2006, p. 160).

Lastly, in 2004, in an article titled "*Why Adapt?",* Linda Hutcheon challenges the readers to answer the question of why adaptations are important and why they should continue to exist. Although she stresses some of her principal arguments addressed already in this section, she concludes that "there is no such thing as an autonomous text or an original genius that can transcend history, either public or private" (Hutcheon, 2004, p. 11).

This introduction to the contextual and theoretical frameworks of the main argument in this thesis aims to explore the concepts, terms, and ideas that are central to this research, all of which will be necessary to understand the following chapters. Although these theoretical elements were initially examined at this stage, they will recur in the subsequent chapters to clarify my analysis of both the primary texts and the adaptations.

3. On Sally Rooney's writing

Before proceeding to a close reading of *Conversations With Friends* and later the analysis of its adaptation, it is important to note the characteristics of Sally Rooney's writing. In the contextual frameworks, there was a brief introduction and contextualisation of women's writing in Ireland, especially modernism. Still, to understand her novels and follow the discussion, some aspects related to her narrative style should be addressed first.

When it comes to the historical period, as shown above, Rooney's fiction situates itself in post-Celtic Tiger Ireland, of which her novels are as clear a reflection as one could get. Both *Conversations with Friends* and *Normal People*, as well as her third novel, *Beautiful World, Where Are You* (2021), which is not considered in this analysis, have many elements of the aforementioned context, confirming that Rooney's literature is a product of its time. One of the differences would be that instead of complaining about the claustrophobic power of both the Catholic Church and the English, we find that she blames neoliberal economies and capitalism itself. We see a major distance between literature that is focused on being Irish, to a literature that expands Irishness by not being shaped by its history, trying to justify it. As Eve Patten argues,

> Fiction of the contemporary period [has] remained formally conservative: beyond a prevalent social realism, its chief stylistic hallmark was a neo-Gothic idiom which signaled a haunted or traumatized Irish society and deep-seated disturbances in the national psyche. The dysfunctional family, and within it the child- abused, victimised or emotionally stunted- continued to provide staple metaphors of cultural crisis. (Patten 2006, p. 259).

Within Post-Celtic Tiger literature, there are two groups of writers: the first comprises novels written with modernist techniques and approaches that examine society's fragmentation after the economic crisis. The second is characterised by the traditional realist novel, a form that dominates literature by young women writers (Darling, 2023). Coincidentally, the realist novel, according to Darling, is "traditionally associated with the bourgeois middle class for whom it was developed, the realist novel

is often seen as the form most sympathetic to capitalism." (Darling, 2023, p. 348). Additionally, due to its simplicity, it is also a marketable type of writing closely tied to capitalistic logic. Darling seeks to understand "whether literary realism proliferating during the Celtic Phoenix era can proffer radically different ways of thinking about capitalism beyond succumbing to its inevitability." (Darling, 2023, p. 350).

Even though Rooney herself stated that she is not trying to be a feminist of some sort, the fact that she is a woman writer is relevant enough. As signalled by Cameron, "between 1650 and 1900 four in ten novelists were women- a substantial presence, albeit one that has had to do battle with an ongoing exclusion from the canon of Irish Literature." (Cox Cameron, 2020, p. 410). Being a woman writer in Ireland, a country that had asylums destined for "broken women" which were exploited through hard labour, with some survivors attesting that it was modern slavery, Rooney has it easier than her predecessors. Ireland's troubling history might allude to women writers being non-existent; however, they were present from very early on, being exponentially relevant from the 20th century. It is important, though, to acknowledge that women writers in Ireland were purposefully marginalised, which, as mentioned above, hindered their writing process. The puritanism process of the 'New Ireland' included censorship, with the: "banning of innovative and experimental fiction authored by both men and women." (Cox Cameron, 2020, p. 411). Kate O'Brien and Edna O'Brien faced consequences due to the Censorship Act of 1929, which banned all books containing any allusions to female sexuality (Cox Cameron, 2012). Regardless of the limitations women writers faced in Ireland, their resistance in writing about gender roles and social norms highly impacted the future of women's writing. As mentioned, Kate O'Brien, as well as Elizabeth Bowen, developed modernist fiction further and addressed social issues that challenged the dominant ideas of the time. Novels such as *The Land of Spices* (1941) and *The Country Girls* (1960) portray strong female characters that challenge the normative ideals of Ireland, representing themes of repression, sexual shame, and religion. Elizabeth Bowen's *The Last September* (1929) navigates the religious tensions as well as themes of nationalism and independence. These women, as well as others such as Maeve Binchy and her portrayal of mundane Irish women's activities, created a legacy

in Irish Literature that has influenced Irish women writers ever since. As Cameron states: "while Rooney's novels can be found in any bookshop in Ireland, fifty years ago both Edna O'Brien and Kate O'brien were banned authors here." (Cox Cameron, 2020, p. 411). Women writers post-Celtic Tiger are a continuum of what these women established throughout the past century.

James Patterson has stated that Sally Rooney may be "the literary voice of Post-Celtic Tiger Ireland" (Patterson, 2020), and as many others have started to notice her interest in Marxist politics, capitalism, and millennial realities such as internet culture. Alongside Rooney, Naoise Dolan is also a young millennial writer whose prose is inclined to anti-capitalist ideals, interrogating the state of the world through Marxist lenses. Patterson calls this generation of Irish writers a "radicalized" (Patterson, 2020) one, which goes hand in hand with the sociological alterations in modern society. In an interview for the New Yorker, Rooney mentioned that "A lot of critics have noticed that my books are basically nineteenth-century novels dressed up in contemporary clothing." (Collins, 2018), a statement that remains truthful after considering different literary traditions that are captured in her modern novels. As Reynolds says, "the development of realism and modernism in these novels confirms that Irish women writers continue to see the value in resurrecting and reworking familiar modes to showcase the hidden complexities of female subjectivity" (Reynolds, 2023, p. 230). Rooney incorporated both realism and modernism into her writing, and both are reworked and readjusted to reflect the reality of a millennial writer capturing Ireland after a significant economic and moral collapse. As Collins concludes, "Sally Rooney is doing something new. And I find her uncomfortably familiar" (Collins, 2018). Many have argued that *Normal People* shares many similarities with modernist fiction, as well as romantic plots, such as *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen; however, the open ending is what differentiates Rooney from the modernist tradition. Perhaps it is the open ending that captures readers, as they can form their own speculations and hypotheses about where these characters go and whether they succeed —something to be considered in the following chapters. Moreover, as Reynolds concludes, "throughout the past century Irish women writers have faced a seemingly implacable triple-bind: if they are too vividly Irish, they are

parochial; if they are too modernist, they are derivative; if they are too commercially appealing, they are apolitical or incorrectly political." (Reynolds 2023, p. 276). Fortunately for Sally Rooney, she is all of them.

Sally Rooney's writing is a combination of various forms, one of them being the *Bildungsroman* form. In postcolonial Ireland, the Bildungsroman emerged as a prominent form of resistance in a nationalist Catholic nation; Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) is perhaps the most notable example. According to Tobias Boes (2009), this concept first appeared as a literary concept applicable only to Germany and its people, due to the complexity and uniqueness of their historical past. However, translations of German novels in the mid-19th century allowed Victorian society to become familiar with this new way of writing and representing, which led to international recognition. Regardless, and as Milchrahm puts it "the Bildungsroman is widely associated with the German Enlightenment, which led to the argument that only a novel from Germany written in the era of Goethe can be considered part of the genre, if it portrays the maturing journey of the protagonists." (Milchrahm, 2021). As most literary traditions go, the *Bildungsroman* is also highly restricted to the reality of middle-class white males who wrote about the characters, who tended to be male. When understanding this, one concludes why Rooney is perhaps reshaping the original meaning of *Bildungsroman*, even though, as will be explained later, she incorporates this fictional mode, she also challenges these archaic conceptions. As Joannou (2019) puts it:

> The coming-of-age journey in the classic *Bildungsroman* is based on the assumption of the male self as the universal self. The quest- whether geographical or the inner quest for spirituality or truth- is a quintessential aspect of human experience, not only in the *Bildungsroman* but also in literary forms such as the picaresque (…). If, however, one is a woman, the quest cannot be contemplated in the same way. It is not possible for a woman to venture forth into the unknown if the very act of stepping onto a public thoroughfare exposes her to the risk of jeopardy to the person, ridicule, loss of reputation, or sexual assault. (Joannou, 2019, p. 202).

Many critics argue that, as a female character, the concept of *Bildungsroman* no longer applies, since it was originally designed to focus on an aimless male young protagonist. However, there is evidence that the first *Bildungsroman* featured a female main character, as shown in a study by Lorna Ellis analysing Eliza Haywood's *The History of Miss Betty Thoughtless* (1751), as well as Alison Finch with *La Princesse de Cléves* (1678), written by the better-known Madame de Lafayette (Milchrahm, 2021).

As far as the meaning of *Bildung* in German goes, Hardin states that it can be interpreted as "the collective name for the cultural and spiritual values of a specific people or social stratum in a given historical epoch and by extension the achievement of learning about that same body of knowledge and acceptance of the value system it implies." (Hardin 1991, xi-xii). In other words, it is inherently linked to personal growth; one is inescapably involved in an ever-changing society. Before the 19th century, or after the spread of the *Bildungsroman*, prose was often tied to the idea that a character is invariable from the beginning and is not affected by external factors that could influence their innate state. Contrarily, *Bildung* depicts a main character whose existence is shaped by the outside world, from which the character learns how to act, talk, and behave accordingly. In short, "a person was thought to be born in a certain way and could not be formed into another person" (Milchrahm, 2023, p. 14). Franco Moretti (1987) in his book *The Way of the World: the Bildungsroman in European Culture*, examines this term critically, questioning and debating well-established, outdated assumptions about it. To him, the *Bildungsroman* signifies "the comfort of civilization" as it pertains to a very specific individual. He critiques the foundations of the term by arguing that;

> Western societies have recognised the individual's right to choose one's own ethics and idea of 'happiness', to imagine freely and construct one's personal destiny- rights declared in proclamations and set down in constitutions, but are not, as a result, universally realisable, since they obviously give rise to contrasting aspirations. (Moretti, 1987, p. 15).

Given the context, it is now easy to understand why we can consider Sally Rooney when studying *Bildungsroman*. One of the most valuable characteristics she brings is

characters who are malleable, completely influenced by the world that surrounds them, it being the political, economic state of the world, as well as the patriarchal structures that shape her characters constantly, however- "the Bildungsroman nonetheless offers a structure through which to view the experiences of subjects structurally alienated from these forms of privilege and cognitive bias." (Frow, Hardie & Smith, 2020, p. 1906). All of them start and end in very different places, and the idea that one dies the same as they were born is nothing but ancient and unimaginable in Rooney's prose.

Scholars have argued that Rooney's *Bildungsroman* is no longer the one introduced in the 19th century; thus, it deserves a new, more accurate definition. *Normal People*, for instance, reveals a very unstable timeline, where past, present, and sometimes even future are constantly in dialogue, the writing of the sequences is fragmented, and as Barros-Del Río puts it, "the novel highlights the liminal existence of today's Irish youth as a state in-between-ness and ambiguity and suggests a precarious relation with the future." In this way, "*Normal People* reshapes the traditional novel of development, and adjusts it to the particular context of Recessionary Ireland" (Barros-Del Río, 2022, p. 179). When it comes to space, *Normal People* also challenges the traditional *Bildung*, although the main characters move through space inside Ireland, they also have contact with the international reality for one summer. Still, space is also used for analytical purposes because "mobility in the physical sense is intertwined with social mobility, and so the novel adapts to the Post-Celtic Tiger context nominated by precarity and engages with political agency and subjectivity" (Barros-Del Río, 2022, p. 179). As mentioned above, realism dominates Rooney's literary stylistic choices, "as a dominant form of writing in contemporary Irish literature, it allows the implementation of literary techniques and strategies of the modernist writers, such as interior monologue and stream of consciousness." (Barros-Del Río, 2022, p. 179). The character-driven nature of the writing, along with the exploration of the interior self, supports *Bildung*'s goal.

Even though this is a new approach to *Bildungsroman*, it shares many similarities with the original stories that inspired this literary concept. If anything, it shows us that old terms remain relevant to contemporary realities, many people would object to this

form of essentialism, and individuals continue to seek the same things, despite different social and political contexts- “the Bildungsroman has never gone away.” (Frow, Hardie & Smith, 2020, p. 1907). As Barros-del Río and Muro write, “Rooney’s novels (…) explore the process of social integration and transition from youth into adulthood through the lens of class and gender, with the discourse of neoliberalism dominating the scene.” (Barros-del Río & Muro, 2025, p. 285). In my view, the survival of the *Bildungsroman* depends solely on the continuation of its aesthetic qualities, and the contextual changes only enable it to endure through different backgrounds that allow the term to expand into something easily shaped by contemporary writers' realities. In post-Celtic Tiger Ireland, we find social and economic inequalities that are featured in many works published in the last decades. In an interview for the Guardian, Rooney confessed;

> It would have been really difficult for me to write about young people leaving home in the west of Ireland, moving to college, and not confront the economic disparities that were emerging at the time, like the stripping back of protections for people from working-class backgrounds who were going to college. I don’t think I would have been able to really explore what was going on in those characters’ interior lives without being sensitive to the changes that were happening outside. (Clark, 2018).

To Rooney, the economic changes in Ireland were highly influential in the writing of Irish authors. Instead of succumbing to the numbing feeling of the economic crisis, writers did what they are historically known for: sitting and writing about the changing times and their frustrations, in the hope of helping people understand their reality better. She feels that, ironically, the post-economic crash period brought “freedom to speak more critically about Irish society, in the way that maybe there was a bit too much cultural cheerleading going on during the Celtic Tiger years.” (Clark, 2018). Perhaps this is the reason we don’t find unrealistic happy endings in Rooney’s novels, for she strives for the reality and bleakness of the Irish youth. Contrary to the typical *Bildungsroman*, Rooney’s characters don’t find their ultimate happy ending, because “although some sense of progression eventually emerges out of the novels, despite multiple internal and external obstacles, the ultimate success and social acceptance of her protagonists remain at

stake." (Barros-del Río & Muro, 2025, p. 286). This is not to say, however, that these characters don't have any sort of character development throughout the novel, but to say that "integration is still in progress and to underline the liminal essence of the character's successful outcomes." (Barros-del Río & Muro, 2025, p. 287). Apart from this, and as it will be addressed in the next chapter, Rooney's writing and personal beliefs derive from a way of looking at the world as a collective. While the *Bildungsroman* focuses on personal and individual experiences, her novels explore the opposite.

As we will see, both her novels feature two central characters who are deeply interconnected, and the plot develops solely through the changes in their personal relationships. In Barros-del Río and Muro words, "Rooney follows Jane Austen's formal legacy and draws on relationality rather than causality" which means that "her novels of formation focus strongly on the emotional and psychological intricacies of the individuals and their interactions with other characters, frequently their peers and lovers, to unfold their progress." (Barros-del Río & Muro, 2025, p. 288). This same collective mindset can be applied to the female characters she writes about, as explained in the following chapters. Her female characters are traumatised women who struggle to navigate the neoliberal world. This is relevant not only because they are women, but mainly because they are Irish women from a long history of negligent mothers. As Mendía puts it, "the trauma she reflects in her novels remains unsolved by the end of the stories, indicating in this way the necessity of more social and mindset changes, but also the impossibility for women of doing away with their current social position just by themselves." (Mendía, 2023, p. 158).

Additionally, her writing style incorporates many modern elements, such as emails and instant messaging. Although this will be discussed further during the close reading of the two novels, it is worth noting that Rooney's way of integrating these contemporary communication methods is unique. The only distinction she makes between instant messages, emails, and other parts of the narrative is through different text fonts. However, she successfully captures what it means to communicate in the twenty-first century by depicting grammatically incorrect sentences. The absence of punctuation and capital letters often leads to misunderstandings between characters,

as they struggle to interpret the tone of messages. As Barros-del Río and Muro state, “through the ambiguity of digital communication, Rooney masters an ability to transmit the in-betweenness within which her characters are trapped.” (Barros-del Río & Muro, 2025, p. 293).

Another aspect of Rooney’s writing that must not be overlooked is her Marxist ideals and how they intertwine with her work. In an interview for the *Louisiana Channel* titled *Sally Rooney on writing with Marxism* (2019), the author reflects on the influences of Marxist philosophy in her personal life and how they inevitably influence her writing. As it will be shown later, Rooney has mentioned several times that she is unable to write about something she does not see herself in/as, and the same can be said about her Marxist influences. As she states in the interview “the way that I think about the world that we live in is probably through mostly a sort of Marxist framework and I’m never quite sure how to make that way of thinking set alongside the fiction that I write.” (2019).To understand what is a Marxist text, Veronika Vanišová says that “Marxist literary analysis thus inquires into the representation of social classes and social structure in a given text. It may pose questions such as whether the narrative aims to marginalise or silence certain voices.” (Vanišová, 2022, p. 20). Rooney is aware that her characters do not represent the poorest of people in a capitalistic society, however she tries to write about young adults who lack financial stability, because that’s the world that she was part of as a college student. When asked if her novels are Marxist, Rooney says that “I write a lot about social class but I don’t think there’s a straight forward way of doing that.” (2019).

She discusses the repercussions of a Marxist novel in today’s world, considering that the publishing world is inevitably tainted with the greed tendencies of neo-liberal economies. In her view, books have become yet another commodity for individuals, and that in itself creates a contradictory narrative: publishing a Marxist text in a society that profits from it, regardless of its content. Overall, Rooney’s intention is to “observe how class as a very broad social structure impacts our personal and intimate lives like how do we carry material realities and economic realities into our interpersonal relationships.” (2019). When it comes to her analysis of class, the following chapters will

include a more in-depth examination of how Rooney explores those dynamics through her main characters.

4. Conversations With Friends

4.1. "I'm not interested in feelings people go through on their own.": introducing the Conversation.

Sally Rooney's debut novel granted her a place in the contemporary literary world instantly; it was shortlisted for the *Irish Book Award* and *Books Are My Bag Readers Award* and won the *Sunday Times Charlotte Aitken Young Writer of the Year Award*. Its narrative derives from the typical coming-of-age novel, presenting themes that are inevitably related to the historical period in which Rooney wrote the novel. That said, *Conversations With Friends* (*CWF*)[2] was published in 2017 and it's the first full length novel written by Rooney, although she had been writing short stories already at the time and getting them issued in literary magazines.

In the initial pages of this chapter, there will be a continuation of our observation of Rooney's writing, including passages from the novel to provide evidence and support my argument. Later, in segment 4.2, there will be a close reading of the novel, focusing on characters, settings, and overall contextualisation. To better understand Rooney's stylistic choices and deepen our comprehension of the novel, I provide a brief introduction below, drawing on a broad understanding of the novel.

As mentioned previously, Rooney's writing is known to be seemingly accessible and straightforward for a broader audience; however, upon closer examination of the writing and narrative style, one understands that it tends to be more complex than most. Rooney herself stated in 2017 that writing emails significantly helped her develop her writing style (Nolan, 2017). At the time, she had a difficult time placing herself within a single literary tradition, as there are numerous factors to consider and influences that impact a writer. It is the profound narrative that attracted so many readers worldwide, and the way Rooney's characters seem to be ordinarily relatable to the reader, the exploration of mundane human feelings and experiences, such as love in the context of

[2] *Conversations With Friends* will be referred to as *CWF* onwards.

Post-Celtic Tiger Ireland, but also at a time when capitalism monopolises everything, tends to be what placed her immediately at the top. As said by Doris Dizdar, "Rooney's exploration of friendship, mental health and societal dynamics are often set against the backdrop of contemporary issues such as class inequality, gender, identity, capitalism, Marxism and even religion." (Dizdar, 2023, p. 7). In every book she has published this far, especially *CWF* (2017), *Normal People*[3] (2018), and *Beautiful World, Where Are You* (2021), we follow complex characters that are either marginalized, or deeply affected by the ongoing financial crisis, or actively fighting the monogamous, straight, bourgeois, nuclear family that has been indoctrinated for centuries in Ireland. Ultimately, Rooney weaves many recurring themes of Irish writing into her work by confronting the still-present conservative landscape, even though its influence is not as prominent as it once was. However, after years of Catholic influence, the interdependence of the Church and Irish identity is now subject to debate. Apart from Rooney's minimalist style, dialogue-driven narrative, and first-person narration, the attention paid to writing about intimacy is uniquely characteristic and worth mentioning. In an interview in 2019, following the publication of *NP*, Rooney says that intimacy is the only feeling she cares for, since it is the only one people cannot feel on their own, in her words, "I think [intimacy] fascinates me because it is a feeling that by nature involves another person. You can be sad on your own, or happy on your own (…) but you can't desire on your own. Your desire needs to have an object." (Cullingham, 2019). Similarly, the author thinks that everything requires community, and the idea of individualism, other than being selfish, is also unrealistic, because "We're living off the labour of others and just pretending to ourselves that those people don't exist because we don't have to look them in the eyes." (Cullingham, 2019). In *CWF*, in the context of Frances being sick, she attempts to think from a different perspective and ends up describing the exact concept that Rooney discusses in the interview. She thinks to herself:

> Each brick was placed by human hands, each hinge fitted on each other, every road surface outside, every bulb in every streetlight. And even things built by

[3] *Normal People* will be referred to as *NP* onwards.

> machines were really built by human beings, who built the machines initially. And human beings themselves made by other human beings (…) Me, all the clothing I wear, all the language I know (…) Is this me, Frances? No, it is not me. It is the others. (Rooney, 2017, p. 294).

This idea is central to Rooney's philosophy and books, deeply rooted in her Marxist ideals and her dislike for the capitalist structure as a whole. However, as Bollas notes, "Rooney's portrayal of class is never overtly political, but instead reflects the quiet, everyday ways in which class affects personal lives, making these dynamics a persistent, sometimes unspoken tension throughout the novel." (Bollas, 25, p. 2). Later, she clarifies that by stating that we always need another person as an object of our desires doesn't mean there's only one way of doing so, as she argues, "I'm not saying everyone should do monogamous pair-bonding for their lives and raise nuclear families. I don't believe that. I do believe that in our personal lives, we end up (…) deeply entwined with other people." (Cullingham, 2019).

All the ideas above are central to most of Rooney's novels, particularly *CWF* —the object of study in this chapter —since it involves diverse dynamics when it comes to love and relationships. Frances and Bobbi, as well as Frances and Nick, and Nick and Melissa —the way the four coexist and entwine, with characters who are either bisexual, lesbian, or open to non-monogamous relations —she creates space for non-normative intimacies (O'Sullivan, 2025). As Frances states towards the end of the novel, "But now I see that nothing consists of two people, or even three. My relationship with you is also produced by my relationship with Melissa, and with Nick, and with your childhood self." (Rooney, 2017, p. 299). Bobbi states at some point that "monogamy was based on a commitment model, which served the needs of men in patrilineal societies by allowing them to pass property to their genetic offspring, traditionally facilitated by sexual entitlement to a wife. Non-monogamy could be based on an alternative model completely." (Rooney, 2017, p. 252). She also states at some point that is totally possible to love multiple people at the same time. As explored by Bollas, "her characters are often marked by a deep ambivalence toward intimacy, reflecting the complicated and

sometimes painful nature of connection in a world that values individualism and self-reliance." (Bollas, 2025, p. 3).

Although sexual intimacy is prioritised by Rooney in her fiction, there are various types of intimacies which are not related to sexual practices. According to Lauren Berlant (2011), those who are intimate with each other, can use mostly body language through signs and gestures, instead of communicating with words. Frances's relationship with Bobbi is an intimate one, not only because they were previously involved both sexually and romantically, but also due to the fact that they share long emails and conversations that result from deeply knowing each other. Their relationship endures the heterosexual desires and phases Frances goes through, reflecting a true connection. They end up writing each other less when Frances starts her affair with Nick, she can no longer engage intimately with Bobbi. Perhaps because she was now involved with someone else, but primarily because the act of purposefully hiding information from a close one is the opposite of being intimate with said person. The intimacy she shares with Nick is different, they are involved sexually and write each other emails as well, but they put a lot of energy in hiding their secret from the rest of the characters, they can't touch each other publicly or even have a proper conversation that wouldn't alarm the others.

The power imbalance of their relationship is obvious in the sense that Nick has the upper hand most of the time, he's the one with a wife, he's wealthy, he's successful, but Frances ends up being the one in control, "when Frances feels rejected by Nick, she thinks more about the power she has lost, than about the love (…) compensating the lack of control and stability in her childhood." (Milchrahm, 2023, p. 109). For example, Frances liked to establish that superiority and control during sex, as she says "sometimes I liked to do that just to feel powerful over him, and afterwards he would say: God I'm sorry, that's so embarrassing. I liked him saying that even more than I liked the sex itself." (Rooney, 2017, p. 75). She tells Nick information that she doesn't tell Bobbi because she's not scared of the way he's going to interpret her, and yet she's afraid of showing her flaws to Bobbi. To exemplify, after being diagnosed with endometriosis, Frances hides that information from everyone, fearful of everyone looking down on her for being a sick person. However, she ends up telling Nick towards the end of the novel,

and she explains “I haven’t told anyone. Just you. I feel like talking about it will make people see me as a sick person.” (Rooney, 2017, p. 317).

Rooney’s sex scenes are entirely calculated, always with the intent of discussing broader topics related to human connections and relationships, or even for plot development. As she says in an interview, “often the crucial changes in the dynamic between two people can happen in the context of a sexual interaction.” Even so, she finds it difficult to write such scenes, not necessarily for their nature, but rather because “my vocabulary becomes very repetitive and narrow in those sections” but repetition is necessary to “create an enclosed sense of intimacy, and sometimes repeating vocabulary can help to create that sense of enclosure and closeness.” (Marchese, 2024). Other than that, and as abovementioned, Rooney’s interest in intimacy derives from her interest in analysing the exchange of power in bed. As Millet puts it, sexual relationships “can scarcely be said to take place in a vacuum, although of itself it appears a biological and physical activity, it is set so deeply within the larger context of human affairs that it serves as a charged microcosm of the variety of attitudes and values to which culture subscribes.” (Millet, 2000, p. 23).

Communication, or the lack of it, seems to be another important element in her writing. Rooney introduces various types of communication, such as emails, instant texts, and calls, all of which help deepen the exploration of communication in her novels, especially *CWF*. This exploration is inevitably connected to intimacy, as the characters can always be in touch with each other, yet still feel abandoned and alienated in society. They use mostly emails, which are an innovative way for the characters to express themselves, more frequently sharing their opinions and philosophies, while also allowing the narrative to maintain a suspenseful nature, “emails and text messages contain key information which trigger further action and keep the novel suspenseful, as the reader awaits a reaction from the recipient of those messages.” (Milchrahm, 2023, p. 102). Although both *CWF* and *NP* feature this very well, it is most noticeable in her third, and more mature novel, *Beautiful World, Where are You* (2021), where the protagonists communicate extensively through email, allowing the characters to express their critical views of the world freely. As noted by Bollas, “these long, intimate missives

allow Rooney to explore larger philosophical and political ideas within the framework of a personal conversation." Bollas continues, "the inclusion of digital communication highlights the intersection of public and private lives, as well as paradoxical combination of distance and closeness in the digital age." (Bollas, 2025, p. 2).

Although communication is often maintained through instant messaging and email, the absence of verbal cues and tone setting allows space for miscommunication and misinterpretation, which can often lead to arguments or unnecessary feelings. This happens rather often between Frances and Nick, since they communicate mainly through instant texts or emails which tend to be short and straightforward, lacking the depth of in-person conversations, as Bollas puts it eloquently "these methods of communication offer immediacy, while also contributing to a sense of emotional isolation, as character struggle to convey the full range of their feelings in short exchanges." (Bollas, 2025, p. 3).

In the following segment, an analysis of the novel will be conducted to identify the most important themes explored by Rooney, as well as the writing style employed to convey those themes. In a second moment, there will be an exploration of the adaptation of the novel to the screen, where it will be analysed in detail, in order to understand how Rooney's writing was translated into a TV series, always with Adaptation Studies in mind, in particularly Linda Hutcheon's idea of an adaptation, which argues that the transit to the screen is much more than the act of it being faithful and respectful, but the act of transforming an already existing story into something else, regardless of it being better or worse (Hutcheon, 2013).

4.2 Money/Power, Intimacy vs. Distance

Conversations With Friends (2017) is set in Dublin and it follows two college students in their early twenties, Frances and Bobbi, as they navigate their life in Post-Celtic Tiger- and economic crash- Ireland. They meet a wealthy couple at one of their spoken poetry readings, Melissa and Nick, which ends up shifting their dynamics. We are told at an early stage that Frances and Bobbi were involved romantically and even though they broke up at some point, they not only maintain an amicable relationship,

but they are also very close friends. Bobbi identifies as a lesbian, while Frances is a bisexual, and even though they are both anti-capitalist and inclined to Marxism, Bobbi comes from a middle-class background, while Frances is the daughter of divorced working-class parents, the father struggling with alcohol and the mother being somewhat absent. Additionally, Frances lives in her uncle's apartment in the Liberties, while working for crumbs at a literary agency, maintaining thus her working-class status.

Historically the city of Dublin is known to be divided into the poor and the rich areas, the northside, which is determined by the Liffey River, is known to be the working-class (poorer) side, while the southside of Dublin is known to be wealthier (O'Toole, 2012). The most important institutions, museums, and other culturally and politically relevant buildings, are placed in the south of the river. Melissa and Nick, for instance, live in a townhouse in the southside. The Liberties, on the other hand, is in the southwest corner of the southside which is also known for its working-class roots.

As mentioned earlier, Sally Rooney's novels can be interpreted with *Bildungsroman* in mind, and in this case *CWF* is at its core a coming-of-age novel, since it follows Frances as she grows into a more mature human, depicting her difficulties and complexities. Noticeably, because she's a woman, and even more so, a bisexual one, Rooney wards away from the original *Bildungsroman,* which was created with a white, cis-het, straight male in mind (Frown, Hardie & Smith, 2020). Although we meet Frances when she's 21 years old, we get to know her adolescent years through flashbacks that explain and contextualise certain plotlines, enhancing the coming-of-age element in the story. Apart from this, and as Bollas points out, "unlike the traditional *Bildungsroman*, Rooney's work often presents characters who are unable to achieve the resolution or self-actualisation typical of the genre. Her protagonists struggle to find stable ground in a world defined by uncertainty, economic inequality and shifting social norms." (Bollas, 2025, p. 1).

Frances's sexual awakening when she notices her attraction to Nick ends up being a central part of her growth throughout the novel, awakening certain feelings and ideas that she hadn't experienced before. Milchrahm argues that contrary to the traditional Irish narratives, where religion is central, in *CWF* the following is substituted

for Communism, as stated, “religion [in *CWF*] has been replaced by the protagonist’s communist ideas as a defence mechanism in a social-political context that has been shaped by the capitalism of the Celtic Tiger and its economic aftermath.” (Milchrahm, 2023, p. 89). Nevertheless, the novel includes discussions about religion, as well as many other topics, since straightforward conversations between friends characterise the story.

Even if it is not explicitly represented, Frances suffers from Catholic guilt and challenges a few religious ideals promoted in Catholic Ireland. For instance, while the Catholic Church is viewed with hostility by the main characters in the first half of the novel, with many discussions about its evil and corrupting tendencies, in the second half, we experience a shift. When diagnosed with endometriosis, Frances finds solace in the church and goes there to pray and reflect and perhaps feel closer to the divine, she says “I’m praying, I thought. I’m actually sitting here praying for God to help me. I was. Please help me, I thought. Please.” (Rooney, 2017, p. 294). Interestingly, while inside the church, Frances becomes suddenly very aware of herself, she gets in tune with her inner self and truth, acknowledging “do I sometimes hurt and harm myself, do I abuse the unearned cultural privilege of whiteness, do I take the labour of others for granted (…) do I have a troubled relationship with my body, yes.” After saying all of this to herself she finally sees it and says that she “felt that I had understood something and the cells of my body seemed to light up like millions of glowing points of contact, and I was aware of something profound.” (Rooney, 2017, p. 295).

While in Ballina, after spending the night at the hospital, Frances starts reading some gospels of the New Testament, she reflects about religion, saying that “I’d hated religion as a child. My mother had taken me to Mass every Sunday until I was fourteen, but she didn’t believe in God and treated Mass as a social ritual.” (Rooney, 2017, p. 174). This passage reflects the idea of the new Catholicism in Ireland, the one that was still very present in its culture, yet most of the population was participating in it out of habit (performative Catholicism) rather than honest faith. As Inglis argues, there was a new epidemic of ‘Cultural Catholics’ (Inglis, 2017).

When stating that the novel is divided in two, it's impossible to overlook the plot development half-way through the narrative, when Bobbi finally finds out about Frances's affair with Nick while in Étables, which leads to them arguing and distancing themselves from each other. This argument is intense enough to divide the narrative into the before Bobbi knows about the affair and after she finds out and how that shifts their relationship. From the very first moment, we as readers understand the importance of Bobbi in Frances´s life, and the fact that she doesn't see herself as an individual, it's no coincidence that the opening words of *CWF* is 'Bobbi and I' (Rooney, 2017, p. 1). Their relationship and Frances's co-dependency, admiration and possibly obsession with Bobbi is central to *CWF*, from the start we get the impression that Frances lacks perception of herself, while being able to perceive Bobbi in a way one usually perceives themselves, "it may be a feeling of inferiority that spurs an admiration- or even jealousy-in Frances; Bobbi holds economic, social as well as cultural capital-the sense of belonging everywhere- all of which Frances lacks." (Utter, 2021, p. 17). As pointed out by Zhou and Huo, "mirrors appear 23 times in the text, implying that Frances is confirming her own image." (Zhou & Huo, 2025, p. 6) at some point she states, "In the mirror I noticed that my hand had started doing the thing again." (Rooney, 2017, p. 179) as if she's not aware of herself, only when she sees her reflection she sees who she is and what her body does out of habit. Later she takes her clothes off to look in the mirror and thinks "for a while I stood there just looking at myself and feeling my repulsion get deeper and deeper, as if I was experimenting to see how much I could feel." (Rooney, 2017, p. 181).

In her own mind she's invisible to most, when in public, Bobbi does all the talking and she believes that she's only able to befriend other people- Nick and Melissa included- through Bobbi's confidence. She practices how to smile, how to talk and how to behave, just so she's likable. When reading the novel, it's complicated for the reader to picture what Frances looks like, since her entire existence revolves around Bobbi and later Nick- she constantly mentions the both of them and cares for the way they look. Her lack of identity mirrors Ireland's sense of alienation following the Celtic Tiger era, after the financial crisis and the subsequent feelings of disconnection.

She is the product of a system that failed, and therefore she is unable to understand her place in society, the same way Irish people felt at the time. A lot of millennials struggled with the same thing. Frances' lack of identity is layered though. As Zhou and Huo put it, "this kind of presence is so real to her that when she accidentally catches sight of her reflection and sees her appearance, she feels a strange, depersonalising shock." (Zhou & Huo, 2025, p. 8). When Melissa asks, right at the beginning, who writes the poems, Frances gives the impression that Bobbi is also a writer, which isn't true. She writes all the poems and Bobbi only participates in the spoken poetry shows. As stated by Helena Utter, "a central part in the self-image she has constructed is the conception of herself as dependent on and inferior to Bobbi." (Utter, 2021, p. 21). Even though the spoken poetry readings were their thing as a duo, and it enhanced the meaning of communication and language in the novel, at some point Frances starts writing prose and that becomes an independent experience, as Utter notes "she takes a creative leap into solo literary writing symbolizing her individualistic self-fulfilment and the finding of her true self." (Utter, 2021, p. 34).

This aimless and numbing feeling gets the worst out of Frances, resulting in self-harm tendencies; as Dizdar puts it, "Frances's mindset could be seen to reflect that of a neoliberal society that supports the idea of self-help and not relying on others. Frances tries to deal with her problems on her own, and rarely asks for anyone's help." (Dizdar, 2023, p. 17). At some point in the novel she states;

> I worried that if I did turn out to have a personality, it would be one of the unkind ones. Did I only worry about this question because as a woman I felt required to put the needs of others before my own? Was 'kindness' just another term for submission in the face of conflict? These were the kind of things I wrote about in my diary as a teenager: as a feminist I have the right not to love anyone. (Rooney, 2017, p. 176).

In addition, Aparicio argues that, "Rooney makes her wonder why otherwise successful well-educated, intelligent young women repeatedly perform self-harm acts, suffer from sadness and loneliness, and accept relationships which leave them emotionally hurt." (Iglesias-Aparicio, 2025, p. 54).

Due to her traumatic family history, she develops these self-harming ways of dealing with the pain she carries, for instance when she finds out about her miscarriage- that wasn't one at all- she purposefully hurts herself; "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." (Rooney, 2017, p. 171). The same happens after she goes to visit her father one night and she is faced with the reality her father lives in, very bleak conditions due to his constant state of drunkenness, she finds an empty house where "the smell was so rancid that it felt physical, like heat or touch. Several half-eaten meals had accumulated around the table and countertops, in various states of decay, surrounded by dirty tissues and empty bottles." (Rooney, 2017, p. 181). The only thing she could think of afterwards was to hurt herself, "I wanted to hurt myself again, in order to feel returned to the safety of my own physical body." (Rooney, 2017, p. 182).

Her helplessness and self-destructive personality eventually gets her into falling in love with Nick, who's not only married, but also a white, wealthy man that embodies everything Frances claims to hate. Her relationship with Nick is doomed to be complex from the start due to their power imbalance, something that is very present in Rooney's writing, her characters "are constantly navigating these power structures, whether they are conscious of them of not" and this imbalance "leaves her characters feeling alienated or disconnected." (Bollas, 2025, p. 2). Rooney explores this dynamic and "by putting the protagonist, who stems from a working-class family and struggles with finances, into the society of south Dublin, [she] creates a contrast which represents a sense of not belonging, which is a central characteristic of the *Bildungsroman*." (Milchrahm, 2023, p. 95).

Zhou and Huo argue that self-harm is a way of Frances dealing with the anxiety and societal pressure that she experiences as a millennial woman in Ireland and that "Frances' attempts to repress or deny her feelings leave her estranged from her physical self." (Zhou & Huo, 2025, p. 12) She continues to harm herself after starting her affair with Nick, and in some cases, it gets progressively worse, meaning that "heterosexual love does not offer salvation for Frances" (Utter, 2021, p. 34).

In fact, Frances deviating from her beliefs is a way of understanding that she is an unreliable narrator. *CWF* is narrated in the first person by Frances herself, and the way the narrative develops illustrates how she manipulates the story. The fact that Rooney also doesn't include speech marks, it blends Frances's thoughts with her dialogue, and it gets difficult to "distinguish between Frances' thoughts and other characters as well as her own utterances, mixing Frances' inside world with the outside world and making the story appear like an endless stream of consciousness, contributing to the distortion of reality." (Milchrahm, 2023, p. 100). This in itself is also an exciting technique used by Rooney, as the fact that this character claims to be anti-capitalism, anti-patriarchy, and the whole system itself becomes contradictory when she falls in love with a man who benefits and profits from that system. When Frances goes to Melissa and Nick's townhouse, she cannot help but feel jealous; the way she describes the house is with such admiration and envy as well. Although she never quite loses track of her core ideals, those things get sidelined as the narrative evolves and she falls deeper in love with Nick, leading to an affair with him. As Dizdar says,

> It's not surprising that, upon meeting Nick, Frances actively forgets her values, principles and morals, and chooses to immerse herself in an affair with him. Just as the Irish 'actively forgot' the issues of their past as the Celtic Tiger brought them hope, Frances leaves behind her principles and indulges in a relationship with Nick as she believes he can offer her the affection and validation she desperately craves and longs for. (Dizdar, 2023, pp. 16-17).

As stated by Zhou and Huo "Melissa is both a friend and a competitor in the novel, the portrayal of Melissa's character provokes Frances' sense of crisis and desire to compete" (Zhou & Huo, 2025, p. 13), which goes against her anti-patriarchal views, she inevitably compares herself to Melissa, although she does the same with Bobbi, it is never in the self-deprecating way or even in a way that makes her believe that Bobbi is inferior to her for certain things. The simple fact that Melissa is not only married to Nick but also highly successful and wealthy unnerves Frances, which contradicts her throughout the novel when she claims she has no desire to pursue a career or a job. As it reads, "I hadn't been kidding with Philip about not wanting a job. I didn't want one. I

had no plans as to my future financial sustainability: I never wanted to earn money for doing anything." (Rooney, 2017, p. 23). In the end, Melissa is the one who confesses that Frances made her feel small at some point. After telling Frances that she is aware of her affair with Nick, Melissa says, "the first time you came to our house you just looked around like: here's something bourgeois and embarrassing and I'm going to destroy it." She continues saying "suddenly I'm looking around my own fucking house, thinking: is this sofa ugly?" (Rooney, 2017, p. 296). In the aftermath, Frances finally expresses her desire to have Melissa's life, to be rich, to be married to Nick and overall, to be successful and have such a house.

At some point in the novel, Frances' unstable father stops sending her money, and she must survive for a month on the small amount she earns at the literary agency, eventually asking for help. As much as Frances hates capitalism and thinking about money, it is inevitable for her to do so since she has been lacking the comfort it brings and cannot, therefore, ignore it and claim it as superficial. Inevitably, it becomes "the source of Frances' low self-esteem and is an important reason for her lack of personal identity." (Zhou & Huo, 2025, p. 16). Her self-loathing ends up being central to *CWF*, and, as Kilroy points out, "previously the church and state have been the apparatus of female repression in Irish fiction, now the women have repressed themselves: they are too guarded to articulate their vulnerabilities." and also "France's feminine awakening is reflected in the two important men around her: her father, Dannie and Nick." (Kilroy, 2017).

Much of Frances' attitude is a reflexion of her father's absence, but also her mother's denial and lack of understanding when it comes to the fact that her daughter is dealing with the consequences of an unhappy marriage. As Frances states at some point, "She [her mother] couldn't understand that I didn't love him. You must love him, she told me when I was sixteen. He's your father." (Rooney, 2017, p. 175). As Aparicio explains, "Frances' mother represents how they [mothers] can reproduce old women's social roles when trying to make their daughters passively accept mistreatment and sacrifice, as they had to do themselves." (Iglesias-Aparicio, 2025, p. 58). Which is why intergenerational trauma is also something that Rooney cares for, the way that she

writes about mothers is somehow very typical in Irish literature, and the way she writes about family dynamics is also very Irish: the fathers are absent or drunks, and the mothers perpetuate old ways of thinking, where women were still embarrassed to get out of toxic and violent marriages, are still embarrassed of getting pregnant outside of the normalities society has determined, among other things. Rooney's mothers, and Frances's mother, accepts violence because that's what she's familiar with and she expects her daughter to endure the same as she did, the mother figures "become the messengers as well as the deliverers of the rules of the father to their daughters or younger women through their internalization of the patriarchal system" (Iglesias-Aparicio, 2025, p. 58). In *CWF*, the most relevant characters are females, and the only two men in the story are Frances' father and Nick, who represent a deviant type of masculinity.

The same happens in *NP* in a way, since Connell struggles to be part of hegemonic masculinity. As Rooney pointed out in an interview, "I feel gender is basically a social system- a set of rules and expectations you basically learn to comply with in childhood, whether you personally feel an affinity with them or not." (Parker, 2018). This idea aligns with the notion that she's not trying to be a feminist by discussing women's issues, but rather because these are genuine issues that people face in society. That said, in *CWF*, Frances struggles with painful periods from the start and is eventually diagnosed with endometriosis, the same condition Rooney herself has, the whole process of her having a false miscarriage and being diagnosed with that illness reflects how sidelined women's health still is in contemporary Ireland, as we see in the novel when Frances gets the letter from the hospital to schedule the ultrasound, "I thought it seemed like a long time to wait, but my mother said that was public health care for you" and also "She told me if it was anything serious they never would have discharged me. I didn't know about that." (Rooney, 2017, p. 175). Frances does most of the research about endometriosis herself, since the doctors did not bother explaining it to her at all. At the time Rooney wrote *CWF* abortion was not legal, only becoming so the year after- in 2018- by national referendum, as said by Frances in the novel "So what? The pregnancy was already over,

and I didn't need to consider things like Irish constitutional law, the right to travel, my current bank balance, and so on." (Rooney, 2017, p. 169).

As Bollas argues,

> Rooney's novels also engage with the evolution of feminism and its discontents in the 21st century. Ireland's historical struggle with conservative values, particularly concerning the catholic church's influence on issues like sexuality, abortion, and women's rights, serves as an implicit backdrop to her exploration of modern feminism. (Bollas, 2025, p. 1).

The same goes for consent or the fact that women in Rooney's novels suffer from sexual assault at some point. As noted, "In the culture of supposed consent, young women find themselves involved in relationships or sexual practices they do not desire, or violent practices they try to believe they are accepting of their free will." (Iglesias-Aparicio, 2025, p. 60). As we see in the novel, after matching with a man on a dating app, Rossa, and meeting him for a drink, Frances went over to his house, and while they were having sex she went rigid, as a consequence of being uncomfortable, she thinks to herself "I let myself become rigid and silent, waiting for Rossa to notice my rigidity and stop what he was doing, but he didn't. I considered asking him to stop, but the idea that he might ignore me felt more serious than the situation needed to be." (Rooney, 2017, p. 209). Afterwards, as a consequence of feeling inferior, disgusted and saddened, Frances self-harms herself once again, "I am normal, I thought. I have a body like everyone else. Then I scratched my arm open until it bled, just a faint spot of blood, widening into a droplet." (Rooney, 2017, p. 209). Aparicio explains this behaviour stating that "decades ago, girls were taken from their families and incarcerated in a Magdalene Laundry for socially unaccepted sexual behaviour, even for having been the victims of incest and rape"; even though this condition changed, it was only so slightly, "nowadays independent girls will be the ones to punish themselves for suffering a violent and non-pleasurable sexual encounter." (Iglesias-Aparicio, 2025, p. 60).

At some point, Frances and Nick were lying in bed, and Frances asked, "Would you ever hit me? I mean if I asked you to." To which Nick responds, he wouldn't, "I don't

think I want to do that." (Rooney, 2017, p. 215). After a fight with him, she chews the inside of her cheek on the bus until it bled, in hopes of it bringing her solace.

4.3 "If you just want to replicate the novel exactly, beat for beat, why bother?"

Rooney's debut novel was adapted into a TV series. It was released in mid-2022, two years after the first adaptation, which was based on her second novel*, NP* (2018). The next chapter concerns that novel and its respective adaptation, and as we will see, *NP* managed to surpass everyone's expectations, becoming a wild phenomenon in both the literary and television worlds. Although *NP* was produced and released first, Ed Guiney, from Element Pictures, shared that they first secured the rights to adapt *CWF*, but due to some technicalities- such as Lenny's inability to see it adapted as a feature film- it was postponed. As a consequence of *NP's* worldwide success, Abrahamson's interest in adapting *CWF* resurfaced.

CWF (2022) is directed by Lenny Abrahamson and Leanne Welham, written by Alice Birch, Mark O'Halloran, Meadhbh McHugh and Susan Soon He Stanton. It consists of twelve half-hour episodes. Contrary to *NP*, Sally Rooney was not involved in the writing process of the adaptation, mostly because she was working on her new novel *Beautiful World, Where are You* released in September of 2021, as Lenny stated for Script Magazine. Apart from that, as Alison Oliver, who plays Frances in the adaptation, tells the New York Times, after *NP*, Rooney seemed to trust the team entirely to adapt her first story to the screen. She still participated in a way, by reading early scripts and helping with the casting process, as it was relevant for her to have the perfect actors portraying the characters she had envisioned in her own mind. In an interview with David Marchese, for the *New York Times*, following the publication of her new book *Intermezzo* (2024), Rooney confessed that although the experience of adapting *NP* had been fulfilling in many ways she still felt "that world was not where I belonged. I felt like, OK, now I know that my books are where I belong, and that's all that I want to be doing." (Marchese, 2024). When asked if she was interested in adapting her third novel, Rooney said that "No. So far I have decided not to accept any offers to option the rights for that

book", because she felt that "it was time to take a break from that and let the book be its own thing for a while." (Marchese, 2024).

Many have argued that Sally Rooney's absence in *CWF* led to its relatively smaller fandom. The reviews of the adaptation were mixed in between extremes, with *The Telegraph* giving it five stars, while *The Independent* and *The Washington Post* gave it two stars, saying things like "at least it's nice to look at" (Kang, 2022). It is essential not to overlook the fact that, due to *NP* being released prior to *CWF*, and mostly because it was done by the same team, most critics compare both, never allowing this adaptation to exist as its own entity. Linda Hutcheon argues that there's a double awareness when watching an adaptation, meaning that if the audience has experienced the primary text beforehand, they will be thinking about it while facing the transit to the screen (Hutcheon, 2013). Interestingly, with *CWF*, other than the book, the audience- who had been conquered with *NP* before- were also aware of the other adaptation, constantly comparing both, and that is noticeable when reading reviews of critics.

To illustrate, *The Irish Times* stated that "*Conversations With Friends* is dramatically superior to *Normal People*" (Power, 2022), Framke, from *Variety*, stated that "*Conversations With Friends* follows the *Normal People* pattern so closely that it often feels more like a faded impression rather than its own series." (Framke, 2022). Serena Irani stated that "while the success of Hulu's adaptation of *'Normal People'* set the bar high, bringing Rooney's source material to life, this second television venture remains aesthetically on par with its predecessor" (Irani, 2022). Very rarely, *CWF's* antecedent is not mentioned in reviews and analysis, many even think that it can be seen as a sequel, even though the stories are distinctively distant. Hilton states that it "revisits the formula so faithfully that even the absence of any narrative continuity cannot prevent this feeling like a sequel." (Hilton, 2022). In fact, these two novels are not that far apart from each other. Rooney's debut was released in May 2017, and *NP* was released August 2018, even though there is a common ground in the narrative, mostly due to Rooney's stylistic choices and politics, the two can exist on their own.

If we were to mention *NP's* adaptation to discuss *CWF*, it would be because the success of the first allowed the team to feel comfortable exploring the dynamics of

Frances, Melissa, Bobbi, and Nick in a realistic way that portrayed a connection that is not so profitable or commercial. As Lenny states for *The Hollywood Reporter*, "if we'd done it first, we might have felt a fear, or had that little voice that says, you need to speed it up and make it sexier and glossier and bigger. That voice would've been harder to resist if we'd done *Conversations* first, and it benefits from being the second of the two adaptations." (Rankin, 2022).

4.3.1 Abrahamson: The in-between

Before diving into what Abrahamson has shared regarding the process of adapting *CWF*, it is relevant to this research to understand his perspective, not only because he directed both adaptations of Sally Rooney's novels, but also because he is one of Ireland's most prominent cinematographers. Linda Hutcheon is a firm believer that when studying adaptation, one should always consider the adapter's personal, cultural, historical reasons for selecting a certain work to bring to another medium (Hutcheon, 2004, p. 1). Although he doesn't come entirely from an established Irish cinematography tradition, a lot can be said about how he is able to tell stories. They are mostly centered on ordinary people in Ireland, with no focus on plot, but rather character-driven depictions of mostly, yet not exclusively, Irish experiences. Though during the 1980s Irish cinematographers struggled to create their artistic vision of the world, since they were beholden to British influence, which hindered the process of expanding their own style, Abrahamson doesn't consider this phenomenon to be central in his artistic vision. He believes in an international world, with a multiplicity of different lives and realities, as stated by Monahan: "Abrahamson's work stands in various ways both inside and beyond the political realities of Ireland and the indigenous cultural and industrial cinematic developments at the time of each film's production." (Monahan, 2018, p. 17).

Many consider Abrahamson's work non-mainstream because he doesn't prioritise the plot- instead, he relies on the characters and how they act within the narrative. As Monahan puts it, in the Irish director's cinematic work "individuals are defined by virtue of states of mind, belief systems and through discussions that reveal

their depth, and from these qualities, narrative situations and plot developments are set to unfold." (Monahan, 2018, p. 23). This non-mainstream approach, as described by Mohanan, is present in both adaptations of Rooney's work.

With these ideas in mind, it becomes easier to understand why Abrahamson was drawn to Rooney's novels and why he instantly connected with the narrative, wanting to bring those characters and their lives to the screen. His Irishness should not be overlooked, though. As he states,

> I remember thinking to myself: here's a novel written by a very perceptive Irish woman, about a love affair happening in small-town Ireland, and there isn't a priest to be seen. And there isn't a bit of guilt to be found. (…) I was really excited. I remember thinking: that's really interesting- to be able to tell a story about contemporary Ireland and for a big audience that doesn't find itself mired in that stuff. (Clarke, 2022).

Regardless of his impression of *CWF*, the director has indicated that there are a few challenges when adapting, because "these are two very different ways of telling a story". To him, the relationship and communication with the writer transforms the process, he thinks that there should be openness, because the story needs to make sense to the adapter, otherwise "if the director doesn't understand it, or it doesn't chime for the director, it's not going to be something that they can do beautifully on screen." (Dean, 2022).

When it comes to numbers, the *Irish Mirror Online* writes that "an average of 156,000 people tuned in to watch the debut of *Conversations With Friends*- but 30,000 people switched off watching the second episode." (Mallon, 2022). The numbers were significantly less than the prior work; however, we'll look closely at the adaptation moving forward, not trying to understand why it wasn't as popular, but to understand that, regardless of the outcome, Abrahamson, along with his team, successfully brought it into another medium.

4.3.2 "Adaptations are not simply repetition; there is always change": The transit

The series begins with Frances (Alison Oliver) and Bobbi (Sasha Lane) sitting outside Trinity College's Berkeley Library, practising their poems for spoken word night. We are immediately introduced to them as a pair, echoing the novel's memorable opening words. Dublin is established as the setting, although the series was mainly filmed in Belfast, with Frances walking around the city and making her way home. Her awkward personality is evident as we see her first interaction with her housemate, the first person she speaks to apart from Bobbi. Later, they meet Melissa (Jemima Kirke) after their poetry performance, and we are introduced to Bobbi's charismatic, bold personality as she chats with Melissa and asks for her phone number. While in the book they go to Monkstown with Melissa, in the adaptation we don't see Nick (Joe Alwyn) in the first ten minutes, and his introduction is different. As Frances searches online for Melissa's interviews, she comes across a picture of Nick Conway, to whom she is immediately attracted. The adaptation focuses from the very beginning on a physical rather than an intellectual attraction. Melissa's mention of the sea early in their conversation immediately indicates her social and economic background, due to the geography of the Irish Sea (South Coast Dublin), the viewer quickly recognises this difference. Later, after dinner, there is a shot where Frances and Nick sit inside, while Melissa and Bobbi sit outside. This is the moment when their dynamic as a group shifts, giving us a glimpse of what is to come.

This is what the first 10 minutes of *CWF* gives us, Lenny Abrahamson has said that they are usually the most important ones, because "everyone in the streaming space is afraid that people will only give something 10 minutes and that if they don't love it, there are 50 other shows they've been meaning to watch"; apart from Abrahamson's nature of slow burn and bringing characters slowly to life, he confesses that they "did think really hard about those first 10 minutes on both shows" (Rankin, 2022).

The adaptation of *CWF* will be considered in light of Linda Hutcheon's theoretical work. Instead of focusing on its success or failure, faithfulness or unfaithfulness, we will examine it as its own creation, its own entity. As she puts it, adaptations are repetitions with variations, "this means not only that change is inevitable but that there will also be

multiple possible causes of change in the process of adapting made by the demands of form, individual adapter, the particular audience, and now the contexts of reception and creation" (Hutcheon, 2013, p. 142). Sally Rooney herself has expressed this same opinion in an interview for *The Hollywood Reporter*, stating that "the techniques that the novel uses are not available to the show, but also because if you just want to replicate the novel exactly, beat for beat, why bother? You already have the novel, right? What's the point? So it was about trying to do this in a new way." (Bentley, 2020). What remains relevant is studying how this story was reshaped, remodelled for the screen, what was prioritised, what was marginalised, and what was softened. This analysis aims to examine exactly that.

As mentioned earlier, *CWF* relies on Frances's point of view; everything we are told in the novel comes from her perspective, including what the other characters do and say in relation to her. Most of it relies on stream-of-consciousness-like writing, and the primary means of communication is emails, with occasional instant messaging and calls. In the adaptation, Rooney's writing had to be adjusted to the screen; the internal monologues were replaced with close-up shots of Alison Oliver's static, mellow expressions, as well as with long, silent shots. Emails were replaced with real conversations, in the hope of humanising the characters. When kept, there would be a shot of the computer screen, as well as a voice-over of the person sending them. Calls would be one-sided, but when the topic becomes more profound, we see the other person, such as in Frances and Melissa's conversation about the affair. Primarily, in episode twelve, when Frances is most vulnerable with Nick, sharing her endometriosis, we see a shot of Nick's expression after a few minutes of conversation, which appears saddened by what the protagonist is sharing. This humanises him as a character who was very distant and numb in the novel. Shots of Frances walking around the city alone, taking public transportation, reflect her introspective and drifting thoughts.

The soundtrack adds a layer of meaning to both the series and the story. Sally Rooney has revealed that music is essential to her writing process: "when I write books (…) I make playlists for my characters." She was "acutely aware (…) that music has a very strong emotional power to inflect the tone and feeling of a theme."(Bentley, 2020).

Similarly, Hutcheon argues that expanding beyond the visual medium is important because “music offers aural ‘equivalents’ for characters' emotions and, in turn, provokes affective responses in the audience; sound, in general, can enhance, reinforce, or even contradict the visual and verbal aspects.” (Hutcheon, 2013, p. 23). Sidelines by singer-songwriter Phoebe Bridgers deserves a mention since it was the only song produced especially for the series. In the lyrics, we find a narrator that feels isolated and deeply detached from their own self, she sings “watched the world from the sidelines/ had nothing to prove/ ‘til you came into my life/ gave me something to lose.” (Bridgers, 2022). The song deeply resembles Frances’s personality and her co-dependency to Nick. These ideas resonate with Hutcheon’s argument that “film is not only a visual medium: it uses music, and sound, and it also uses words- spoken words within the dramatic situation, words overheard on the street, on television, but also voice-over words, spoken by narrating figure.” (Hutcheon, 2007, p. 6).

As Abrahamson noted, when characters are on screen, they need to be humanised, which is why there are a few changes when it comes to the other protagonists, such as Melissa, Bobbi, and Nick. They are no longer voices in Frances’s head. To exemplify, Bobbi is not as codependent on Frances in the series, she has friends who she goes out with, she meets new people outside of Frances’s knowledge, in episode eight she brings a girl home with her, while she’s already living with Frances, demonstrating that her own life keeps moving, even if the narrative focuses on what happens with the protagonist. In the same way, Bobbi does not tell Frances about her parents' divorce immediately, and does not express how much distress that is causing her until she breaks down and cries in front of Frances outside a pub. Although their dynamic is downplayed in the adaptation, Frances’s nurturing love for Bobbi is expressed through body language; there are plenty of scenes of them smiling together, and the contrast with Frances alone in public, on public transport or roaming the streets of Dublin, effectively conveys that feeling of alienation and isolation.

Their intimate scene in the last episode is dramatically different from the ones we’ve seen of Frances and Nick; her facial expressions are seemingly more relaxed and satisfied. Abrahamson has shared that “when Frances and Bobbi got back together, we

wanted it to feel like home. There´s loads of laughter and they're talking to each other." he continues ", Bobbi is Frances' closest person and will always be that, so the lovemaking had to feel distinct from that of Nick." (Rankin, 2022). The series focuses on voice-overs of both reading the emails they send each other. Although they do not have the same depth as the book, it's still highlighted that they maintain various forms of communication, which creates layers to their relationship. There is a clear prioritisation of Bobbi's relevance towards the end of the series, creating a more hopeful ending to the narrative, one where Frances is equally romantically linked to Bobbi and Nick. Apart from this, Frances shows a lot more signs of agony when she's arguing with Bobbi; her body language implies how much Bobbi's distance affects her. This is visible when Bobbi gets closer to Melissa, when Bobbi is upset about Frances's hiding the affair with Nick, as well as when Bobbi decides to move after finding out about the story Frances wrote and published about her. Alison Oliver does an impeccable impression of Frances's awkwardness, with close-mouthed and bland facial expressions.

Although Frances's bisexuality gets marginalised by her heterosexual desires in the series, we get to see Bobbi as a Black American lesbian woman, and as Clarke argues, "Lane's Americanness emphasises the distance between Bobbi and Frances. We are not quite so dazzled by the trans-Atlantic self-confidence as we once were, but we do, perhaps, still expect any U.S visitor to be the least inhibited person in the room." (Clarke, 2022). Regardless, Abrahamson has shared that he decided not to limit himself to Irish actors, since there are so many great ones around the world. Melissa is less of an enemy in the series, her constant presence in the room makes it difficult for the viewer not to sympathise with her. To enhance Frances's jealousy and dislike towards Melissa, instead of her being a photographer and journalist, she is instead an essayist, which turns her into Frances's biggest opponent. She gets recognition from Melissa, a writer herself, and she asks Frances's permission to use her quotes in one of her books. Later, Frances gets in contact with Melissa's editor, who only knows about her talent because of how highly Melissa spoke of her. These changes intensify the power imbalance between the two, but at the same time, they do not victimise Frances as much, a characteristic of the novel that allows us to see what happens through her eyes. In episode ten, when Melissa

reaches out to Frances after discovering the affair, their conversation takes place in person at the townhouse, whereas in the book, Melissa sends a lengthy email to Frances. Although this could be altered due to technicalities, it's also a very interesting way of forcing Frances to physically confront her opponent, and we get to see how this information affects both of them through their body language.

When it comes to Nick, the dynamics are changed dramatically. For one, Frances and Nick's relationship is more physical in the series; it's much more direct when it comes to their attraction to each other, and there is no buildup of tension rising from their email exchange. This might be a narrative strategy to capture the viewer's interest in their romance. Mainly because after they start the affair, the episodes consistently end in cliffhangers, inviting the viewers to stay. Nick's character is also reshaped in the series, he presents himself as a more emotionally available and mature person, and even though we still see many disagreements and miscommunication between the couple on screen, they seem more prepared and eager to resolve their issues. Their intimate scenes are frequent throughout the twelve episodes, and that's how Rooney's interest in intimacy is presented on screen, through body language and lovemaking scenes. In order to portray the bedroom dynamic, Abrahamson explains that an intimacy coordinator was necessary; their mission is to be "the person who works with the director and actors on filming sex scenes, making sure that the actor's wellbeing is a priority." (Barry, 2022). These scenes are usually shot with precision, featuring numerous close-ups and extended silences to capture the pleasure and intimacy shared between the two people. There is a priority in presenting it in a simple yet claustrophobic manner, as if the viewer is watching them from up close.

Additionally, and as Hutcheon reminds us, "because adaptation is a form of repetition without replication, change is inevitable, even without any conscious updating or alteration of setting. And with change come corresponding modifications in the political valence and even the meaning of stories." (Hutcheon, 2013, p. xviii). Apart from all those reinterpretations in the series, it's also relevant to briefly discuss the themes that were marginalised in the adaptation, and what was prioritised. Frances' self-harm is diminished considerably, there is only one scene where it is implied that she

hurts herself, which is in episode eleven. Even though there is the absence of these small moments of self-destructiveness, it's evident, for the most part, through Frances's body language that she has a complex relationship with herself, through her eating habits in which we see a clear negligence, she consumes herself with anxiety and uncertainty instead. The hospital scenes, with a cold colour palette, enhance her sickness, including the mirror scene of her looking at her own reflection and realising then that she was sick[4]. Other than Frances's self-neglect, her political visions and opinions are also not a priority to her character, apart from some lines that were kept maintaining the power imbalance of her character with, for example, Nick and Melissa, it is not as obvious as it is in the novel, where she talks about money constantly. In the series, she also refrains from borrowing money from Nick, which proves to be a layered moment in the novel; instead, their dynamic is shaped by the inconsistency of their affair and the emotional turmoil it causes in Frances. The religious aspect, which is linked to Irishness, is entirely dismissed in the series; instead, we have shots of the Irish countryside, Irish pubs, Irish sea and primarily Dublin. We get a glimpse of the multicultural Ireland, with foreign restaurants in the background of multiple shots, as well as a diverse set of characters and figurines on both sides. All of them together, plus her father's drunkenness and her mother's cold and distant personality, turn the series inevitably Irish.

Lastly, the holiday location, which is in southern France in the novel, changes to Croatia in the adaptation. According to the team, the change was mainly due to technical reasons, as *CWF* was recorded during the COVID-19 pandemic, and travel restrictions were in place. However, Abrahamson also implied that the change of scenery was intended from the start. It captured the most idyllic and beautiful shots in Croatia, where the dramatic plot unfolds, surrounded by colourful, bright images of the four protagonists abroad, which highly contrast with the reality of their lives in Dublin.

To conclude, Sally Rooney's infamous open ending was kept in the adaptation, Abrahamson explained that "the novel had an iconic ending, and we all felt we must keep it but also give it a nuance." (Rankin, 2022). In the final moments, Frances says the

[4] Figure number 2.

same line as in the novel “Come and get me”, but instead of the gloomy, uncertain tone, we get a hopeful one in the adaptation, leaving the rest of the narrative entirely to the viewer’s imagination.

4.4 Final considerations: eccentric repetition or sameness?

The never-ending discourse about this adaptation reveals itself to be limited and counterproductive when the most important thing reviewers, critics, and audiences take from this adaptation is that it “failed” to be as good as *NP’s* adaptation, as well as the novel. The adaptation of *CWF* is much more than a failed attempt, as many have argued; it is the reimagining of a story that already exists in the novel medium but was never reinterpreted for the screen. When thinking clearly about the discussion about *CWF* vs *NP*, it sounds small and irrelevant; it’s not until another adaptation of *CWF* resurfaces that there is a level of comparison, and even then, both of them are allowed to coexist in that medium. As Linda Hutcheon puts it, “an adaptation is not vampiric: it does not draw the life-blood from its source and leave it dying or dead, nor is it paler than the adapted work. It may, on the contrary, keep that prior work alive, giving it an afterlife it would never have had otherwise.” (Hutcheon, 2013, p. 176).

In this chapter, we analysed what makes *CWF*’s narrative unique and timeless, and with that material, we then looked at the adaptation with an open-minded perspective, in hopes of understanding the dynamics of its production. The context in which *CWF* fits differs from that of *NP*, which was released during a lockdown when people eagerly sought positive and heartwarming stories. Perhaps it was the timing that was off, or the fact that *CWF* deviates from your typical romantic plot. Either way, despite the reception, Lenny Abrahamson was able to capture complex characters in a foreign medium to them; Frances and Bobbi came to life, and their story was told with a unique variation.

Figures:



Figure 1: *Conversations With Friends* (2022).



Figure 2: *Conversations With Friends* (2022).

5. Normal People

5.1. "Sally Rooney is doing something new, and I find her uncomfortably familiar."

In August 2018, the year after *CWF* was released, Sally Rooney published her second novel, *Normal People*. This book cemented her position as one of the most influential contemporary Irish writers, thanks to its swift success and loyal fandom. Just like *CWF*, *NP* was nominated for various awards in 2018, winning the *Costa Book Award*, *Irish Book Award*, and *Waterstones Book of the Year*, while also being longlisted for the *Man Booker Prize*; however, Anna Burns's Milkman (2018) ultimately won that prize instead. The book was overwhelmingly acclaimed, and only one year after articles named "*The cult of Sally Rooney*" (2019) started to appear, resulting from said positive reception. In that article, Grady points out that *NP* "has sold just under 64,000 units in hardcover in the US in the four months it's been out" (Grady). *CWF* had sold around 78,000 copies of the book in hardcover and paperback since its release at that point. Evidently, and as Grady states, these are not groundbreaking numbers never seen before; however, as she puts it, "for literary fiction, a genre in which 25,000 units sold can count as sensational, Rooney's sales are more than a sensation" (Grady, 2019).

In fact, the reception was such that it gained its own popular movement in social media, with celebrities showing off their copies of the novel and as stated in the article "if you read Sally Rooney, the thinking seems to go, you're smart, but you're also fun" (Grady, 2019). This way of thinking will align later on with the online phenomena of young women picking up reading as a hobby in consequence of the 2020 lockdown due to the Covid-19 virus. This discourse is relevant to this study because *NP*'s adaptation popularity was a result of numerous factors, one of which was the political and social state of the world in 2020, the year the adaptation was released. Nevertheless, it's equally relevant to demonstrate that the novel was already a phenomenon in the literary world, despite the idea that the adaptation was the sole reason for its status and consequent success. However, as it will be discussed later, Rooney's second novel did

not exist on its own for an extended period, since a year and a half later, in April 2020, the adaptation of *NP* was released and widely praised.

NP follows the same dynamics and writing techniques as the previous novel; however, instead of the first-person, Rooney introduces the third-person narrative, which allows the reader to navigate between the minds of both protagonists. As she explains for Esquire (2019), "if I had chosen to tell the story simply from either one of their perspectives, I don't think it would have had the same interest for me" and because Rooney tends to write about flawed characters she felt that she "needed to be with both of them to understand- to sympathize and to be there with him even when he was doing bad things, and also to be with her." (Westenfeld, 2019). Indeed, suppose it weren't for this dual perspective of the characters, there would be room for misunderstandings on the readers´ part. Rooney is interested in exploring what makes us human, and by revealing these flaws, she is not only writing for a wider audience that can relate to it. In that case, she is also welcoming in fiction people who are painfully mundane and still worthy of being written about. As mentioned in the last chapter, Rooney's writing initially appears simple, but the depth of her characters and their presence in society, which is inevitably a society she herself inhabits, creates a web of complexities unique to them.

While *NP* might seem just another love story in contemporary fiction, it opens doors to various discussions about gender, class, love, violence, mental health and communication. Rooney was able to write a story that resonated with both Irish and non-Irish millennials, and it also speaks to younger generations that are still inevitably suffering from the consequences of the economic crisis she wrote about a decade ago. In an interview for *Nylon* (2019), Rooney disagrees with such statement, when people directly mention that she is a representative of a whole generation, she argues that it scares her because "I didn't seek out to achieve that, and I know I didn't achieve that, so that can be a bit weird for me because I know that what I'm writing about is a very small slice of life, a very small section of Irish society." (Iversen, 2019). However, the public response and the impact this novel, and frankly all the others, say otherwise. When it comes down to understanding why Rooney's novels were so well received by

the public, a multilayered answer seems to be wise, yet Caoimhe Higgins argues that it relies on her portrayal of intimacy:

> Culture saturated by social media, where group chats and facetime calls have replaced real in person conversation or dating atmosphere that depends on swipes and dms, each of which leads to casual sex far more than a committed relationship, perhaps Connell and Marianne give their reader a level of intimacy to hope for. (Huggins, 2025, p. 192).

Paige Reynolds, though, argues that "the popularity of *Normal People* may derive in part from its open ending, which encourages readers to interpret the novel as a popular romance. But the open ending of *Normal People* offers more than simply an invitation to imagine *Normal People* 2" (Reynolds, 2023, p. 248). Both are plausible, but Marianne and Connell's connection does not conform to the hopeless romantic trope often seen in contemporary romances. It is a story of two people bonding emotionally, intellectually, and romantically, and being unable to let go of each other because they lack what they share together with everyone else in their lives. "I'm never going to feel the same way for someone else" (Rooney, 2020, p. 272). Rooney's choice to write an open ending allows them space to grow as individuals, and it would be unrealistic to think that at such a young age these two would settle for anything, especially in such bleak and turbulent economic times. Their shared memories are endless, and it would be unreasonable to expect them to end after the hardships. As Sally Rooney shares in *Nylon*,

> I was grappling with this ending for a long time (…) And I found that when I did it, it worked better than the more conventional ending I had imagined at first, because I don't think it forecloses on the idea that there's something waiting for them. They're not, like, out of each other's lives permanently, and I think it's pretty clear they'll be in each other's lives in one way or another. But also leaving in the freedom—because they're only 21 or 22—leaving the freedom to just go and live all their lives and still have one another in some way. But that's a more open, liberating ending for them and in a way a happier ending for them, even though it had pain in it as well, I think. (Iversen, 2019).

NP follows the story of two teenagers, Marianne Sheridan and Connell Waldron, from their adolescence into their 20s, and their unstable, yet profound romantic connection. The novel begins in Carricklea, a fictional town in Northwest Ireland, County of Sligo and follows them as they move to Dublin to enrol at Trinity College Dublin. Although a section of the novel is set outside Dublin, contrary to *CWF*, it leans more towards the Campus Novel style, and the university setting seems more relevant. Rooney has stated that "in both the books, the campus setting predominates- to some extent more so in *Normal People*. I think it's probably the limitation of my own imaginary world, it's that I couldn't reach that much farther than the world that I knew." (Iversen, 2019). As stated above, the story is told from both Marianne and Connell's perspectives on the page, allowing Rooney to explore gender more broadly, and as will be expanded later, to explore masculinity in the context of post-economic crash Ireland.

5.2. "Marianne answers the door when Connell rings the bell": close reading

NP begins in the year 2011, three years after the beginning of the severe economic crisis that devastated several European countries. The social context of the time serves as a backdrop to the protagonists' lives, but it holds a central position in the storyline. Not only because Rooney is interested in the dynamics of power imbalance, class, and money, but also because it was the reality she herself was imprisoned in. She has stated that her books might be entirely fictional; however, they are always based on opinions she has of the world, as well as her own personal experiences. After all, she was a Trinity College student herself. In an interview for the *Louisiana Channel*, Rooney said that she "didn't have any other life [she] could write about" (2021). In 2019, the author said that she "tend[s] to write characters who share [her] way of seeing" and she continues: "that's just the principle with me- I always have to be there with them, to not insist on the distance between them and me." (Westenfeld, 2019).

Just like *CWF*, *NP* also follows the *Bildungsroman* pattern, even though its traditional morphology has been altered to fit contemporary purposes. As Barros-del Río writes, "in the Irish postcolonial context, the Bildung form emerged as a discourse

of resistance where the individual is unable to find his place in nationalist Catholic Ireland, as Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) epitomises" (Barros-del Río, 2022a, p. 178). The novel's irregular timeline does not mirror the typical *Bildung* coming-of-age narrative that follows the protagonist throughout the years, instead *NP* goes from five minutes later to six months later and back to the past, "this serves to underline the irregular rhythm of the storyline" and "the present tense dominates the narrative in order to emphasize the immediacy and temporariness of the course of events". The characters are in a liminal space, as Barros-del Río puts it, "a state of in-between-ness and ambiguity" (p. 178). The physical journey of the *Bildung* is not found in *NP*, even though the plot begins in Carricklea and then it moves to Dublin, "the novel surpasses physical borders and explores a more universal pattern of youth emancipation in contemporary capitalist societies" (p. 180), justifying then why so many millennials relate to Rooney's writing. Nonetheless, and as Barros-del Río claims, "her novels still cling to some canonical topics of Irish fiction, in particular questions regarding identity formation, [but they also] clearly divert from other typically Irish issues such as nationalism and the catholic church." (p.178).

Effectively, *CWF* does not deal with religious trauma in the canonical sense. Still, it does address religion interestingly, as analysed in the former chapter; however, comparatively, *NP* does not employ the same approach. We can still see how religion is tangled with the Irish reality when we see, for example, Marianne still going to her father's anniversary Mass. She makes sure to express that she's not going willingly, but because her mother had insisted. The same happens when the characters gather for Rob's funeral. However, religion does not appear as an oppressive institution; instead, capitalism does. "The Marxist ideas and the absence of religion contribute to the formation of a contemporary Irish *bildungsroman* which adheres to the changed socio-political context" (Milchrahm, 2021, p. 63). In any case, and as Iglesias-Aparício argues,

> Her female characters are intelligent, well-educated, independent urbanite women. They live alone in Dublin, they are college students or post-graduates, enjoy a rich cultural life and present themselves as non-religious, even if most of them went to catholic sex-segregated schools and attended religious ceremonies

such as weddings and funerals just out of social duty. (Iglesias-Aparício, 2025, p. 55).

In *Damaged Women*, Alicia Muro explains how the complexities faced by the Irish are addressed differently in contemporary works, specifically when it comes to trauma, which used to be collective and now tends to be more individual. *NP* is an example of that, where both characters are multilayered and traumatised by structures that existed long before them; in fact, Marianne and Connell's "love story is based on shame and silence" (Muro, 2023, p. 107). Marianne's trauma can be seen through her masochistic tendencies and her dislike for herself, things that can be traced back to her mother's unwillingness to stop the violence they both suffer from Alan, Marianne's brother. Even though her father died when she was thirteen, we are told that her mother suffered at his hands, "my dad used to hit my mum, she says." (Rooney, 2020, p. 45). As Muro explains, "Marianne's reluctance of mentioning him might indicate as such" (Muro, 2023, p. 107), silence is a form of oppression and cooperation, her mother's silence allows Alan to be both physically and psychologically violent towards Marianne. In the scene when she is telling Connell that the "last time I was home my brother told me I should kill myself", he asks her: "would you not tell your mother if he talked to you like that?" and Marianne says "she was there" (Rooney, 2020, pp. 187-188), exemplifying her mother's complicity. Marianne blames herself for this abuse, in a passage from the novel she states: "Maybe I want to be treated badly, she says. Sometimes I think I deserve bad things because I'm a bad person" (Rooney, 2020, p. 138). As Darling writes, "Marianne not wanting to admit her brother's abuse because that would make her a damaged person, serves as an example of how systemic abuse such as violence is internalised as personal failure under neoliberalism." (Darling, 2023, p. 34). This violence escalates when her brother hits her face with a door after forcing it to open, trying to get to Marianne after yet another pointless argument. She notices how much her nose is bleeding and starts to lose her senses due to the shock of the door hitting her, despite it all her brother says, "are you going to blame me for that now?" (Rooney, 2020, p. 247).

Similarly, Connell also "imposes secrecy on his relationship with Marianne and, for years, cannot dispel the notion that his attraction to her endangers his desire to be

a normal, well-adjusted person." (Carregal-Romero, 2023, p. 224). Marianne uses her body to escape from her subaltern position in high school and ends up choosing violent and wealthy partners while in university (Barros-Del Rio, 2022a). She is representative of her own generation of women who are struggling to find common ground in a bleak sociopolitical reality, she "becomes the epitome of the characteristics of the recessionary Irish identity defined by Free and Scully as 'trauma, guilt and shame' while at the same time being the representation of the new era of women's liberation." (Yağcı, 2025, p. 39).

At the same time, she is a victim of sexual assault, a man that shows up at the raffle "moves his hand down from her shoulder and squeezes the flesh of her right breast, in front of everyone." (Rooney, 2020, p. 42). Even though young Irish women have more control over their bodies and less systemic punishments for their sex lives, they are still victims of abuse and oppressed by occurrences such as assault. "Unlike (…) mid-century Irish writers, the masochistic underlay of this fiction functions less as a corollary to patriarchy and more as its disturbing outcrop." (Cameron, 2020, p. 426). When reading Rooney's fiction it is inevitable to think about how much women's conditions have changed, and yet how traumatised they continue to be, when looking at Marianne: " it is no surprise that contemporary Irish fiction should heavily revolve around the theme of the abused child and the resulting malign youth, as Ireland has a longstanding history of maltreating and neglecting children in institutions." (Milchrahm, 2021, p. 65).

Throughout the novel Marianne is referred as a mentally unwell person, her brother is constantly insulting and degrading her, Peggy says that "you should consider seeing a therapist or something" (Rooney, 2020, p. 199), Jamie, after causing a scene in the Italian villa says that Marianne is "fucking mental case" and "you need help" (Rooney, 2020, p.185), Rachel says also at some point that she's mentally deranged. By constantly humiliating her, these characters are "attempt[ing] to control and structure Marianne's space and subjectivity whether by claiming possession over her body or ostracizing her in public space." (Yağcı, 2025, p. 40). Her deviant personality immediately makes her a target when she also challenges the norm. Marianne is described as an

unattractive woman who does not put on makeup and engages in activities usually not associated with women. In the end, she comes to believe that she is broken, and she does not understand why she cannot make people love her, as she thinks, “I think there was something wrong with me when I was born” (Rooney, 2020, p. 187).

Rooney challenges the traditional ways of portraying Irish mothers in literature, by writing about a wealthy upper-class woman that looks down on people and is unable to stop the violent tendencies in her household, and a working class woman who had her son at the age of 17, and has family in prison, she’s juxtaposing both “to discuss the stereotypes usually attached to these characteristics.” (Muro, 2023, p. 111). Lorraine represents healthy womanhood and motherhood, distancing from old patterns and can be seen as “Rooney’s attempt to leave stereotypes behind” (Muro, 2023, p. 109), while Denise represents the intergenerational trauma in Irish women. As Christine Adams argues, “denial protects the mother from the pain of knowing about the abuse” (Muro, 2023, p. 111). In reality, as Barros-del Río writes, “Normal People debunks the ideological construction of the nuclear catholic Irish family, demonstrating that Connell’s single-parent and loving family performs better than Marianne’s insensitive mother and abusive brother.” (Barros-del Río, 2022a, p. 180).

In Carricklea, Connell is able to overshadow his working-class status by being popular and well-liked in school, when he moves to Dublin he is robbed of those two things and when faced with students whose parents support them financially and have a privileged background, Connell struggles to fit in. Both Trinity and the city of Dublin are his sites of “neoliberal violence, his personal insecurities are exacerbated by his socio-economic background, leading to his alienation from himself and to his depressive episodes.” (Darling, 2023, p. 20). Sligo, being the starting point, is very relevant because it’s part of the disadvantaged west. As we see throughout the novel, both Connell and Marianne deal with detrimental comments about their upbringing’s location, such as Peggy’s when she says, “You’ve been to Berlin? I didn’t think people from Connacht travel that far” (Rooney, 2020, p. 141). Also, Connell when he says that “people in Dublin often mention the west of Ireland in this strange tone of voice, as if it’s a foreign country” and that he had told a girl “he was from Sligo and she made a funny face and said: Yeah,

you look like it." (Rooney, 2020, p. 72). Connell's lack of sense of place in Dublin is very relevant to the narrative because it showcases how Rooney is able to address gender in a different way that doesn't make Connell a hegemonic masculine type. In fact "the narrative does not fall into essentialism, it explores how the underlying frictions between social status and traditional gender roles affect the male characters too." (Barros-Del Río, 2022a, p. 183). Moreover, as Milchrahm explains: "in a country that has always been culturally and politically torn between two oppositions such as Protestantism/ Catholicism and Unionism/Republicanism one's self identity and sense of belonging play a great role." (Milchrahm, 2021, p. 64).

The way the characters situate themselves in Dublin is another way of Rooney exploring the class dynamics and the power disparity, while Connell struggles to fit in a city full of pretentious, self-righteous and rich students, Marianne fits just as well, she had no connections in Carricklea and even though she had been there all her life, it never felt like home because she lacked a sense of place. Other than a violent household, Marianne had only mosaics of an unhappy upbringing in her hometown, where she was friendless and lonely most of the time. Apart from this, Connell feels adrift in Dublin, a place where he has to work multiple jobs to be able to pay rent, a place where people go to class debating about books they didn't read at home and a place where people give confidently opinions about everything without reading the novels first. He is unable to forge connections in Dublin and make friends, aside from his roommate Niall, as he finds everyone arrogant, with superiority complexes. He is a victim of the system that controls him and as Cronin has highlighted, neoliberalism has a physical impact on disadvantaged bodies (Cronin, 2015 as cited in Darling, 2023). Jamie's character, and all the men Marianne dates, serve as radical opponents to Connell, they are all wealthy and influential, Jamie's father is considered in the book as one of the people who caused the economic crisis, the one that is so oppressive for Connell and the one that shaped and changed the course of his life. Apart from that, Jamie is blind by his privilege and elitism, targeting Connell's insecurities. The death of Rob, Connell's high school friend, not only accelerates his mental health decadence, but it also manifests the rise of suicide during the financial crisis; as Darling argues, "Rob is a body sacrificed to political economy"

(Darling, 2023, p. 23). At some point Connell sits motionless in his room: “it was impossible to move either forward of backward, only downward, onto the floor, until his body was arranged motionless on the carpet” (Rooney, 2020, p. 208). Although in reality Connell was paralysed by his depression, it also illustrates the stagnant and hopelessness of his generation when it came to job prospects, housing facilities, and overall- their future. We can read this as a metaphor for the way young people felt in recessionary Ireland, they had no choice but to stay quiet in a debilitating economy with barely any hopes of survival. Connell only goes to therapy because it’s free, otherwise he would’ve gone without any professional help even though “he would like to kill himself.” (Rooney, 2020, p. 210). This not only showcases the decrease in mental health Post-Celtic Tiger years, but it also raises the question that if Rob had access to therapy, if he would’ve still killed himself.

From the first moment the reader is introduced to the power imbalance of Marianne and Connell, when in the first page it reads: “down a few steps in the kitchen, his mother Lorraine is peeling off a pair of rubber gloves” (Rooney, 2020, p. 1)- establishing Lorraine as Marianne’s cleaner and putting her in a privileged and somewhat higher position. As Barros-del Río states,

> In a Post-Celtic Tiger context, Rooney forces an unexpected encounter between two individuals whose social positions could hardly be more different. This double breach, which is social and material, testifies to the author’s Marxist ideology and determines the shifting and unbalanced nature of the protagonists’ love-sex relationship. (Barros-del Rio, 2022a, p. 181).

Rooney’s protagonists are aware of the reality they live in, early on in the novel *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) is mentioned and not only does that introduce Connell’s class consciousness and political awareness, it also determines the author’s position and the fact that the Marxist ideology will be taken into consideration throughout the narrative. Direct discussions about capitalism can be found all over the story, there’s a scene when Connell expresses his lack of enthusiasm to study law in Galway, and Marianne suggests English at Trinity, in response to that he says: “Yeah. I’m not sure about the job prospects, though”; and Marianne replies: “Oh, who cares? The

economy's fucked anyway." (Rooney, 2020, p. 21). Barros-Del Río argues that this moment "addresses the rupture of the social contract in Recessionary Ireland. In previous generations, a university degree had implied a subsequent job and independence, but in post-financial crisis Ireland, this sequence is interrupted, and the young generation is left with a vacuum instead." (Barros-Del Rio, 2022a, p. 183). The same happens when they visit the ghost estate where teenagers gather in Carricklea, a clear consequence of the economic recession where houses were left empty due to lack of capital to continue the construction, "these empty buildings are the most visible physical evidence of the unbridled consumerism and uncomfortable reminders of, and memorials to the temptation to excess consumption in the Celtic Tiger period." (Yağcı, 2025, p. 39). After a conversation trying to understand why such a big house was abandoned, Marianne says, "It's something to do with capitalism" and Connell replies: "Yeah. Everything is, that's the problem, isn't it?" (Rooney, 2020, p. 36). At some point, already at Trinity, Marianne asks "Joanna if she finds it strange, to be paid for her hours at work- to exchange, blocks of her extremely limited time on this earth for the human invention known as money." (Rooney, 2020, p. 112). Connell winning the scholarship enhanced the fact that meritocracy is a failed system invented by capitalists to justify their privilege and "we can't all go to private school, you know." (Rooney, 2020, p. 150) while for Marianne it was a matter of reputation, to him it was a life-altering support, "everything is possible now because of the scholarship", and suddenly "foreign cities are real, and famous artworks, and underground railway systems, and remnants of the Berlin Wall. That's money, the substance that makes the world real. There is something so corrupt and sexy about it." (Rooney, 2020, pp. 165-166).

It's only later in the novel that both Connell and Marianne finally admit that they come from very distinctive backgrounds: "I guess we're from very different backgrounds, class-wise", she continues ", I'm conscious of the fact that we got to know each other because your mother works for my family." (Rooney, 2020, p. 179). Political stances take place as well in the narrative, with mentions of contemporary world conflicts. To illustrate, when Connell's driving Lorraine to the polling station to vote they have a discussion about who they're voting for, and he says "we could do with a bit more

communism in this country if you ask me"; and his mother says "come on now, comrade. I was the one who raised you with your good socialist values, remember?"; and Rooney writes following this conversation that Lorraine is "interested in Cuba, and the cause of the Palestinian liberation" (Rooney, 2020, p. 49). As stated before, Rooney's personal visions of the world are in the characters she writes, she has been vocal about the Palestinian Liberation, either by not allowing her books to be distributed by Israeli publishers, but also by vocalising her concern for the cause in public speeches, such as the one at Southbank Centre, held in consequence of the release of her newest novel *Intermezzo* (2024), as of June 2025 she has also written an article for *The Guardian* regarding this subject. Additionally, we find Marianne reading "long articles about Syria and the research[ing] the ideological backgrounds of the journalists who have written them." and "read[ing] long articles about the sovereign debt crisis in Europe." (Rooney, 2020, p. 62).

We also find Marianne "expressing some in-depth opinion about the Magdalene Laundry report or the Denis O'Brien case." (Rooney, 2020, p. 173), and she engages in conversations about feminist topics with her female friends Joanna and Peggy, such as: "generally I find men are a lot more concerned with limiting the freedoms of women than exercising personal freedom for themselves"; and she adds: "they control the whole social system and this is the best way they can come up with for themselves?" (Rooney, 2020, p.99).

Akin to *CWF*, *NP* incorporates Rooney's gifted way of writing about intimacy. As addressed formerly, writing sex scenes is one of the ways the author has found to really portray not only the intimacy shared between these two characters, but also the structural dynamics that follow them to bed, as Rooney has pointed out in an interview. In another interview for *Nylon*, Rooney says: "I only write about sex when I feel it's telling us something different or new about these characters- when it's showing something actually happening to them rather than just filling you in on the fact that they have a sex life." (Westenfeld, 2019). It's also a way to show an "exchange of intimacy that hopefully makes the reader understand why these people find each other compelling" (Westenfeld, 2019)- they fit a purpose, and they aren't accidental. Through these

scenes, Rooney illustrates how intimacy doesn't have to be expressed through verbal communication alone, their "intimacy exists in a space of what is left unsaid" (Higgins, 2025, p. 192). Indeed, communication is not Marianne and Connell's strength, they have several misunderstandings that result from not being honest and open to one another. One of the most relevant moments is when Connell loses his job and as a consequence, he has to move back to Sligo, for he can't afford rent in Dublin. He could also ask Marianne to live with her, but that would put Connell in a vulnerable position, instead he breaks up with her and leaves for the summer: "despite their shared intimacy, Connell feels uncomfortable asking Marianne for financial help, illustrating his discomfort at their economic disparity and his financial helplessness." (O'Sullivan, 2025, p. 176).

In 2019, Rooney said that "miscommunication is something novelists have always been interested in." Since as writers they are "interested in language, and [they're] interested in where language fails." (Westenfeld, 2019). According to the author, language is supposed to be everything and yet it isn't, it is never enough, for her "the ways in which we could communicate are so rapidly multiplying that they can often be sources of miscommunication, as well" (Westenfeld, 2019). Contrary to *CWF*, in *NP* we do not see much miscommunication happening due to misinterpretation of instant texts, the protagonists tend to misunderstand each other when both their individual power is at stake, just like Connell leaves when he is forced to ask Marianne for help, so does she when he invites Rachel instead for the Debutante Ball, leaving her alone after pronouncing his love for her. As Romero states, "silence remains prevalent throughout *Normal People*, partly because neoliberalism not always provides millennials with a language that can be used to identify the sources of their anxiety and discomfort." (Carregal-Romero, 2023, p. 229).

When it comes to the violent practices Marianne engages in, one would think that Connell is the exception, since he does not want to engage in violent sexual practices and refuses when Marianne asks him to. Rooney explains that there is more to it, "it's about Connell recognizing that the power imbalance has always been there." Likewise, Connell decided in the first place that their relationship had to be kept a secret,

and that was in a way also of domination- “it’s about him coming to terms with the fact that he has, in many ways, been dominating her all along, without wanting to admit it in himself” (Westenfeld, 2019). Even so, Marianne’s relationship with Lukas, a man she meets while studying abroad in Sweden, is physically violent, they had a BDSM relationship, where Marianne “feels disgusting and begins to hate herself, and these feelings trigger in her an overwhelming desire to be subjugated and in a way broken”; she uses her body, and the pain inflicted in it, to escape her own head, “when it happens her brain simply goes empty, like a room with the light turned off” (Rooney, 2020, p. 143).

5.3. Welcoming; how faithful should you be?

Normal People (2020) is the adaptation of the Irish novel we have been analysing at length. The television series is directed by Lenny Abrahamson and Hettie Macdonald, written by Sally Rooney, Alice Birch and Mark O’Rowe. It was released in April 2020, not even two years after the publication of the novel, coinciding with the period when the world was in lockdown. In contrast to the reception of *CWF* (2022), this adaptation's reception was generally positive and even, paving the way for its massive success. In this case, success is being used to describe the popularity that *NP* (2020) achieved. In the following segment, I aim to explore how the adaptation was carried out, considering the significant differences in logistics from the subsequent adaptation, and to understand why *NP* is popular, as well as reflect on its place in contemporary Ireland.

BBC reported that *NP* was the most-streamed series of 2020 with 62.7 million views from release date until the end of the year (McLennan, 2020). In Ireland specifically, RTÉ reports that “an average of 371,000 viewers tuned in to watch the first two episodes” on the RTÉ Player “301,000 streams have been watched to date, making it the strongest drama opening ever on the Player.” (Ryan, 2020). According to Condon, “*Normal People* had a 30% share for young adults aged 15-34, meaning just under one-third of young adults watching TV on Tuesday night were tuned into *Normal People* on RTÉ One.” (Condon, 2020). In an article for *The Guardian*, Sweney states that Fionna Campbell, the controller of *BBC Three*, said, “a significant proportion of people watched

all the episodes in the first 24 hours" and that the target audience was inevitably a young one because "people love bingeing" (Sweney, 2020). In truth, the structure of the series is very appealing to younger audiences, who often have growing short attention spans due to their upbringing in a highly technological society. Just like *CWF*, *NP* is divided into twelve half-hour episodes, with Lenny Abrahamson directing the first half and Hettie Macdonald directing the subsequent episodes. Unlike *CWF*, *NP* was written in part by Sally Rooney; however, after the seventh episode, she is no longer involved in that process, because she was once again working on her next novel. As noted above, *NP* had already a place in society before the adaptation and Lenny Abrahamson's anxiety towards adapting confirms that the pressure comes from the fact that *NP* (2018) was highly praised; in his own words, "when a novel is very loved people will be more critical and ready to argue in case you damage the thing that they feel is very precious" (BBC, May 2020). As Linda Hutcheon reasons, "the possible response of the target audience is always going to be a concern of the adapter(s)." (Hutcheon, 2013, p. 114).

At the same time, the director has revealed in many interviews that he himself is a fan of the book, and ultimately, he was very pleased with the way it was adapted. Ed Guiney, executive producer, tells *BBC* that he "dearly hope[s] that fans of the book will feel that we have done it justice" (BBC, 2020a). Abrahamson shares that the way Rooney writes about her characters, while simultaneously distancing herself from the novel, allowing them to exist independently, is something he related to when reading the book for the first time. Moreover, the director was also captivated by the idea of filming in Ireland. In an interview for *BBC*, Rooney talks about the importance of the adaptation being filmed in Ireland, "we were committed to getting the environment right and doing justice to the specific setting of the story, and I think that's become an important part of the show." (BBC, 2020b).

Since *NP* was released first, there are a few technical questions that were answered either through online interviews, magazines, videos, radio, that help us understand the process of adapting Rooney's book. In an interview for *Waterstones* (2020) on YouTube, with Lenny Abrahamson, Sally Rooney, Daisy Edgar-Jones (Marianne) and Paul Mescal (Connell), the author of the novel reveals her excitement in

being part of this project which allowed her to explore new ways of writing, trying to do justice to the complexity of the characters. The story of Connell and Marianne was no longer being approached by a reader but rather a viewer, so it was necessary to adopt new ways of telling the story. Rooney reveals that the collaborative nature of the writing process was something she found endearing and that without that aspect the experience would not be the same. For a writer that wasn't, at that point, familiar with screenwriting, it was relevant for her to have professional guidance- "my co-writer Alice Birch was enormously helpful in tackling that challenge." (BBC, 2020b). In addition, Rooney reveals how liberating it felt to interact differently with the characters she wrote, as these were now being turned into something real- to the visual medium. Due to her writing style, moving Connell and Marianne from paper to screen turns them into mysterious beings, because the viewer doesn't have access to their interior thoughts, as we do in the novel. In her words, it was about "encountering the mystery of the characters all over again." (Waterstones, May 2020).

For the same interview, Abrahamson explained the process of determining the structure of the adaptation. In a world of movies, plays, TV series, musicals, among others, it is relevant to understand why *NP* was divided into the twelve episodes. Similarly to *CWF*, Abrahamson couldn't envision *NP* being a feature film, and to him the story was immediately laid out in an episodic nature. He explains that he tried to follow the structure of other popular shows such as *Fleabag* (2016-2019), directed by Harry Bradbeer and written by Phoebe Waller-Bridge. Nonetheless, this structure has been used frequently in recent years, especially by streaming platforms such as *Netflix*, with *The Queen's Gambit* (2020), *Bridgerton* (2020), *Sex Education* (2019), being some of the examples. All of these share the structure of six to eight hourly episodes, while *NP* for instance runs for longer in short amounts. Stephen King has explained that he prefers to work with streaming services rather than traditional TV, he argues that firstly, TV series allow for a more in-depth and uninterrupted storytelling and, secondly, that with streaming "you have a chance to tell a story with a little more nuance, a little more texture to it. It's totally immersive, working on a show, and if you're going to take the time, you want to put your heart and soul into it." (Bullard, 2023). Abrahamson shares

the same view on the matter, he says, “you can go deeper in the shorter episode because you don’t need this big plot structure to sustain your full hour of viewing.” (Waterstones, May 2020). And precisely, *NP* doesn’t include the normal narrative style where there’s a build-up tension leading to a plot, most plot changes happen naturally, through small encounters between the protagonists. He continues: “you can zoom in to a gradual level of observation and you can take the specific key moments or phases in the relationship and subject them to a proper examination.” (Waterstones, May 2020). This might explain why *NP* doesn’t feel exhausting, every choice seems to be entirely considered with intention of it being there and that elevates the viewing experience.

When it comes to the division of the series, the director explains that he wanted to be part of the process from the beginning, yet he knew that collaborating with Hettie Macdonald would not only improve the adaptation but would also allow for it to come together faster. In the introduction of the *Normal People: The Scripts*, the director says that the process of adapting *NP* was unconventionally fast: “it took less than a year to go from the BBC’s commission and Hulu coming on board to stepping on to set to begin filming.” (Rooney, Abrahamson, & Macdonald, 2020), and, in fact, that is noticeable considering the novel was published in 2018, which would mean the filming occurred the following year.

Contrary to *CWF*, *NP* had an overwhelmingly positive response, both from the media and mostly from the audience. Articles with titles such as- *Normal People Is The Best Book Adaptation I’ve Ever Watched*; *Normal People: When book adaptations go right*; *the TV drama that’s better than the book*; *Adaptation of Sally Rooney’s intense love story is pitch-perfect*; *A great love story, perfectly adapted*- and many more, started to appear and they are once again looking at the adaptation through limiting lenses. It is essential to examine why this adaptation is considered perfect and why these articles make such claims.

Angela Law writes that *NP* is the best adaptation she’s ever watched because “the series is remarkably true to the book”, she continues “, it’s hardly surprising, since Rooney wrote the first six episodes herself before handing the reins over to the show’s creative team.” (Law, 2020). Distinctively, there are more expansive opinions, such as

the one Lucy Mangan writes for *The Guardian*, "to have shown it instead of told refreshes the story for those who already know it and will surely help engage those who are alienated by such interior detailing." (Mangan, 2020). Likewise, Hughes starts her review by saying "the central question surrounding all literary adaptations, but particularly those where the source material has a fervent fan base, is how faithful should you be." (Hughes, 2020); she considers that *NP* was true to Rooney's novel, but that it allowed the audience to engage with the story in a fresh and exciting way.

5.4. "Familiarity and contempt, ubiquity and denigration"[5]: the adaptation

Similar to *CWF*, the first ten minutes of *NP* are also fundamental in setting the scene for the viewer, whether they are unfamiliar with or familiar to the protagonists. We are immediately introduced to the dichotomy of popular Connell and loner Marianne; however, by placing the scene when Marianne confronts her mathematics teacher at the beginning, we are also being introduced to her bold and somewhat arrogant posture in school. Marianne's mansion, being the idyllic white big house, immediately places her in a position of power. Resembling the novel's first line, she opens the door for Connell and welcomes him in. The viewer is presented with both Marianne and Connell's perspectives, with contrasting scenes of Connell eating with Lorraine in a small, low-light kitchen and Marianne eating alone in a spacious one. In the first ten minutes, all the characters that are central to the development of the story are introduced; besides the protagonists, we are also introduced to Lorraine, Denise and Alan, as well as the schoolmates.

Regarding intimacy, the novel's most relevant characteristic and also the most challenging thing to capture on screen, as Abrahamson has shared, it was possible with cameras that allow very claustrophobic close-ups, giving the sense that the characters are in a very private environment- allowing the viewer to feel as though they are beside the characters, instead of watching them from afar. The way the camera focuses on their

[5] Hutcheon, 2013, p. 169.

faces, both individually and together, is very representative of the introspective narrative of Rooney, certain shots are so close to the faces of both actors that it breaks the fourth wall. The intimate relationship between Connell and Marianne, and the way Rooney discusses sexuality, impressed Abrahamson, who is from an older generation than the Irish author, surprising him with a type of discourse that was far from the shame he grew up with. For this reason, the adaptation stands out when it comes to the portrayal of sex scenes, which were indispensable, since the protagonist's relationship, as explored before, is deeply embedded in their mutual exchange of pleasure. However, these do not feel as invading as most sex scenes usually feel, the raw portrayal of emotions with camera angles that do not objectify their bodies, we get a glimpse of how they feel towards each other, as Asava writes "*Normal People* is uniquely sexually explicit but also stands out formally due to its directional approach, in its adherence to social realism, it draws on directors Lenny Abrahamson's arthouse credentials and Hettie Macdonald's interest in marginalized communities." (Asava, 2022, p. 125). This aspect of the adaptation made it into the headlines of Irish newspapers, containing the "longest-ever sex scene to be aired on national TV." (O'Connor, 2020).

Throughout the adaptation there are various moments where consent is addressed, firstly when Marianne and Connell have sex for the first time, he asks her multiple times if she's comfortable and says, "Well yeah, it's fine, it's just that if you want to stop or anything we can obviously stop." (Rooney et al., 2020, p. 47). Later, in episode five, when Connell and Marianne meet at Gareth's house, Marianne tries to kiss him while drunk and asks him to sleep with her, and he says, "not tonight, you're wasted." (Rooney et al., 2020, p. 159). In episode six, Connell asks her for a nude picture and says that he'd delete the picture for Marianne's privacy and reassurance. These scenes contrast with the scenes of Marianne and Lukas in Sweden, in episode nine she asks him to stop and says no, after which he continues to force her into doing what he wants, therefore there's a lack of consensual exchange between them. As Bollas argues, "nonconsensual sex has been an issue for Irish society. In a recent survey, many university students report ['non-consensual penetration by incapacitation, force, or threat of force during their time in college']." (Bollas, 2022, p. 53).

While in the novel class dynamics are described and justified with either political statements or descriptions of the characters interests, in the adaptation those things are shown. For example, Marianne's mansion is symbolic from the first moment, with large, spacious rooms, a living room with full bookshelves, surrounded by a green landscape of trees and a garden, as seen in the figure [6]. This contrasts with Connell's modest home, with his modest car parked outside, and much smaller rooms[7]. In the scene when Alan forces Marianne to walk in the pouring rain, we also see her brother's brand new, expensive car. Instead of the *Communist Manifesto*, in the series we see *The Golden Notebook* (1962) by Doris Lessing which is also political and linked to the communist ideals Marianne and Connell share, however this one is more focused on the cause of women which makes it more reflective of Marianne's intellectualism, but it also shows Connell's multifaceted political awareness and "clearly signals the screenwriters' intentions to introduce Connell's multi-layered social consciousness, which is not only concerned with social class struggles but also with those related to gender." (García, 2025, p. 98). This version of Connell contrasts with the one the viewers are presented with in the beginning of the first episode, despite being popular, good-looking and a relevant Gaelic football player, Connell is also a sensitive, emotional intelligent man. The fact that this version of him is at first only introduced to Marianne, shows the viewer the way he behaves uniquely beside her. In the second episode we also see Marianne reading *Never Let Me Go* by Kazuo Ishiguro.

The class imbalance is more obvious when Connell moves to Dublin to attend university, from the room he rents in Dublin, a room that is small and shared with Niall, to the shot of the beans on toast that he eats for dinner[8] illustrating a typical low budget meal. In episode four we see Connell's first job at the gas station. Just before Connell meets Marianne at Gareth's party, he has a conversation about sharing his room with someone else with what he considers typical Trinity students -meaning, wealthy students from the metropolis- and they react in a way that makes Connell feel inferior.

[6] Figure number 3
[7] Figure number 4
[8] Figure number 5

From the moment Marianne is presented in Dublin, the viewer has access to both their perspectives again and the contrast between Marianne's relaxed lifestyle full of luxurious house parties, smoking with friends on the balcony with books on the table and a spacious house her mother owns in the city, with Connell's life wandering around Dublin alone, either studying tiredly at the library or working[9]. In episode five we see him working in Dublin in a restaurant and then we see him driving to Sligo for the weekend where he keeps his gas station job; as Silva concludes, "through a sequence of juxtaposed scenes, the script conveys their diverging paths- Marianne immersed in an intellectual and hedonistic milieu, and Connell navigating the realities of financial precarity." (Silva, 2025, p. 37). When Connell gets punched by a man trying to steal his wallet he says in the book, in response to Jamie's comment, that not everyone can go to private school, that line is changed in the series to "You know we can't all be the spawn of millionaires" (Rooney et al., 2020, p. 212), which sounds more of a direct attack to him personally, considering that Jamie's father is considered in the novel a wealthy powerful man and responsible for the economic crisis. Even after getting the scholarship, Connell maintains his modest lifestyle and clothing, when in an art gallery during his backpacking trip in Europe, there's a shot of his dirty shoes[10] placing him as someone that would not be in a space like that if his circumstances were any different.

Still in Italy, the protagonists have a conversation about money while sitting outside a church[11]; as Silva points out, "it's rather symbolic that this dialogue takes place outside a church since those places usually evoke ideas of morality and confession, which resonates with the essence of this exchange between Connell and Marianne." (Silva, 2025, p. 35). The way the characters talk about this topic showcases the sensible nature of it, "the pauses and silences in the conversation, which are better perceived in the adaptation, suggest some resistance in addressing deeply ingrained class inequalities." (Silva, 2025, p. 35).

[9] Figure number 6
[10] Figure number 7
[11] Figure number 8

Despite the mutual perspectives, the viewer is able to engage with both Marianne and Connell's personal struggles. Both take up space to demonstrate the character's state of mind as they navigate through life, both as on-and-off companions and as individuals. As previously discussed, Dublin is a site of neoliberal violence to Connell, and from the moment he is placed in Dublin, the viewer is automatically aware of his weakened sense of self: "he appears to have been swallowed by the metropolis, and we follow him redefining himself" (Bollas, 2022, p. 53). Right at the start of term, we get a shot of him in a room full of people, despite him being in the middle, he is easily camouflaged amongst the students[12]. In episode ten, there is a similar shot of Connell when he is profoundly depressed. These two shots put together demonstrate how much his mental health has consumed him. The fact that there are no students around him puts him right in the spotlight as he's sweating and nervously biting his pen[13]. Contrary to the novel, in the adaptation the therapy session is a turmoil of emotions for Connell, while in the novel it felt like he was supressing his emotions, we get to see Connell having a breakdown in front of Gillian as he talks about how out of place he feels in Dublin and how getting back to Sligo will not resolve anything because what was once there, is not anymore.

Apart from this, there are various moments in which we see him getting emotional but suppressing his emotions, such as the scene by the pool when he tries to ask Marianne to move in with her for the summer after losing his job. When he gets the call from Lorraine telling him about Rob's death, we see him joining his old friends at a pub where he sits statically, and a moment later, he's sobbing at home. Furthermore, the scene when Connell calls Marianne after the Debutante Ball is also a relevant one, not only because in the novel the reader is left guessing what his voicemail said. We get that in the adaptation, but also because Connell physically and emotionally breaks down on his way home after Eric tells him everyone knew about him and Marianne. Angelo Bollas explores some of these phenomena in an article about Irish masculinity, to him

[12] Figure number 9
[13] Figure number 10

“Connell’s sensitive nature and interest for literature not only contribute to the expansion of what is heteronormatively defined as masculine but, also, the series promotes these traits as desirable attributes of masculinities.” (Bollas, 2022, p. 52). In fact, Connell demonstrates his appreciation for romance classics, such as *Emma* by Jane Austen, in both media, which already sets him apart as a man who deviates from the norm. Not necessarily because men cannot enjoy Jane Austen, but “one might find it somewhat contradicting that a male teenager is a top athlete and popular among his peers while, at the same time, having an interest in literature.” (Bollas, 2022, p. 52). Coming from a place where being the popular Gaelic football player, having high grades and a group of friends means success and reputation, Connell finds himself sidelined with the reality of Dublin, a place where status doesn’t come from those things, but rather money- “Connell’s difficulty in adapting to city life becomes more of a figurative critique of the established, hegemonic masculinity of rural Ireland and less of a commentary about Connell’s inability to adapt.” (Bollas, 2022, p. 54). Though one could argue that Connell is still part of what theorists consider to be Hegemonic Masculinity, his inability to acknowledge his feelings for Marianne and accepting her, demonstrate that he is a victim of that societal pressure. Yet “despite social pressures that dictate him to act in a certain way, and despite the fact that at times he does give in to these pressures, the series allows us to experience him being discontent about this.” (Bollas, 2022, p. 56).

When it comes to Marianne, there’s a drastic change in the way the viewer sees her in Sligo and then Dublin, just like Connell. Her presence during the first episodes was shadowed with Connell’s happy and social life, we see multiple shots of her lying in her bed alone and not leaving the house, despite it being an abusive one. Going to Dublin is an opportunity for her to reinvent herself, far from the judgement of her school peers, but mostly far from her brother’s abuse and her mother’s negligence. Every time Marianne shares a private thought while in bed with Connell, we see her always staring at the ceiling, which gives the impression that she’s talking mostly to herself, just like in the novel. Connell’s receptive and reassuring responses relax her, and she smiles and looks at him during those scenes. Marianne’s deterioration peaks when she starts to

surrender to sadomasochist relationships with both Jamie and Lukas, the latter being the most damaging one. Apart from the scenes of Marianne and Jamie arguing, and him breaking the glass in Italy, as well as one sex scene, we as viewers spend more time with Marianne during her stay in Sweden when she's seeing Lukas. The studio where they exchange imbalanced and somewhat unwanted sexual practices is very bright, grey and morbid, comparing to the claustrophobic scenes of Connell and Marianne usually in a bed, with dim lights and a close up, we get distanced from this reality and these scenes where Marianne herself is adrift from her own body. There's one scene in episode nine when she's enduring her submissive position with Lukas and we get a close up shot of her face, she's very pale, with tiring eyes embodying the symptoms of total alienation[14], "the camera confronts the audience with an objectifying image of Marianne, capturing her indolence, apparent emptiness and total apathy with regards to the situation she is in" (Barros-del Río, 2022b, p. 76). As Barros-del Río writes, "the complex interplay of materiality and gender inflict Marianne with emotional damage, and her insecurities adopt a more corporeal form, which emulates postfeminist practices framed by the notion of individual lifestyle choice." (Barros-del Río, 2022b, p. 75). In this moment, as we see her so close yet so distant, there's a voice-over of Connell reading an email he sent her- as Hutcheon explains, "voice-overs were used to keep the action moving, thereby in a sense translating drama into narrative or showing into telling." (Hutcheon, 2013, p. 117)- where he tells her that she doesn't deserve bad things, in response to her saying so, "this technique epitomizes Marianne's internal struggle against self-objectification: the sequence ends with her refusing to submit and ultimately rejecting such degrading sexual practices." (Barros-del Río, 2022b, p. 77).

Mirroring Connell's scene when he's punched, we get to see Marianne's bleeding nose after her brother's violent act towards her, in a scene that is reminiscent of the novel, Marianne looks down at her hand covered in blood in a slow-motion shot, as if uncertain that it was real, she cries while reassuring herself that she had been hurt by

[14] Figure number 11

her brother. Connell comes to rescue her, something that doesn't happen in the novel, emphasizing the traditional romantic pattern that existed subtly in the adaptation.

In relation to the timeline of the novel, at first the adaptation seems to follow a regular chronological structure, but after the first half, in episode seven, we see that there are time gaps and irregular screenwriting. It starts with a shot of the sink with a broken glass and jumps back to show the audience the moments leading up to that, however it isn't until the next episode that the audience knows what happens, this misunderstanding is considered to be relevant for the plot and thus the viewer gets multiple perspectives out of it, first we only see the sink, then we see Marianne crying and breaking the glass, afterwards Connell leaving the house and then there's a sequence of both their perspectives about this moment. Marianne thinks Connell wants to break up with her because he wants to see other people, while Connell thinks that she's the one that wants to see other people. Whereas in the novel this moment is a mirror of their constant miscommunication, somehow in the series it adds a new layer of malfunction in conversation (Barros-del Río, 2022b), the fact that it happens in the sixth and seventh episode also enhances the plot development. In the second half, where most episodes were written by Alice Birch these time jumps, and overall inconsistencies happen more frequently. For instance, the harsh change from the Italian villa, with shots of sunny Italian countryside, to the cold, snow-covered landscapes of Sweden warn the audience of the coldness and bleakness that is about to come- and the most emotionally heavy episodes happen afterwards.

Last of all, the closing episode runs smoothly and light-heartedly with shots of Marianne and Connell laughing together in the car, while driving to Christmas dinner at Lorraine's. This dinner scene contrasts with the awkward scene of Denise's birthday lunch, full of apathetic people, while now the audience sees a wholesome portrayal of a family spending time together playing games. Marianne and Connell going to a local pub to celebrate New Year's with their high school friends and everyone being so welcoming towards both sets the happy ending the audience is waiting for. Their heartfelt kiss in public overshadows the struggles the protagonists suffered in the previous eleven episodes. In any case, the series ends with Marianne and Connell sitting on the floor of

her- now empty- Dublin apartment, where they pronounce one last time their feelings for each other, in the novel Marianne thinks “he brought [me] goodness like a gift and now it belongs to [me]” (Rooney, 2020, p. 273) and in the adaptation she says “we have done so much good for each other.” (Rooney et al., 2020, p. 331). Regardless, the open ending remains present.

On a final note, *NP’s* soundtrack revealed itself more relevant than ever “to compensate for the absence of dialogue and internal thought processes, the TV adaptation makes use of incidental music, composed by Stephen Rennicks.” (Barros-del Río, 2022b, p. 77). There is a scene of Connell taking the train in Italy and staring at Marianne while a cover of *Love Will Tear Us Apart* plays swiftly. As Barros del Río puts it, “these choices (…) definitely fulfil their function as an essential part of the show’s muted tone.” (Barros-del Río, 2022b, p. 77).

5.5. In the end, does *Normal People* create the doubled pleasure of the palimpsest?

All things considered, it’s once again important to reflect about the never-ending opinions and reviews about adaptations that can’t seem to let go of the idea of faithfulness. For instance, Catherine Magee says to *BBC* that *NP* “is very faithful. I think the tone of it is, I would say, authentic, raw, intimate and I think all those things is what possibly distinguishes it from other shows.” (2020, April). Contrarily to this statement, Lenny Abrahamson seems to be conscious of the fact that adaptation is a multidimensional field that has a crossover of various media that complement each other. In the introduction of the scripts he writes: “adaptation is never simple, and behind what I hope feels like a faithful rendering of the book are countless reconfigurations, transpositions, additions, subtractions and shifts of emphasis that turn the inner landscape of the novel into the external and linear unfolding of a screenplay.” (Rooney et al., 2020, p. 1). In truth, this idea mirrors Linda Hutcheon’s arguments. Due to *NP’s* success as a primary text, it’s likely that most of the audience was already familiar with the story of the characters, but to Hutcheon that doesn’t mean the experience will be any inferior, in fact “in these instances, we simply experience the work without the

palimpsestic doubleness that comes with knowing. From one perspective, this is a loss. From another, it is simply experiencing the work for itself, and all agree that even adaptations must stand on their own." (Hutcheon, 2013, p. 127).

NP's enormous response from either fans of the novel or curious souls answers the question itself about it being a successful adaptation. Rooney's story was elevated and transformed into a fictional- yet very real to many people- world that millions of people all over wanted to be part of. The question that remains is not if its success is related to it being faithful to the primary text, if that were the case millions of people wouldn't have gone back and read *NP*, for the adaptation was already enough. As noted in *The Independent*, 'Sally Rooney's *Normal People* has topped the UK book charts for the first time over a year after it was first released" (Lewis, 2020). Equally, in an article by Bullard, discussing the impact of *Netflix* in the world of adaptations, the author demonstrates that *The Queen's Gambit* was back on the bestselling list for the first time in 37 years, resulting from the success of the adaptation, she elucidates "dozens of other previously side-lined books found a long-awaited path to adaptation through these new streaming services, including authors of color whose POC characters had struggled to find footing in the notoriously white-washed film industry." (Bullard, 2023, p. 125). Thus, both media can coexist, as Hutcheon argues, and both can be equally relevant in their own ways- Marianne and Connell will live on and on both on paper, as well as on screen, and it will be influential for generations to come.

Figures:



Figure 3: *Normal People* (2020).



Figure 4: *Normal People* (2020).



Figure 5: *Normal People* (2020).



Figure 6: *Normal People* (2020).



Figure 7: *Normal People* (2020).



Figure 8: *Normal People* (2020).



Figure 9: *Normal People* (2020).



Figure 10: *Normal People* (2020).

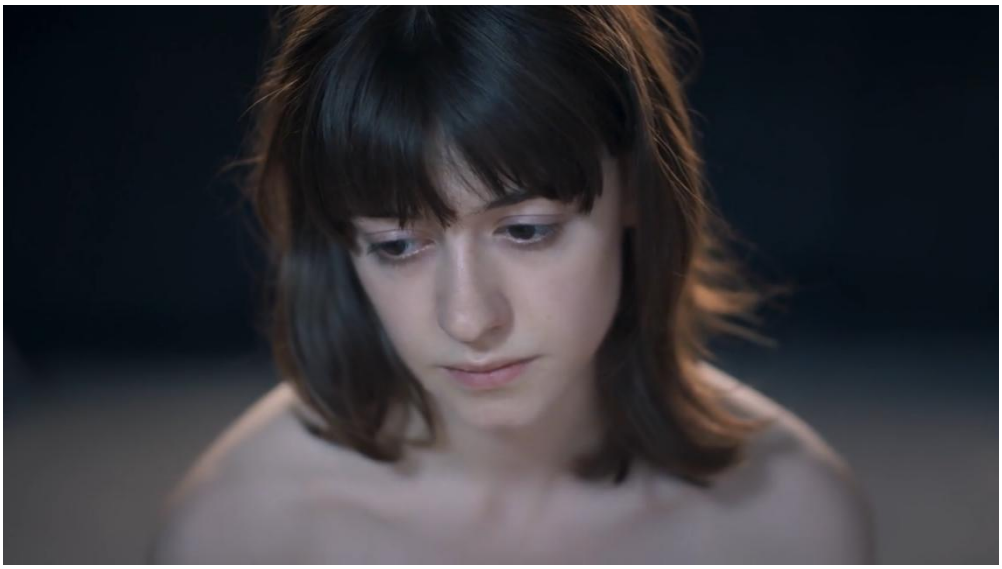


Figure 11: *Normal People* (2020).

Conclusion

The primary objective of this thesis was to explore Sally Rooney's novels, *CWF* and *NP*, alongside their respective adaptations. By understanding Sally Rooney's literary heritage and the historical context in which she wrote and published her two novels, we gained a deeper insight into her writing. The theoretical framework of adaptation studies helped achieve a very clear understanding of this field and how complex and important it remains today. Although the focus of this field remains on adapting novels to film and on the adaptation of canonical literature, we have understood through Linda Hutcheon's work that adaptations are everywhere. Indeed, her groundbreaking study, *A Theory of Adaptation*, shows us that adaptations are present in all aspects of daily life, from video games and songs to films, series, and beyond. In her view, adaptations are so essential for keeping art alive that removing all adaptations would leave us with very few options. This highlights, once again, that relying solely on fidelity to judge a work is no longer reasonable, as many other factors must be considered. If that analysis were to be included in this thesis, it would conflict firstly with Rooney's own remarks on the importance of adaptations, and secondly, it would amount to a straightforward comparison of the primary text with its screen version. Ignoring the countless other elements involved would prevent us from reaching meaningful conclusions. Instead, this thesis offers an in-depth analysis of the novels that helps us understand the many themes, as well as Rooney's stylistic choices in storytelling. It also considers the historical impact on her narrative, highlighting that she writes about people living in contemporary times and real cities, and that she effectively depicts the struggles faced by many in her generation. As mentioned earlier, Sally Rooney feels strangely familiar to many young people, and they are able to connect with her writing regardless of their geographical location. The overwhelmingly positive response to both first novels confirms this – she was immediately acclaimed as a writer of a generation. Although her characters are deeply relatable, as mentioned, her books are not as simple as they seem. Rooney is able to embed multiple layers of meaning into her narrative, making it appear straightforward, but a careful reading reveals other elements. Sally Rooney is a contemporary writer, for she is still actively producing books and, hopefully, will write

many more. This fact has been both positive and negative at times, as it is challenging to discuss an emerging yet already established writer. This thesis combines various studies that analyse Rooney's works from multiple perspectives, considering numerous specificities. It also includes several interviews with the author herself, which, at an early stage like this, help us understand how Rooney perceives her writing and how she also interprets her adaptations.

To analyse the process of adaptation, Linda Hutcheon's conclusions were utilised to observe how we can view an adapted work without judging it solely in relation to the original text. In the case of *CWF*, as we have seen, although the outcome was not what was expected and the reception was not as overwhelmingly positive as *NP*, we realised that Lenny Abrahamson enjoyed filming the second adaptation more because the success of the first allowed for the fluidity and experimental nature of the second. Sally Rooney's limited involvement with the story also permitted the team to interpret the text and reframe it in a way that made sense to them. This story wasn't cannibalised; it was reinterpreted, translated, and understood in its own right. Perhaps instead of questioning why the story was not exactly the same as depicted in the book, one should ask why people still care so much that a book remains faithful to its primary text? In a world of streaming, and as I've shown before, a world where *Netflix* adapts many books into miniseries that are bingeable and incredibly successful, and a world where books like *The Queen's Gambit* are back on the bestseller list after years of being forgotten- it is impossible to ignore the vitality of adaptation in our world.

Nowadays, it is very common for books to be reissued with new covers after an adaptation has been made of them. A never-ending discussion, however, it is a fact that when we walk into a bookstore, we are most likely to find various books with new covers from their adaptations on screen. If the adaptation is so inferior and secondary, why use it to sell more? If the primary text is so flawless and superior, why then would they allow it to be featured on the cover? As Hutcheon argues, "book publishers produce new editions of adapted literary works to coincide with the film version and invariably put photos of the movie's actors or scenes on the cover." (Hutcheon, 2013, p. 30). Interestingly, we do not find this in Sally Rooney's books; none of the books that have

been adapted have been reissued, and I would argue that it is because Rooney considers books to be a commodity these days. In the interview with the *Louisiana Channel*, Rooney stated that alongside that "books have no potential to speak truth to power, they have no potential as political texts because of the role they play in the culture economy, that's already predetermined to how people are going to read them." She continues: "even if the book if full of Marxist propaganda, it's still sealed off from any political potential because of its position as a commodity in this market." (2019). In truth, if she considers books to be a commodity, it would not be very honest to allude to those ideas by producing multiple new covers for her books. Regardless, the only physical materials related to the adaptations are the scripts, which have both been published along with additional information on the processes, as well as iconic frames from the TV series.

In a second moment of this study, we examined *NP*, both the novel and its adaptation. There was again a close reading of the text, which has now been referenced and studied by various scholars analysing post-Celtic Tiger literature, as it serves as a prime example of that. Upon closer inspection, we then studied the adaptation, with its impact and success already in mind. Our aim was not, however, to understand the successful nature of *NP* regarding the text, but rather why this story, created by Sally Rooney in words, was so appealing to the public when presented on screen. *NP* is often cited as a 'perfect' adaptation, supported by arguments such as those presented earlier, that it remains true to the primary text. Intriguingly, *NP* was co-written by Sally Rooney, Alice Birch and Mark O'Rowe; all of whom contributed to the writing process of the series, alongside the entire team that produced and directed it, which invalidates the argument that Sally Rooney's participation was the only factor for its success. It also seems to me that *NP* was a successful adaptation, as it effectively translated Rooney's intimate writing and incorporated the Marxist undertone of her writing into many scenes. Through discreet details, the series was able to showcase a lot of Rooney's stylistic choices, and that is a success. As we concluded before, Marianne and Connell are going to live in both media for years to come, and perhaps one day someone else is

going to present us their idea of these characters, and it will be as relevant as the first interpretation.

In one final moment, we recognise that having a body of work adapted for the screen is both a cultural and artistic production. The entire team behind the productions of *CWF* and *NP* has gained public attention for their work. These stories are no longer merely books; they are the reason Paul Mescal and Daisy Edgar-Jones, for example, are now renowned actors in Hollywood. They are also the reason Paul Mescal received an Oscar nomination. All these elements cannot be overlooked—these adaptations have a life of their own and have paved the way for many more to come. To conclude her study, Hutcheon emphasises that: "stories too propagate themselves when they catch on; adaptations- as both repetition and variation- are their form of replication." For her, "we retell- and show again and interact anew with- stories over and over: in the process, they change with each repetition and yet they are recognizably the same." But one thing is certain, these works are not "inferior or second-rate- or they would have not have survived." (Hutcheon, 2013, p. 177). The politics of sameness have not been and continue not to be relevant in adaptation studies; if that were the case, adaptations would cease to exist.

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